A MIXED METHOD APPROACH EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF THE FACULTY OF BUSINESS AND HOSPITALITY'S STUDENT SUCCESS MODEL WITHIN THE DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT, IN ATHLONE INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, OVER EIGHT ACADEMIC YEARS.

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This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the award of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

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Authors Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of PhD is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: *Owen Ross*   (Candidate) ID No.: 18215112   Date: 11/01/2023

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

A&BC	Accounting and Business Computing
AIT	Athlone Institute of Technology
B&M	Business & Management
CAO	Central Applications Office
COP	Community of Practice
DA&BC	Department of Accounting & Business Computing
DB&M	Department of Business & Management
DHT&L	Department of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure
DOF	Dean of Faculty
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
FB&H	Faculty of Business & Hospitality
FYE	First Year Experience
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HOD	Head of Department
HTL	Hospitality Tourism and Leisure
IOT	Institute of Technology
ISSE	Irish Study of Student Engagement
LDHE	Learning and Development for Higher Education
LIT	Limerick Institute of Technology
MIS	Management Information Section
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
PR	Programmatic Review
SSM	Student Success Model
TUS	Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest
TP	Teaching Pedagogy

Thesis Title

A MIXED METHOD APPROACH EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF THE FACULTY OF BUSINESS AND HOSPITALITY'S STUDENT SUCCESS MODEL WITHIN THE DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT, IN ATHLONE INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, OVER EIGHT ACADEMIC YEARS.

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Abstract.

Too many students drop out of higher education in their first year. OECD Countries, including Ireland, recognise student non-progression as problematic.

Decades of research have established that student attrition is multifactorial. Mitigation requires a multifaceted approach. There is little evidence to contradict Tinto's assertion that substantial gains in student retention have been hard to come by.

This study describes a faculty retention project undertaken in response to high non-progression rates. The retention project evolved into a Student Success Model. It encompassed three foundation blocks, six pillars, and twenty-seven actions or interventions. This dissertation evaluated model efficacy to ascertain if a substantial gain in student retention resulted from the Student Success Model.

Philosophically underpinned by pragmatism, this study followed an explanatory sequential approach. Quantitative statistics regarding non-progression, performance, withdrawal, and autumn examination success were gathered. Focus groups with model architects and participants helped explain the quantitative results.

Findings showed that there was a substantial gain in retention in the Department of Business & Management. Over the selected timeframe, the departmental non-progression rate fell from 36% to 12% because of model efficacy. Non-progression rates for individual departmental programmes also reduced. Students' performance improved, as did the success rates in the autumn repeat examinations. Improvements in rates of early withdrawals were not maintained.

Model efficacy emanated from the totality of measures. Certain model actions were crucial to its success. Further research is required to establish model transferability to other institutions and disciplines.

Future retention projects should to be driven in faculties and departments, as opposed to the institutional level. Such projects require accurate and timely data. Success requires a team-based approach led by faculty managers. Designing a first-year curriculum to support transition and progression is especially critical. Improving student performance in autumn repeat examinations should be prioritised.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Over 8 academic years, the rate at which the number of first-year students who did not progress to second-year of their studies, reduced from 36% to 12% within the Department of Business & Management (DB&M) in Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT), an Irish-based higher education institution (HEI).

During that time, this researcher, in his role as the Head of Department (HOD) of Business & Management, was part of a faculty team which managed a retention project aimed at reducing student non-progression.

A Student Success Model (SSM), developed by the researcher, graphically represented this retention project. The model categorised and identified measures and interventions which were put in place over that period, to enhance students' first-year experience (FYE).

This study is a mixed methods research project evaluating the SMM's impact on AIT's DB&M. The research seeks to establish the full extent to which the model contributed to the headline reduction in rates of student non-progression.

The dissertation will also evaluate other measurements of student performance, besides the headline rates, in order to seek a deeper understanding of model efficacy. The study also seeks to test if the theoretical model developed by the researcher is an accurate depiction of the project from the perspective of other key participants. Critically, the researcher also seeks to establish which aspects of the model were the most important in relation to its contributing to the reduction in the student non-progression rate.

The SSM is included in Appendix A. It has three foundation blocks, six success pillars and twenty-seven actions, supports or interventions. A full narrative account describing how the SSM was developed and a detailed description of each SSM component is included in Chapter 2. The SSM is presented in this study exactly as the researcher presented it in the 2019 European First Year Experience (EFYE) Conference.

1.1 Introduction to Chapter

This chapter sets out to outline why the SSM was developed and why non-progression is an important issue in higher education. The model addresses several challenges facing students who transition from the Leaving Certificate (LC) at the end of the senior cycle in secondary school, to higher education studies. It is also very relevant in the context of Student Progression, from first- to second-year in higher education, the detail of which, will be established in the international and Irish context.

Details and limitations of student non-progression measurement, will also be outlined in this introductory piece. In relation to time and place, a description of the setting, the DB&M in AIT and the timeframe that evaluates 8 cohorts of first-year students who enrolled between September 2010 and September 2017, is provided.

Headline results from perhaps the core key statistic, the non-progression rate by year will be supplied in this chapter, coupled with the overall and associated research questions this evaluation explores.

Concluding this chapter will be the researcher's rationale for conducting the study and a detailed outline of the structure of the entire dissertation and details of each chapter.

1.2 Transition from the Senior Cycle of Second Level Schooling to Higher Education–The Irish Context

Prior to seeking application for a place in a HEI, students complete between five and six years in secondary school. This begins with the three-year junior cycle culminating in a set of state examinations called the Junior Certificate. Many schools then offer students an option of taking a one-year transition to broaden student experiences. This year is known as the transition year. Completing secondary school, students undertake the senior cycle, which lasts two years and culminates with a set of state examinations called the Leaving Certificate.

Student performance in the Leaving Certificate is the mechanism used to gain entry through a competitive process into higher education. The process is a points system. It is managed by the Central Applications Office (CAO). Every student seeking a place on a higher education programme must indicate their preference on a CAO form.

For all students, the better the grades achieved in their Leaving Certificate exam, the higher their CAO points total score becomes. The quest of seeking the highest number of points has become known as the "points race".

1.2.1 The Relationship between the Leaving Certificate Examinations and Participation in Higher Education

Policymakers have strenuously considered the usefulness of the Leaving Certificate examination relative to student preparedness for higher education in Ireland. Central to these considerations are the correlative or lack thereof, between the purported educational benefits of the Leaving Certificate and the perception of the points race promoting a "learning by rote" culture among participating students. Potentially, students might seek to maximise their individual CAO points total, at the expense of the educational tools necessary to be successful in higher education. A

summary of these reflections was included in a report entitled "Entry to Higher Education in Ireland in the 21ˢᵗ Century", known as the Hyland Report.

The Hyland Report confirmed that the Department of Education and Science stated the goal of the Leaving Certificate:

> According to the Department of Education and Skills' website, the Leaving Cert programmes today "emphasise the importance of self-directed learning and independent thought; a spirit of inquiry, critical thinking, problem-solving, self-reliance, initiative and enterprise; preparation for further education, for adult and working life and lifelong learning" (Hyland, 2011, p.7).

However, the report suggests that these goals are not being reached and that the Leaving Certificate was not preparing students for the third level, but promoting a culture of learning by rote.

> At a meeting of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education in December 2010 which focused specifically on the transition from second to third-level education, several speakers said that the Leaving Certificate, with its focus on rote learning, left students ill-equipped to meet the challenges of third level. It was stated that an increasing number of students entering third level education exhibit serious deficiencies in basic literacy and analytical skills. Tom Boland, Chief Executive of the Higher Education Authority, said that there was growing concern about the Leaving Certificate across the third-level sector—particularly its failure to foster problem-solving and independent learning (Hyland, 2011, p.8).

The impact of the points system is further supported by research conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) into student experiences of their schooling (Smyth, Banks and Calvert, 2011), the findings of which clearly point to the impact of the impending exams on young people's experience of teaching and learning in sixth year.

> Rote Learning is a process of committing information to memory by frequent repetition, so that it can be recalled immediately, word-for-word, when required. The fact that a person has learned something by rote does not necessarily imply that they do not understand what they have learned, or that they are not able to use, adapt, apply or evaluate the information. However, the term is often used in such a way as to imply a lack of such understanding or ability. This ambiguity between the precise use of the term and the more negative connotations can make it difficult to engage in discussions about the extent to which rote learning of certain kinds of information might be desirable or even important (Smyth, Banks and Calvert, 2011 p.13).

An apparent disconnect between the Leaving Certificate culture of rote learning and the critical thinking skills necessary to succeed in higher education, suggest a reason why students might find studying in higher education a very significant challenge. It offers a rationale as to why they might

be in danger of dropping out in their first year. Chapter 3 provides further focus on the transition from the senior cycle to higher education in Ireland.

1.3 International and National Context of Student Progression

This section introduces policy relating to progression. A more detailed account of national and international policy follows in the literature review chapter.

Many reports have been published regarding the international context of student progression in relation to broadening education participation such as the OECD report entitled *State of Higher Education* (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017) and also reports on specific non-progression rates in OECD member countries featured in the report *Education at a glance 2019: OECD indicators* (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019).

Student progression is an important consideration within Higher Education in Ireland. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) published its first report in 2010, which looked at the entire national cohort of new entrants from the academic year 2007/08 and 2008/09 (Higher Education Authority, 2010) and the HEA now publishes about student progression annually.

National Policy emphasises the importance of a positive first-year student experience in achieving the goals of higher education, as "failure to address the challenges encountered by some students in their first year contributes to high drop-out and failure rates, with personal and system-wide implications" (Higher Education Authority, 2011 p.56.).

The vehicle that drives the targets that third level intuitions must strive to reach, the *Higher Education Systems Performance Framework 2018-2020* (Department of Education and Skills, 2018) highlighted the following two specific targets:

- All HEI's will have a student success strategy in place by 2020, which will embed whole-of-HEI approaches to institutional access strategies (p.15).
- Completion rates for students from disadvantaged cohorts will be specifically targeted for improvement (p. 16).

Student retention and progression is an important issue for Irish Third Level institutions. The report entitled *A study of Progression in Irish Higher Education 2014/15 to 2015/16* stated that:

> International research has shown that if a student progresses to second year, he or she is more likely to complete their programme. It is important for the higher education system that we seek to address reasons as to why a student may not progress, as this has significant personal and possible financial implications for the student, but also for the institution and for the State in funding the course (Higher Education Authority, 2018 p.5).

1.3.1 How Non-Progression is Measured

In Ireland, the measurement used to quantify the rate at which first-years drop out of college is the non-progression rate. It is important to understand how non-progression is measured. The method used by the HEA when they issue their annual reports is described below.

The Non-Progression Rate is the% Difference between a and (b + c) where a, b, and c represent:

    a.   The number of 1st year students registered on March 1st in the year X.

and

    b.   The Number of those students registered in 2nd year on March 1st in the year X+1.

plus

    c.   The Number of those students registered as repeat and attending 1st year on March 1st in the year X+1.

There is a different approach given the manner in which students repeating year 1 are accounted for in the non-progression statistics. Students who do not complete year 1 successfully have two options if they wish to continue their studies:

Students can register to "repeat and attend" for the modules they have failed. This means the students go to class and do all aspects of the module similar to the year before. Students who do this are considered to have progressed using the method applied nationally.

The alternative is for repeating students to register for "exams only". This cohort of students elect to only sit the final exam associated with the module they have failed. They do not attend class. Students exercising this option are considered to have not progressed using the method applied nationally.

The Progression Rate is the% of students who make it into category b or c. 100% minus the progression rate is always equal to the non-progression rate and is also regularly referred to as the attrition rate.

1.3.2 Student Withdrawals

Any student who enrols on a first-year programme and who completes a formal withdrawal form before March 1st, of their first year, is not considered at all in the official progression statistics. National Reports currently do not consider this cohort of students. Nationally, the estimated figure for withdrawals is 9% (Fleming and Finnegan, 2010). The implication here is that the extent to which first-year students are dropping out is under-reported in official figures.

1.3.3 Limitations and Anomalies of Statistical Data

It is worth noting potential anomalies arising from the methodology measuring official rates for progression and student drop-out rates. The table below depicts two notional departments, with an intake of 100 students each, in September 2018. The researcher has built-in notional drop-out rates in both departments over the first 18 months. From the table below, department A has more students still active and has a better success keeping students than department B.

Notional Departments	A	B
September 2018	100	100
November 2018	98	91
January 2019	94	77
March 1st 2019	92	71
June 2019	88	69
September 2019 (2nd Year)	72	59
Repeating 1st year attending	6	10
Repeat 1st year externally	10	0
December 2019	67	54
March 1st 2020	63	51
% Students still Active	79%	61%

Table 1.1 Comparison between Two Notional Departments

The measurement of the official progression rate only begins on March 1st, with the number of students still registered in the first year. Therefore, the students who drop out/ formally withdraw between September and March of the first year are not considered as part of the official non-progression or attrition rates.

As a result, the official progression rate for both these notional departments is depicted below.

Notional Departments	A	B
Official Progression Rate	75%	86%

Table 1.2 Official Progression Rate Comparison Between Two Notional Departments.

Although the tables above are an illustration of two notional departments, this example raises several issues relevant to higher education in Ireland, as a whole:

The official reports publishing the non-progression rates exclude early withdrawals. Potentially, the true extent of non-progression is being under-reported. The extent of the potential under-reporting in this evaluation, to be presented in Chapter 5, is approximately 5.4%. The difficulty in measurement, besides the importance of the withdrawn cohort, has been identified from the outset, of the publication, regarding student progression rates in Ireland:

> We have found that the 4 percent estimated by the HEA report as not progressing in the November to March period is broadly accurate, if on the low side. But if we start counting from September, we find that an additional 5 percent leave in the September to November period. Some few move to other colleges, and though difficult to track, they are not a good reason for ignoring the 4 or 5 or even 10 percent who are already on the exit route by March. This sets a significant challenge for higher education as the numbers leaving persist in spite of imaginative and useful interventions by the system (Fleming and Finnegan, 2010, pp. 2-3).

Efforts made by individual departments to enhance the first semester experience may not lead to a lower non-progression rate. In effect, a dramatic improvement in retaining students in semester 1 of a programme will have no impact on the progression rates, as those students will not count until they are still in their studies on March 1st, in the second semester of their programme.

1.4 Introduction to AIT

This chapter's outset outlined that this evaluation was conducted in the then AIT's DB&M. A merger took place in October 2021 between AIT and Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT) forming the Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest (TUS). AIT was abolished. Based in the Irish midlands, AIT was a 2nd tier institution with approximately five and a half thousand students. As of September 2018, when this dissertation commenced, the institute housed three research centres and four academic faculties.

One faculty was Business and Hospitality (B&H). This Faculty comprised three departments, Business & Management (B&M), Accounting & Business Computing (A&BC) besides Hospitality, Tourism & Leisure (HT&L). At the beginning of this study's timeframe, the institute operated on a school structure. Within this structure, the Business School comprised two departments: B&M and A&BC. A restructuring occurred in 2014. The then School of Humanities was disbanded,

resulting in the transfer of the Department of Hospitality, Tourism & Leisure (DHT&L) to the newly restructured and renamed Faculty of Business and Hospitality (FB&H).

In relation to the management team, the former Head of the Business School transitioned to a new title of Dean of Faculty of Business and Hospitality. He resigned his position on February 1st 2019, but except for the last month of the timeframe, he was in his role for the duration of this study.

Similarly, the author was the Head of DB&M for the entire duration. The Department of Accounting and Business Computing (DA&BC) had two different HODs during the study, with the changeover occurring in September 2017. A new HOD of HT&L was appointed in September 2014 when the department was transferred to the Faulty. That newly appointed HOD remained in place for the duration of the study.

Students in AIT studied on programmes ranging from Higher Certificate (Level 6) to PhD (Level 10). Programme levels and associated awards in Ireland are placed on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The NFQ is a system of ten levels. Each level is based on nationally agreed standards of knowledge, skill, and competence. These standards help define what an individual is expected to know, understand, and be able to do following successful completion of a process of learning (Qualifax, 2019). The table below shows the NFQ's award levels.

NFQ level	Title of Award	
1	Level 1 Certificate	
2	Level 2 Certificate	
3	Level 3 Certificate	Junior Certificate
4	Level 4 Certificate	
5	Level 5 Certificate	Leaving Certificate
6	Higher Certificate	
7	Ordinary Bachelor's Degree	
8	Honours Bachelor's Degree	Higher Diploma
9	Master's Degree	Postgraduate Diploma
10	Doctoral Degree	Higher Doctorate

Table 1.3 National Framework of Qualification Awards by Level.

Students who enrol in a first-year programme in the DB&M can do so at any of three levels: 6, 7 or 8.

- Students can enrol on a Level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree. They study for a minimum duration of four years to gain this award.
- Students can enrol on a Level 7 Ordinary Bachelor Degree. They study for a minimum duration of three years to gain this award. Students with this qualification can progress to a one- year Level 8 (add-on) Honours Bachelor Degree.
- Students can enrol on a Level 6 Higher Certificate. They study for a minimum duration of two years to gain this award. Students with this qualification can progress to a one-year Level 7 (add-on) Ordinary Bachelor Degree and subsequently to a one-year Level 8 (add-on) Honours Bachelor Degree.

1.5 Timeframe of the Study

Tracking and documentation of student progression is conducted over an 18-month period. Registered students who enrol during any given September are categorised as either progressed or non-progressed on the 1st of March of their second-year, eighteen months after registration.

Many support measures and services were in place over several decades to assist students progressing through their first year, at AIT. This study evaluates the SSM's impact since the first intervention by faculty management in February 2013. The first cohort affected registered in September 2011 for the academic year 2011/12 and their progression evaluated in March 2013 for the academic year 2012/13.

The first-year students who registered in September 2010 for the academic year 2010/11 and were counted as either progressed or non-progressed in March 2012, for the academic year 2011/2012 did not benefit from any of the new interventions. This cohort acts as a pre-intervention base year.

Students who enrolled on business programmes each September between 2010 and 2017 are included. The final cohort considered are those who were active when the researcher began his PHD in the summer of 2018, the first-year group who registered in September 2017.

Student cohorts from eight academic years are included in this study. All registered students on any business programme in the academic year beginning September 2010 are included in the first year. The concluding cohort enrolled in the first-year in September 2017, year eight of the timeframe.

The date on which the progression of the September 2017 intake was measured, is the 1st of March 2019. That date also represents the closing date of the timeframe under consideration in this study.

Based on a combination of two separate internal reports, one compiled by Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC), the other compiled by AIT's internal Management Information Section (MIS). Departmental non-progression rates are presented below with DB&M depicted in blue.
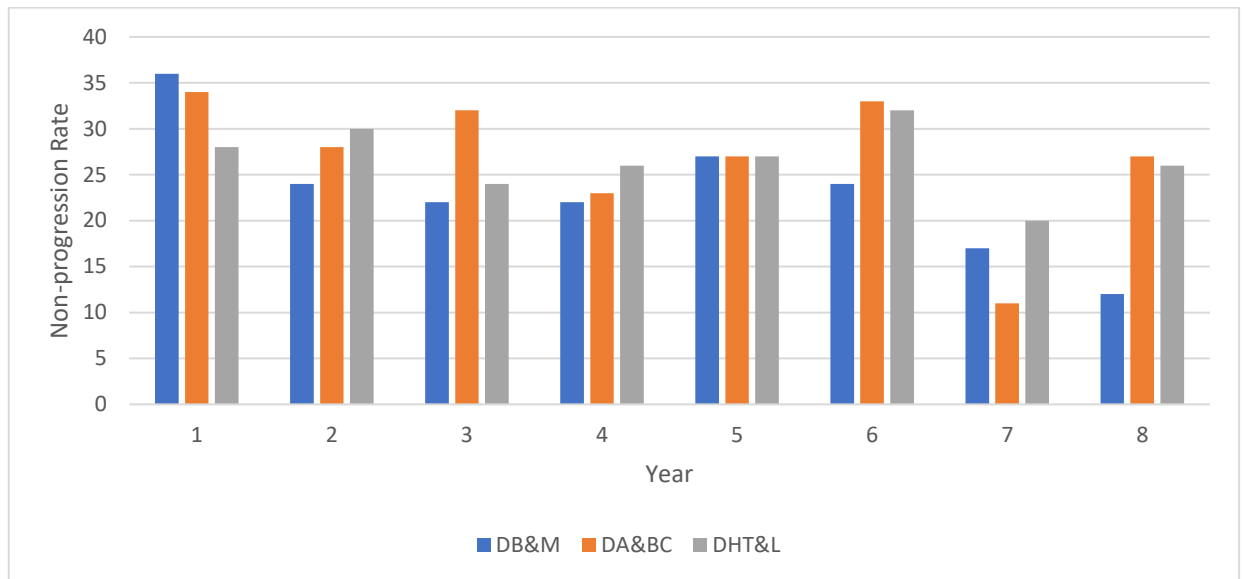
Figure 1.1 Non-progression Rates of FB&H Departments.

This project is a mixed methods study following an explanatory sequential approach (Creswell 2014), which initially seeks to explore the non-progression rate from the DB&M in further detail, and subsequently aims to identify which elements of the SSM were most effective in reducing first-year attrition in AIT's DB&M, over eight academic years.

1.6 Contextualising the SSM in the Broader Context–Research Aims

Earlier in this chapter, the importance and relevance of the international, national and local contexts of student progression was set out. Clearly, student attrition remains a global problem with significant gaps in the knowledge of how that problem should be addressed.

This research project is important as it addresses how to deal with some of these significant gaps by evaluating a student success project based in an individual department over eight academic years. Based on the headline statistics, which stated student non-progression fell from 36% to 12%: This project was very successful. The project aims to offer a template for others to follow, which could be of a great significance for many first-year students globally. This study will contribute both to existing knowledge and theory, which will be developed in chapter 3.

The proposed audience for this research project is a combination of academic managers, academics with an interest in student retention, and policymakers interested in gaining knowledge of fresh approaches to student retention.

1.7 Research Question

Outlining student retention challenges, Vincent Tinto (2006) reflected on what was then, over four decades of research conducted into student retention.

> It would not be an understatement to say that student retention has become a big business for researchers, educators, and entrepreneurs alike. But for all that, substantial gains in student retention have been hard to come by (Tinto, 2006, p.2).

Substantial gains in student retention have remained elusive. On that basis, the central research question is based on Tinto's assertion:

> Can the SSM's impact in the DB&M, over eight years, be considered a substantial gain in student retention?

A challenge presented itself regarding how the word substantial is considered. Tinto (2006) did not define what he considered "substantial" in the context of a substantial gain. In order for the research question to be valid, how substantial is defined in this study needs to be set out.

There are two elements to this consideration. First, how might a substantial gain be defined? Second, for whom might there be a substantial gain? At the individual student level, progressing from first- to second-year potentially constitutes a substantial gain for each of them, in their lives. If the students in this study are shown to outperform students of a similar or higher standard in terms of their rates of progression, then that too could be considered a substantial gain in student retention for the department.

Reduced rates of non-progression yield higher fee income for the institution, this could be termed as a substantial gain in revenue for the college. Improved progression rates from previous years because they can be measured could also be considered a substantial gain in student retention.

Describing what a substantial gain might be in the previous paragraphs was clearly subjective and viewed through different lenses. If the study can show a measurable gain in any or all of those examples above, then that gain will be considered as a substantial gain in student retention for the context of this study.

The alternative approach would have been to remove the word substantial because it could never be measured, which would have meant there could never be a substantial gain recorded and Tinto's assertion could remain valid forever.

Following an explanatory sequential approach (Cresswell, 2014), this study broke the research question down into quantitative questions in the first instance, followed by qualitative questions.

1.7.1   Quantitative Questions

The headline figures for departmental non-progression were presented earlier in this chapter. Because these statistics are presented annually to the HEA they are especially important. Determining model efficacy, however, requires analysing a wider set of quantitative data outlined below:

a. The change in the annual official student non-progression rate submitted to the HEA annually.

b. The change in the number of first-year formal student withdrawals.

c. The change in the nature of student performance.

d. The change in the pass rate from the autumn repeat exam sitting of students with failed modules.

1.7.2 Qualitative Questions

As this is a mixed methods study, the quantitative information will be enriched from a qualitative perspective, seeking to answer the following questions:

a. How did these quantitative changes occur and what is the perception of key participants of the SSM?
b. Which particular aspects of the model do key participants and architects believe were central to the recorded outcomes?

1.8 Rationale for the Study

Enrolling for a PhD is a significant professional and personal undertaking. The researcher had previously enrolled and dropped out of a PhD after 1 year. He could not meet the time demands of the PhD, a very busy work schedule as an Academic HOD and family life incorporating young children. On reflection, the researcher felt he withdrew for three reasons; it was the wrong time to take up a PhD, there was not the support structure of research method modules which incorporates completing such an undertaking and most crucially the original topic, albeit of high interest to the researcher, did not constitute a part of his day-to-day role. Therefore, the time commitment necessary to complete it was deemed unrealistic.

Topic selection is key for any PhD. A profound interest in the topic is a key ingredient for persevering and completing the task. The researcher got involved in first-year student retention out of managerial necessity, as his departmental non-progression rate was 36%. Over several years that researcher estimates he has spent, excluding the time spent on this dissertation, thousands of hours on student success and especially the activities outlined in the SSM. The complementarity between what the researcher did in his role as a HOD and the topic in question

has resulted in time efficiencies, which enabled the researcher to focus on the dissertation in a manner in which he failed previously.

The researcher never envisaged that the student meetings in February 2013 would form the conduit to the incremental establishment of the model. Sometimes, as a manager in Higher Education, it is easy to read and view the statistics on student performance and try to improve the statistics.

Conducting the student meetings on a bi-annual basis reminded the researcher that behind the statistics are actual students, each one with their own set of individual circumstances. There is a human narrative behind, either, why they are struggling, or why they will drop out of tertiary education. The wide array of student accounts moved the researcher and served as a constant reminder of his work's importance.

From the perspective of AIT as an employer, there were two key advantages in relation to the researcher completing his PhD. On commencement of the dissertation in September 2018, AIT was seeking to become a Technological University in its own right. Subsequently, it became part of a consortium with the Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT) in seeking the designation. The Technological Universities act set out several key metrics that had to be reached to achieve TU status.

One metric was that each institution would require 45% of academic staff qualified at level 10 (PhD) and demonstrate an upward trajectory towards 65% ten years after designation. Having the researcher enrolled would form part of the trajectory towards 65%.

An additional advantage in evaluating the SSM as it pertained to the DB&M, lay in the opportunity for the institute to embed it on an institute-wide basis with the obvious goal of reducing student non-progression and enjoying the associated financial and human dividend.

Employability was a further consideration for the researcher when enrolling in this PhD. The researcher was first employed as a HOD in the AIT in 2003. Having both a primary and a master's degree secured such a role. This is in stark contrast to today when the short-listing for Assistant Lecturer posts in business disciplines, often requires candidates to have completed a PHD. The post of Assistant lecturer is three levels lower on the academic career ladder in the Institute of Technology/ Technological University sector, than that of a HOD. Certainly, the researcher believed that career progression or enrichment was not possible without achieving a PhD.

1.9 Structural Outline of the Dissertation

Starting the thesis, the opening chapter sets out the national context of student progression and attrition in Ireland. How student progression is measured in Ireland, is both explained and critiqued. An overview of the trends in attrition in the FB&H, focusing especially on the DB&M, is provided for the defined time period. Outlining the research aim, research question, and the rationale of the researcher was also be included in this chapter.

Providing a natural follow-on, the second chapter will provide a full narrative account of how the SSM was developed. The account describes the SSM that was created, offering the rationale behind its three foundation blocks, six pillars and twenty-seven individual actions or interventions.

Chapter 3 will focus on the literature associated with many aspects of student retention by comparing and contrasting the SSM with international best practice. This chapter will seek to contextualise the research and identify gaps in the scientific knowledge (Baddie, 1995; Ridley, 2012). Comparisons with established researchers in this area who have advocated either an all of institute approach (Kift, 2015), or offered insights into institute responses (Tinto, 2012), will be considered.

Given the researcher's business and management background, it was considered that the Research Onion (Saunders, Thornhill and Lewis, 2016), popular in that field, was an appropriate conduit to guide the project. In relation to research methodology, an explanation of why the selection of mixed methods explanatory sequential approach (Creswell, 2014), was chosen, will be the focus of the fourth chapter.

This chapter will also detail the methodology adopted from both the quantitative and qualitative approaches. It offers a clear articulation of what is being measured quantitatively. Methodology regarding the selection of participants for the qualitative element and how the qualitative data was gathered will be described in full.

A presentation of quantitative findings in Chapter 5 will show greater detail beyond the headline figures of student non-progression data from the DB&M. As this is a mixed methods study, Chapter 6 will present the findings from a qualitative perspective. Some participants who helped to create, design and crucially implement the model will explain changes in student performance.

Chapter 7 will seek to critically evaluate what has been presented in Chapters 5 and 6. It will provide considerable detail about differing perspectives of what was achieved within the DB&M and how it was achieved. In particular, it will give priority to providing the identity of the components of the model that are considered having impacted the most.

The thesis concludes with what was learned throughout the study by integrating the component chapters in a cohesive manner. Chapter 8 will also make recommendations for further study or improvements that can be made to the existing SSM.

Chapter 2: SSM Narrative Account

2.1 Introduction to Narrative Account

Chapter 1 identified that this project evaluates an SSM developed to reflect a faculty level student non-progression project in AIT. How students are prepared for higher education through the Leaving Certificate at the end of their 2nd Level education, was introduced. The chapter contextualised the national and international landscape of student non-progression. This rationalised the development of the SSM. The author put forward the research rationale along with the research questions.

This current chapter describes the SSM from the researcher's perspective. It was devised to graphically capture a faculty retention project. Devising the model identified the actions and interventions developed to enhance the FYE. The SSM was used as a catalyst to embed the actions into everyday activities within the faculty.

Developed through an iterative approach, continuously amended by introducing new ideas or activities, the model developed. The Author presented the SSM (Appendix A) to a wider audience, at the 2019 European First Year Experience Conference. The model does not just depict the additional interventions taken during the time period, but also captures several measures that pre-dated the faculty retention project.

2.2 Genesis of the SSM

From a managerial perspective, the catalyst for the initial intervention was alarmingly high non-progression rates. Non-progression rates were published internally in January 2013. The rates focused on the first-year cohort, who began their studies during the academic year 2010/11 and progressed into the second year during the academic year 2011/12.

Faculty Management first intervened in February 2013. They decided that every first-year student who failed any semester 1 subject would attend a scheduled meeting with the HOD. The faculty also invited students from other years who failed over one module to attend such meetings.

The focus of each meeting would be to motivate the individual student to work harder and achieve a better set of results. An unforeseen consequence of these meetings was that the students were very honest in articulating that they had worked hard for their leaving certificate

exams. Subsequently, they found they didn't replicate that level of effort once they began their studies at AIT.

Based on information gathered at the student meetings, faculty management deduced that students were being allowed, by faculty, to establish bad habits from the outset. Natural student enthusiasm was not being encouraged to develop. Change was necessary if the situation was to be improved both in relation to student performance as well as progression rates.

The faculty's response, supported and delivered by the academic staff, was to promote a "habit-forming" initiative for every first-year student, at the start of the 2013-14 academic year. This "habit-forming" initiative required students to begin a habit of working, starting on their very first day at AIT. In order to enhance student engagement, every student received their first assignment at induction.

The assignment itself required students to meet a 2-week deadline. It was designed to be time-consuming yet achievable. Students received feedback within five days of submission. Throughout the first year, lecturers set assignments at regular intervals. For students to succeed, developing and maintaining good habits was important. "Habit-forming" became the catalyst for further developing the SSM.

Initially, because of the student meetings with the HOD and the habit-forming initiative, there was a reduction in the non-progression rate. That reduction created both an energy and an appetite to try new and varied interventions. The totality of these interventions subsequently combined to form the SSM.

2.3 SSM Description

The model is based on three foundation blocks. It is management led and driven. The Model is a team-based approach. Finally, the underlying principle is that it takes four years to bring a student all the way to fully becoming an independent learner. These foundation blocks support the model's six success pillars. Each pillar has several specific interventions associated with it. The six pillars support twenty-seven specific actions, supports or interventions. There is significant overlap and complementarity between individual model components.

While the model evaluated in this thesis is that which is included in Appendix A, the diagram below outlines the foundation blocks and the six success pillars.
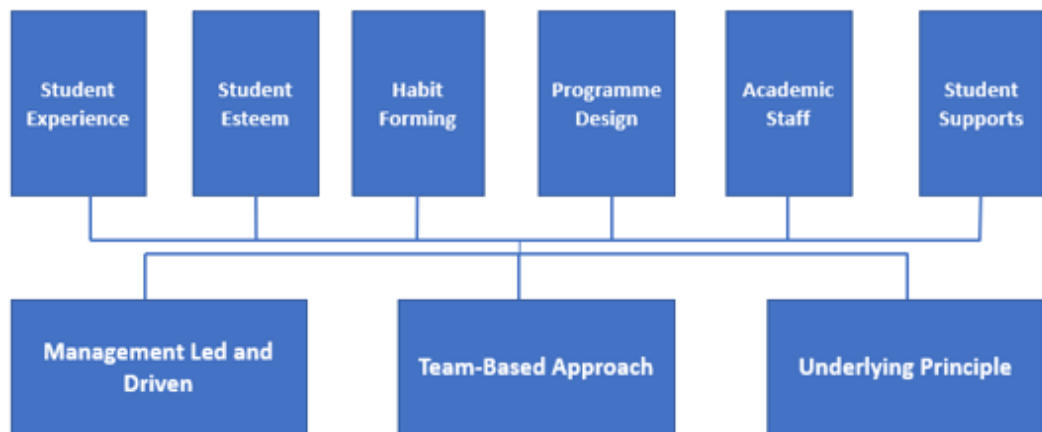
Figure 2.1 SSM Foundation Blocks and Student Success Pillars

2.4 SSM Foundation Blocks

2.4.1 Management Led and Driven

One of the key components of the model is that student retention was a key strategic priority of the faculty management team. Managers were not responsible for all the elements, but they constantly strived to encourage both the academic and non-academic team members to continuously improve on various elements within their control.

Faculty Management also provided and considered an increased level of analytics in relation to student performance, which fed into consideration of further interventions. Academic leaders regularly proposed additional interventions. After either internal debate within the management team, or after wider consultation with the lecturing staff, these interventions were often but not always implemented.

2.4.2 Team-based Approach

Teamwork was a cornerstone of the SSM. Roles were clearly defined for each team member within the faculty. These roles are visible to or shared with all the team, so each staff member knew others were also contributing to the model. From a management perspective, both the Dean and the HODs fully understood their expected contribution. This cascaded downwards to lecturers involved in the delivery of first-year programmes and modules.

Administrative staff in the faculty knew the role they were expected to play. Besides conducting much of the administrative work (e-mails, texting students, making appointments etc), they also bought in to the faculty's underlying supportive culture.

Faculty management attempted to draw from what was espoused by Sally Kift in relation to an institute wide approach to the FYE and student retention which she described as "everybody's business" (Kift, 2008 p.1.).

2.4.3 Underlying Principle: It Takes Four Years to Bring a Student All the Way to Fully Becoming an Independent Learner

Faculty managers devised this foundation stone. Institutions like AIT want to produce high-quality graduates. Employers and the wider society expectations of a graduate, is one who can think critically and work independently. Indications from the National Employers Survey 2015 were that employers were positive towards graduates:

> In terms of satisfaction, employers were very satisfied with graduate recruits across a range of workplace and personal attributes (Higher Education Authority, SOLAS and Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2015, p.6).

When students enter AIT, or other such institutions, they have typically progressed from a second level system that does not promote these elements entirely. Prior to the development of this model, the FB&H had almost a "sink or swim" attitude towards students. The faculty almost expected them to transition from second to third level in a single day.

With the revised approach, the faculty recognised that the period of study a student has to complete an honours degree is four years. That is the time available to develop the learner into the graduate that society, and the economy, requires. Developing the graduate over the four years does not mean there is a lack of focus in developing their critical thinking, from the beginning.

2.5 Student Success Pillars

All three foundation blocks link to and support six pillars. Pillars are separate but complement each other. A description of each pillar follows, besides the specific actions or interventions that encompass each individual pillar.

2.6 Habit-forming Pillar
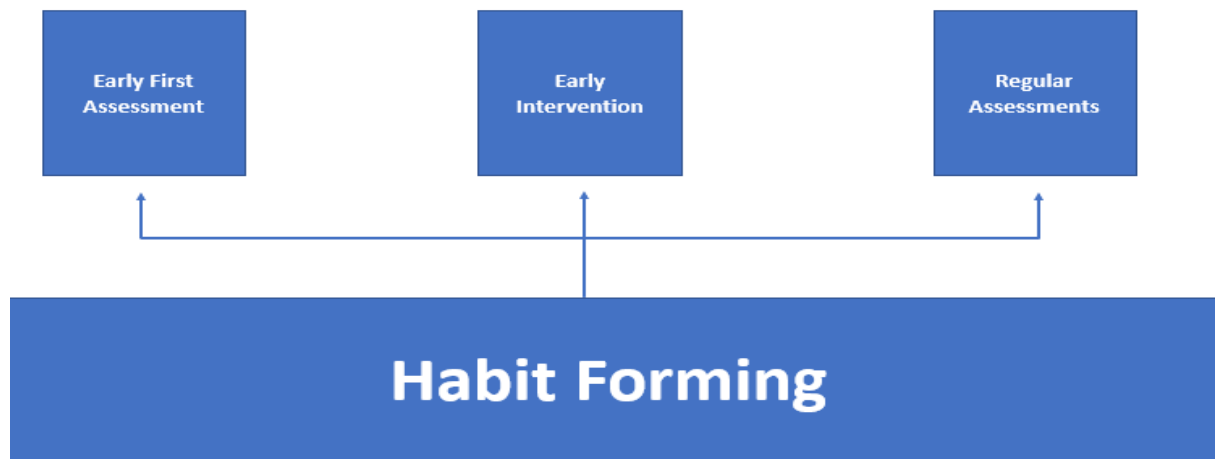
Figure 2.2 Habit Forming Pillar

The habit concept may provide a mechanism for establishing new behaviours, and so healthy habit formation is a desired outcome for many interventions (Lally and Gardner, 2013 p. s137).

At the outset of the faculty's attempt to reduce student attrition, and prior to the modelling of the entire SSM and the creation of the different interventions, the faculty project was called the habit-forming initiative. The goal, at that juncture, was to no longer allow students any opportunity to create poor habits in their first-year. Creating good student habits aimed at enhancing their performance was enabled by the following three components:

2.6.1 First Assessment—Time Consuming and Easy to Achieve High Marks

Prior to the retention project, students were required to submit their first assignment in week 7. This changed as the assignment and deadlines were brought forward. Initially, students were given their first assignment at induction, on their first day in the college. This was subsequently revised to that assignment being flagged at induction but given to students during the first lecture in "Learning and Development for Higher Education", a mandatory module that every student, on all FB&H Programmes, undertake.

Students had a two-week timeframe to complete this initial assignment. An example of such an assignment was a submission of a 1,500-word SWOT analysis, including referencing, on a company of the student's choice. The goal was to encourage students to work from the start of term on a time-consuming submission however, the assignment afforded them an opportunity to get high marks to boost confidence, from the outset.

2.6.2 Assessment at Regular Intervals During the Early Phase of the Programme

During the first semester of their third-level experience, students were either given an assignment or had an assessment on the horizon at all times. Exemplars could be notice of a multiple-choice quiz, a set assignment with a formal due date or establishing a date for group presentations. At all times in semester one, students were aware they have an assignment deadline within the subsequent two weeks.

2.6.3 Early Intervention for Poorly Performing Students

Crucial to gaining the support of academic staff from the outset was the concept of early intervention by management for poorly performing students. Any student who either did not submit or was late for the first assignment, was sent a letter, addressed to their home address besides subsequently being phoned and requested to meet with their HOD. Students largely engaged with the first assignment, resulting in only two students requiring this early intervention over the study's timeframe.

2.7 Student Esteem Pillar
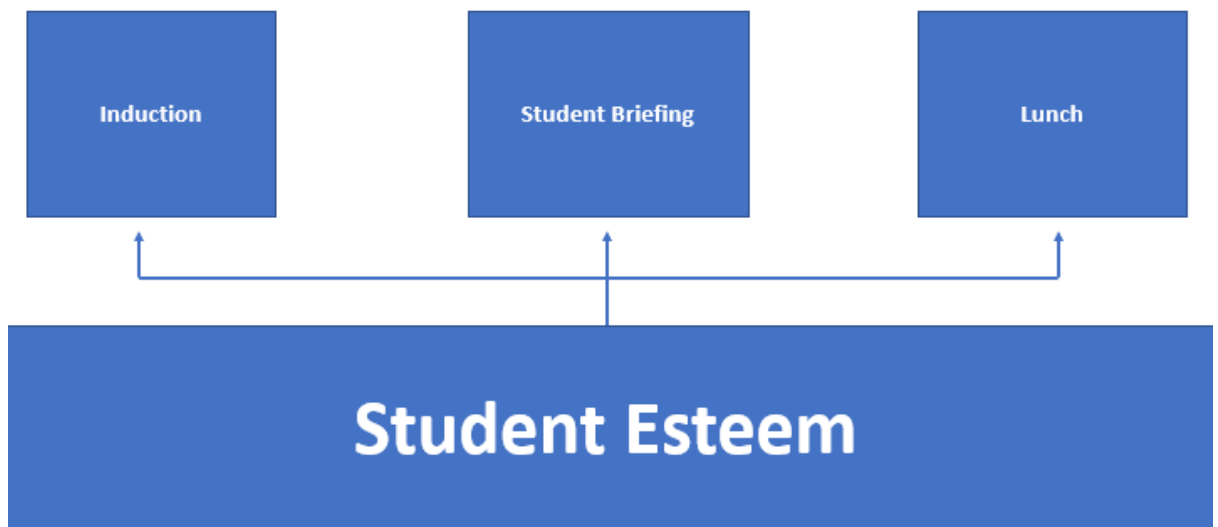
Figure 2.3 Student Esteem Pillar

Arshad, Zaidi and Mahmood (2015) found that there was a significant relationship between self-esteem and academic performance among university students. Low self-esteem among students who failed modules and attended the student meetings with the HODs was a recurring theme. Building student self-esteem became a pillar in its own right, besides being embedded in other pillars.

2.7.1 Lunch for High Performers

The SSM is not only about increasing student retention. Enabling students of all abilities to reach their potential is a further focus. To reward and further motivate students with high marks, every student from non-award years, who achieves an average mark of 70% or over in their exams, is invited to lunch in the Hospitality Training Restaurant. After a short and simple ceremony, the DOF then presented each student with a certificate of achievement.

2.7.2 Student Induction

Student induction was traditionally about imparting information messages to students that institute management and the student services department deemed important. There was considerable emphasis on the supports available to students with learning disabilities. Typically, students were also advised of the wide array of things that go wrong and what they should and should not do.

Faculty management asked the student services manager to orientate induction more towards creating a feeling of pride amongst the student body about their achievement in attaining a place in college. Instilling such pride would hopefully create a real level of motivation amongst the student cohort both collectively and individually.

The largest portion of the induction schedule saw the traditional time apportioned to managers addressing the first-years replaced by having a recent AIT business graduate, now working as a motivational speaker, facilitator and author, speak to the students. This graduate spoke of how he and his friends succeeded in their passage through college despite the odds being heavily against some of them. He claimed AIT changed his life and offered that every student sitting in the lecture hall could achieve the same thing.

2.7.3 Briefing for Students with Failed Modules

Students who had failed modules in a set of exams, provided feedback that a key feature was the negative impact this had on them. In order to address this, it was decided to bring all the students who had failed an exam together for an information session. This started at the departmental level within the DB&M in 2013, extending to the FB&H the following year. By 2016, it had become an institute-wide event.

The information session had multiple goals. Students received information about registering to repeat their exams. The level of support available to students from their lecturers/ tutors was

outlined. Self-reflection among the students as to some reasons contributing to the failed exam and what associated changes were necessary, was encouraged.

Most important was to motivate students to try harder to succeed. This included a reminder of what life implications are associated with finishing a college degree. The sessions provided a timely reminder to each individual student that they were not alone in failing an exam. They saw hundreds of other students in similar circumstances, which was hoped to dilute the negative impact on failing.

2.8 Student Experience Pillar
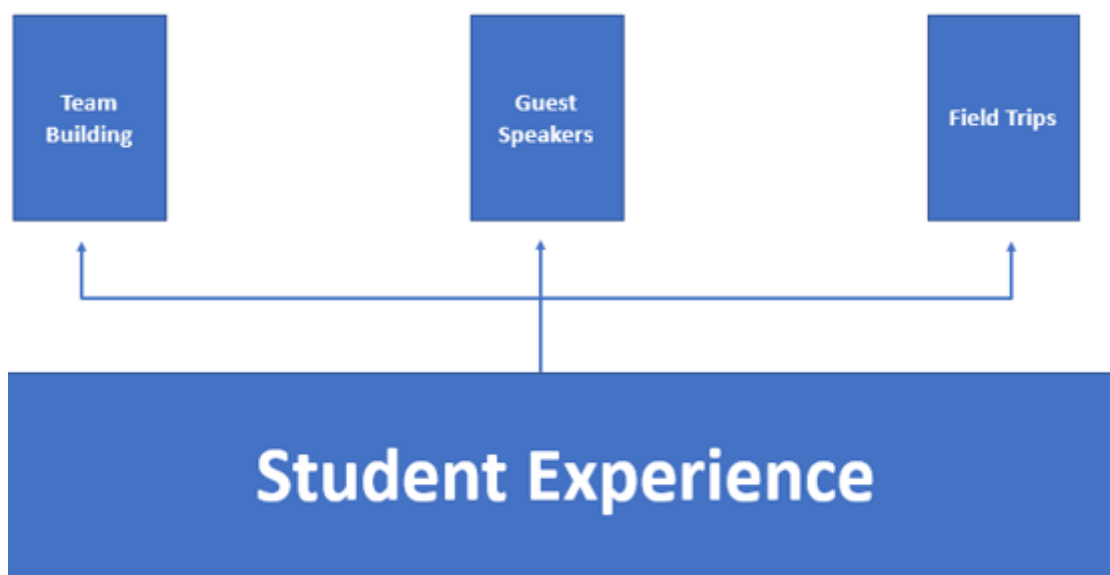
Figure2.4 Student Experience Pillar

Identifying measures within all the programmes on offer in the faculty that would give students a "wow factor" early in their student life was proposed by faculty management. Enhancing the student experience both fostered and enforced student belief that they had selected the right programme.

This pillar's goal was to ensure students both enjoyed the programme but also really understand the extent of career opportunities that might be open to them on successful completion. Certain students who might dislike their programme experience might leave. This was an acknowledgement that not every student selects the right programme for their personality or skill set.

2.8.1 International/ Domestic Field Trips

A field trip is where a group of students travel away from the AIT campus to a destination that introduces them to the discipline in a professional environment. The field trip is an enjoyable learning experience that excites the student about the career path they have chosen. Examples of field trips conducted by first-year students in the DB&M are:

- Business & Law Students: Visits to the District Court and High Court.

- Digital Marketing Students: Site visits to the Google campus and HubSpot in Dublin.

- Business Psychology Students: Visit to Arigna Mines.

2.8.2 Guest Lectures

Faculty managers recommended that each module in the first semester incorporated at least one guest lecture. Guest lecturers come from an array of backgrounds but primarily work in industry. They describe the latest industry trends to the students. Lecturers are also encouraged to invite recent graduates back to AIT, to offer visibility to the current student cohorts about potential career paths. Students can gain an insight into what type of graduate they can become. Finally, many guest lectures are delivered by partner organisations, which included Bank of Ireland and the state broadcaster, RTE. High profile RTE personnel guest lecturers, with whom students would be familiar, from watching television, attracted a lot of interest.

2.8.3 Team Building Event

In order to promote the concept of students getting to know their classmates and making friends, a team building event, scheduled for the third week in September, was organised to take place in the sports arena. The events were not physically demanding and did not benefit sporty or athletic students to any great extent. Students were given an array of challenges which could only be achieved through teamwork and collaboration. The event concluded with pizza and social interaction between the students and their lecturers.

2.9 Role of Academic Staff
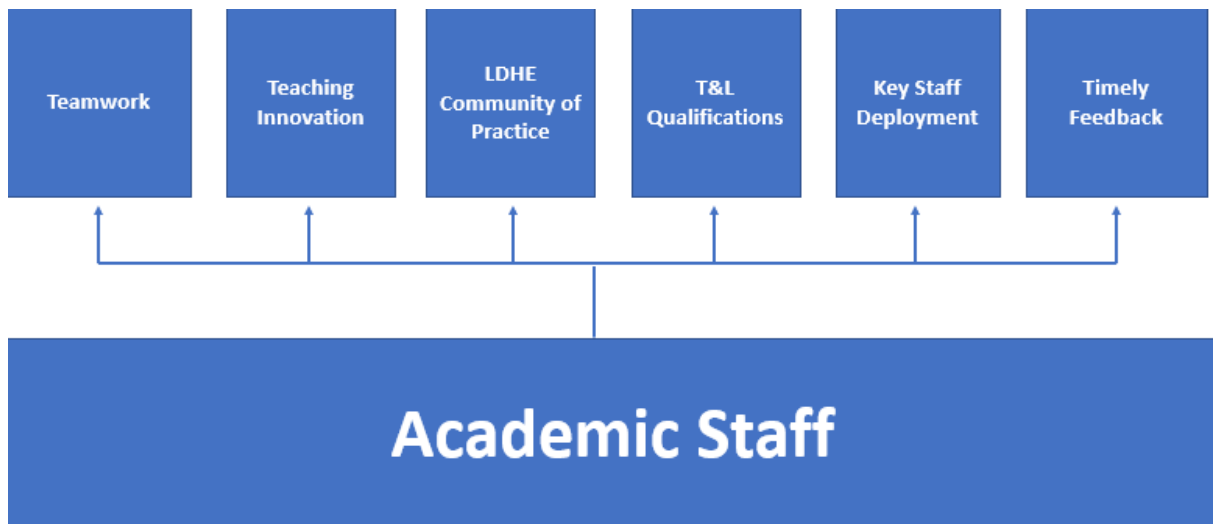
Figure 2.5 Role of Academic Staff Pillar

Without support from academic staff, the SSM would never have developed. Ultimately, managers may have sought to implement some changes, but students interact with lecturers more than any other college employees. Lecturers are the public face of the institute with what they deliver in the classroom.

The faculty was aware that research has shown that positive relationships with staff enable students to gain both self-confidence and motivation. Student work improves if students feel staff believe in them, and care about the outcomes of their studying. Thomas (2002) highlighted the importance of the role of academic staff:

> Students seem to be more likely to feel that staff accept and value them if lecturers and tutors know their names and exhibit other signs of friendship, are interested in their work and treat students as equals (Thomas, p.432).

2.9.1 Deployment of Key Staff in First-year

Traditionally, the Faculty often assigned new lecturers to first-year with their more established colleagues delivering modules at final year degree or postgraduate level. An aspect of the SSM was to deploy experienced lecturers to deliver first-year modules. Lecturers who had received student nominated awards, such as that of National Teaching Hero which recognises excellence in teaching, were deployed in first-year module delivery.

2.9.2 Teaching and Learning Qualifications

In AIT, an integral part of the promotion of excellence in teaching has been achieved by staff undertaking accredited and practically oriented programmes in teaching and learning. The institute's Learning and Teaching Unit delivered such programmes on-campus.

The institute contractually required all new permanent employees to achieve a formal teaching and learning qualification within 3 years of commencing employment. This policy has been in place since 2014.

Faculty management encouraged more long-standing lecturers to gain such qualifications. There was a significant uptake among this cohort. At this study's outset, 57% of faculty lecturers had earned an accredited formal teaching and learning qualification.

2.9.3 LDHE Community of Practice

All first-year business students undertake a 5-credit module for three hours per week in their first semester. This module is called Learning and Development for Higher Education (LDHE). Aspects of LDHE are generic, but there is discretion for each individual lecturer to orientate the module to the particular programme in which it sits.

Classes are divided into groups of approximately twenty students. As a result, there are many lecturers involved in teaching this module. In order to ensure consistency of delivery and build synergy among the lecturers delivering the module, the DOF established a Community of Practice (COP) in 2010. The COP met regularly throughout the first semester and shared ideas and resources in relation to enhancing the module for the students.

2.9.4 Teamwork at Programme Board Level

A programme board is the term given to the staff that is involved in the delivery of a specific programme. When formally constituted, the DOF chairs the programme board. The board is conducted by the HOD, attended by lecturers who have been designated to deliver the modules. The departmental secretary records formal minutes.

Under AIT's Quality Assurance process, programme boards convened at least once per semester. For the duration of the timeframe under consideration in this study, two further meetings were conducted informally.

Known locally as "mini-boards", they took place at the start of both semesters. These meetings reinforced the formal plan for assessments, field trips and guest lecturers and informed each lecturer regarding what either his or her colleagues' work plan was during that specified semester.

2.9.5 Provision of Feedback on First Assessment in a Timely Manner

Complementing the first assessment described earlier as part of the SSM's habit-forming pillar is the provision of early feedback to the students. Submitting the assessment two weeks after their first class, students received their marks and feedback within one further week.

As a result, three weeks into their first semester, students had an indication of how they have performed. Any student who either didn't submit their first assignment or didn't reach the minimum pass mark of 40% was scheduled to meet the HOD as an early intervention.

2.9.6 Teaching Innovation

Many faculty lecturers incorporated innovation into their teaching. The faculty leadership encouraged them to do so. Innovation came through incorporating several techniques. These techniques included problem-based learning, the flipped classroom or use of screencasts as a tool to help students in aspects of the curriculum they found more challenging. Lecturers also reflected upon and amended some of their assessments, incorporating greater variety.

2.10 Programme Design Pillar
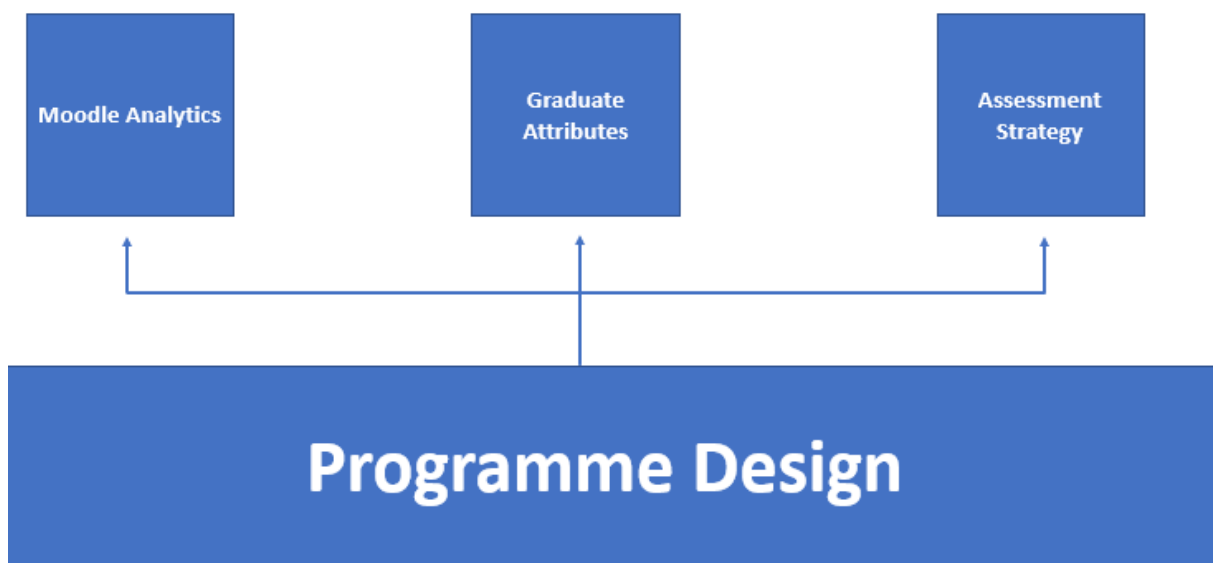
Figure 2.6 Programme Design Pillar

When designing a programme, there are multiple competing demands in relation to what must be included in terms of content and how best the programme can be delivered.

Research conducted in Australia (Mestan, 2016) divided attrition in to course-related or personal reasons. Amongst course related reasons, the most important related to: course direction and purpose, subject range and peer bonding as well as teaching quality.

Students come to college determined to work. They also expect that they will enjoy the programme of their choice. Sometimes they are disappointed, one reason being that they encounter subjects they had not thought would form part of the programme.

For example, students choosing a business degree in digital marketing in AIT have to take microeconomics and financial accounting in semester 1. The reason many have selected the programme is that they are excited by social media and the wider digital environment. Creating such an excitement is how the department markets or sells the programme to the students.

In contrast, the only programme that fully factored in student retention as part of programme design was the honours degree in Business Psychology. On this programme, there was a front-loading of psychology components, which the programme team believed students wanted to study. This programme completed the course development validation process in 2013.

Of the 30 credits in semester 1, two modules of 10 credits were in "Fundamentals of Psychology" and "Business Psychology". There were also two five credit modules: "Introduction to Marketing" and "Learning and Development for Higher Education" (which was orientated with a psychology slant). In total, 25 of the 30 credits were psychology related.

The academic staff based their case studies on real-life issues that the students found interesting to learn about. Examples of such case studies included why overweight people continue to eat too much or why older men fall in love with younger women.

Inexplicably, the action entitled "front loading of the most relevant course material" was unintentionally omitted from the SSM. It was a component part of the retention project.

The focus on retention when developing Business Psychology resulted in considerable learning for the department in relation to course design. Specifically, regarding course design focusing on retention.

Every five years, quality assurance rules require each faculty to review their programmes in a process called the Programmatic Review (PR). By 2015, the department applied some of the learning from the design of Business Psychology to different programmes. The focus on retention was identified as important in the *Business School Programmatic Review Self Evaluation Report Volume 2*.

> AIT Business School has in recent years focused on the retention of first-year students as a key objective. A number of initiatives have been developed to improve the statistics in this area. These initiatives are themselves strengths, as are the results thereof (AIT Business School, 2015 p.76).

2.10.1 Graduate Attributes

During the PR in 2015, in consultation with employers, the faculty identified several graduate attributes or competences that all graduates were required to have on completion of the programme to enhance their employability.

These competences (Appendix P) could not compete with the knowledge students gained from their programme, but complemented that knowledge.

The method chosen to ensure students developed these attributes was through an additional level of constructive alignment. Traditionally, academic staff were required to align programme learning outcomes, module learning outcomes, and assignments. As part of the PR2015, they also agreed to align the graduate attributes to their assessments and explain how all of their individual assignments developed one competency identified. At programme level, the HOD ensured all competences were included.

Subsequently, when disseminating assignments, the academic staff members informed the students which attribute was being developed by the assignment and why it was important in relation to their future employability.

2.10.2 Assessment Strategy and Calendar of Assessments

A Calendar of assessments for each programme was originally introduced in the mid-2000s to prevent over-assessment in certain times, usually week seven, of the semester. During PR 2015,

the approach changed to ensure every first-year student has an assessment to complete at all times.

At the start of each semester, the faculty held mini-boards. The primary reason is to remind all the academic staff where their module fits as part of a larger programme. Mini-boards emphasised the importance of the calendar of assessments. They also identified when the assignments would be announced to the students so that they would have an assignment to work on at all times.

2.10.3 Moodle VLE Analytics

Besides the methods already employed as part of the habit-forming pillar, lecturers used Moodle analytics to assess the level of student engagement at module level. Academics can see what elements students are logging on to and how long they are spending on Moodle.

Some of the recurring issues identified were that students use Moodle only as a repository of notes and do not take part in the interactive activities. Such data, however, is not totally reliable in predicting success, as there is a significant number of students who only use Moodle to print all the notes yet work hard and are very successful.

2.11 Student Supports Pillar
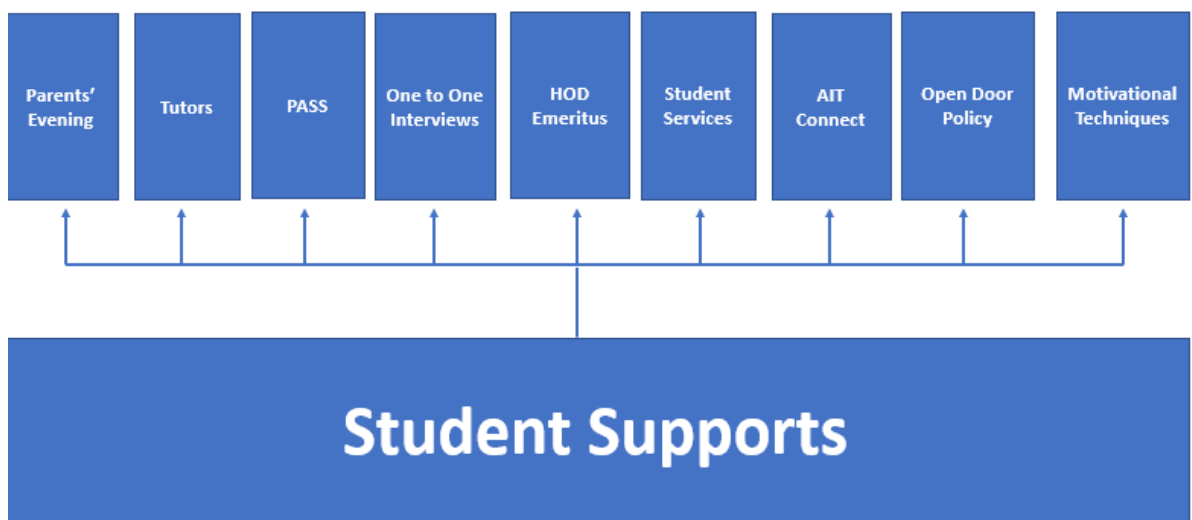
Figure 2.7 Student Supports Pillar

Deciding on the level and extent of support that a student needs is a difficult task, as each individual student has either his or her own set of circumstances. Individual students can be

resistant to seeking such supports and the degree to which students will utilise the support may vary during their student journey.

In a UK-based study that investigated the effectiveness of academic and pastoral support, Lally and Gardner (2013) found that high engagement with support mechanisms is necessary for some students.

Given students' individuality and the associated individuality of supports required, describing this pillar posed several challenges. It is recognised that there are significant kinds of support, such as help given by friends, that are not included in the SSM. Listed below are institutional and faculty supports geared towards assisting students.

2.11.1 Interviews with Students who have Failed First-year Modules

At the very beginning of the retention drive in February 2013, the HODs undertook to interview every first-year student who failed any module in semester 1. The primary intent of these meetings was as a deterrent for students, -with a visit to the HOD's office, seen as a big stick approach.

The nature of the meetings evolved over the timeframe in question, with two significant changes implemented in 2017. In order to maximise the impact of the meeting, three lecturers from the Business Psychology programme board were requested to make recommendations. They issued a report (Appendix E) in which they advocated use of empathy, motivation and mini exercises. Their suggestions were acted upon from February 2017.

From June 2017, HODs conducted an additional set of meetings in semester 2 for first-year students who had passed all the modules in Semester 1, but failed modules for the first time in their Semester 2 exams.

2.11.2 PASS

PASS is an acronym that stands for Peer Assisted Student Support. AIT's Pass programme appoints students who have successfully completed year 1 to act as mentors for the following year's first-year cohort. Managed centrally by the student services department, it has been running in AIT since 2008.

2.11.3 Open Door Policy

Every student who enters the faculty is advised immediately that all staff, regardless of their position in the faculty, are on a first-name terms basis with students. Students are consistently informed that there is an open-door policy. Any student can call into any office without an appointment, and every effort will be made to afford the student the appropriate level of support.

2.11.4 HOD Emeritus

In June 2017, a Senior Lecturer and former HOD was retiring. The institution offered him an alternative role, acting as a retention officer for first-year students, within the faculty. His role entailed meeting all 1st year students and offering wide support, expertise and understanding.

He also contacted each student who failed a module, before every repeat examination sitting, with customised advice regarding study, tutorial support, administrative issues and motivational techniques.

2.11.5. Tutors

Traditionally, the three first-year subjects that students in the business discipline failed with the greatest frequency, were Financial Accounting, Economics and Quantitative Techniques (Mathematics). In 2009, the institute employed tutors for these subjects. Students could avail of extra tuition from these tutors for these particular modules, besides attending lectures, and accessing notes, through the Moodle VLE.

2.11.6 Use of Motivational Techniques

Embedded throughout this model are motivational techniques. Empathy and motivational actions are central to the interviews that first-year students who fail a module have with the HOD.

A motivational exercise was conducted by a HOD, each year at first-year induction, based on asking the students how they would spend a certain large sum of money which is the equivalent monetary amount identified by the OECD as the earnings gap between graduates and non-graduates.

Semester 1 also sees a focus on the "why" students should study with a special emphasis on careers and guest speakers.

2.11.7 Parents' Evening

Established in October 2012, the annual parents' evening aimed at getting parental support for students undertaking the first-year. The briefing session, led by faculty management, involved faculty lecturers and staff from the student services department. The event summarised the common reasons students fail and also examined reasons why students succeed. Practical advice on how parents and family can help students, was also imparted.

2.11.8 Student Services Department

Many of the student supports available to all AIT students are managed centrally by the institute's student services department. These services include:

- AIT careers office: Offers students advice regarding CVs, job applications and career opportunities.

- Student Medical Centre: Campus-based nurse is available to students, with doctor available periodically and by appointment.

- Access office: Offers financial advice and helps students with financial issues.

- Disability office: Students registered with a disability are supported through technology and support.

- Peer Assisted Student Support (Pass).

- Counselling Service: For students facing challenges that warrant counselling.

- Health Promotion Office: Service promotes health and wellbeing within the student body.

- Chaplaincy: A full time Chaplin of was employed by the institute who was available to help and support students.

2.11.9 AIT Connect

An institute initiative that commenced in September 2017, AIT connect was managed centrally by the student services department. It is a seven-week programme that was aimed at each student understanding what being a college student means, their environment and themselves. Within each week, there was an associated theme:

Week 1: Get started.

Week 2: Get connected.

Week 3: Your welfare and check in.

Week 4: Your learning support.

Week 5: Get it together.

Week 6: Mind yourself.

Week 7: inspiration.

The goal of this initiative was to ensure students were settled-in at the institute by the end of week seven, that they had friends and that their motivation was not waning at that point.

2.12 SSM - Timeline of Measures Introduced

The SSM developed over the timeframe under consideration. Additional measures were introduced or existing measures were modified each year. The following table offers a top-level timeline when measures were introduced or changed. The table only deals with the actions, interventions or supports as opposed to the foundation blocks or pillars.

Academic Year	Nature of Model Modification
2010/11	Measures in place pre-dating the model include Student Induction, Tutors, PASS, Open-door policy, Student Services, Teaching and Learning qualifications, Moodle VLE Analytics and the LDHE Community of Practice
2011/12	Inaugural Parents Evening is hosted by the faculty. Lunch for High Performers is conducted for the first time.
2012/13	One-to-one interviews between students who have failed first-year modules and HODs are first conducted. Briefing for students with failed modules is introduced at the departmental level.
2013/14	"Habit forming initiative" begins with students receiving their first assignment at induction. Provision of feedback on first assessment in a timely manner is introduced.

	A mechanism for Early intervention for poor performing students is introduced.
	Briefing for students is conducted at faculty as opposed to the departmental level.
	The BA (hons) in Business Psychology is developed with a focus on student retention.
	Deployment of key staff in first-year begins.
2014/15	Faculty level Programmatic Review (PR) is conducted with a focus on retention and developing graduate attributes. Teaching innovation is developed through PR. Guest speakers and field trips are incorporated into programmes. Assessment Strategy focuses on providing assessments at regular intervals during the early phase of programmes.
2015/16	New first-year syllabus after PR is implemented.
	Teamwork at programme board level is conducted through the establishment of "mini boards" for the first time.
	Briefing for students is conducted at the institutional level (led by Faculty of Business & Hospitality) as opposed to the faculty level. The focus is re-oriented toward motivating students.
2016/17	New Student Induction format incorporating motivational techniques is introduced.
	One-to-one interviews are changed and are not only conducted in February, but additionally in June for the first time.
	HOD Emeritus is appointed to the new role with an immediate focus on repeating students.
	Inaugural Team-building event is conducted.
2017/18	AIT Connect is run for the first time.

Table 2.1 Student Success Model Timeline of Measures Introduced

2.13 SSM Narrative Conclusion

This chapter has described the SSM and its genesis. Describing a model such as this incorporates a level of challenge: Each foundation block, success pillar, action, support or intervention is briefly described however, the cohesion, the extent of interaction or overlap between each component part is difficult to capture.

The most important element that contributed to a student's success can vary widely between students and will often be based on an individual student's standard and requirements during their journey over the first eighteen months. Also, the SSM does not capture or claim to capture the entire FYE. Many additional variables that pose challenges for students are not and could not be included in the model.

In the following chapters, the project will consider the literature base in relation to student retention and critically identify how this SSM aligns or contrasts with other approaches to student progression. A greater evaluation of the student performance will be depicted along with perspectives of the SSM, by key participants.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Introduction to Literature Review

The opening chapters contextualised participation of students in Irish higher education and their related transition. High student attrition rates within the AIT's Faculty of Business & Hospitality prompted the genesis of the SSM, the aim of which was to reduce student non-progression rates. The SSM was described in Chapter 2. The SSM's impact on the Department of Business & Management is what this study evaluates.

Identifying the key literature that is associated with student transition and progression and how it relates, complements, or contrasts with the SSM under evaluation is the purpose of this chapter. Baddie (1995) contextualises a literature review:

> Because every research report should be placed in the context of the general body of scientific knowledge, it is important to indicate where your report fits in that picture. Having presented the general purpose of your study, you should then bring the reader up to date on the previous research in the area, pointing to general agreements and disagreements among the previous researchers (Baddie, 1995, pp. A10-A11).

Besides determining where the SSM fits in the wider context of student progression and retention, this review also seeks to determine the Model's relevance. Ridley (2012) identified that reviews can have multiple purposes, which characterise what this literature review seeks to achieve:

- It provides a historical background for your research;
- It gives an overview of the current context in which your research is situated by referring to contemporary debates, issues and questions in the field;
- It includes a discussion of relevant theories and concepts which underpin your research;
- It introduces relevant terminology and provides definitions to clarify how terms are being used in the context of your own work;
- It describes related research in the field and shows how your work extends or challenges this, or addresses a gap in the field;
- It provides supporting evidence for a practical problem or issue which research is addressing, therefore underlying its significance. (Ridley, 2012, P24).

Central to this dissertation is the evaluation of the SSM developed in the AIT. A considerable challenge associated with the methodology of this literature review presented itself in the consideration of balancing the breadth of research associated with the topic with going into depth regarding the most relevant published research articles pertaining to student progression.

This chapter balances both breadth and depth by describing the key broad research themes associated with the various components of student retention (breadth), and also renders a

specific focus on historical models and approaches (depth). This review includes how the work of other researchers either aligns with the SSM, or identifies some of its shortcomings.

Divided into distinct but complementary sections, this chapter's initial focus is on the journey from senior cycle, to tertiary education in Ireland. Publications associated with the Leaving Certificate, the points race and the suitability of the Leaving Certificate, in the context of preparing students for their third-level entry, will be reviewed. This chapter will consider the suitability of students entering higher education, to contextualise the applicability of the SSM, - pertaining to the student cohort.

Giving context to this study, this review will consider international and Irish contexts of student progression. Reviewing documents published by government agencies from Ireland and abroad, this section will establish why student progression is important and justify this study's timeliness. A review of reports published by the Organisation for Economic and Co-operation and Development (OECD), highlights the international context for student attrition, helping define practical problems any retention initiative might address.

This chapter will then consider the historical background of the published research, including many theories and concepts pertaining to what underpins student transition and the first-year experience. Entitled "Historical Background of Student Progression", this segment captures aspects of research related to a large volume of publications describing various commentaries and interventions in multiple institutions.

From a methodological perspective, given the volume of publications within the historical background, this review utilised a peer reviewed examination of the first-year experience (Harvey, Drew and Smith, 2006) as a starting point.

Categories identified within that examination were investigated further through keyword searches of multiple academic databases, to examine more recent studies. Further details will be outlined later in this chapter.

Providing supporting evidence on the practical issues that the SSM might address emanates from the assertion that substantial gains in student retention, has been recognised as being hard to come by (Tinto, 2006 p.2). This assertion formed the basis of the research question outlined in Chapter1.

The remainder of this dissertation will subsequently find out the extent to which the SSM has produced a substantial gain in student retention and also to consider if the model bridged or partially bridged the gap that Tinto identified between research and theory and effective practice.

> The fact is that despite our many years of work on this issue, there is still much we do not know and have yet to explore. More importantly, there is much that we have not yet done to translate our research and theory into effective practice (Tinto, 2006, p.2).

Given this thesis is an evaluation, considerable emphasis is placed on evaluating some influential and popular models. These frequently cited models informed the SSM's development, offering key similarities and nuanced differences.

Throughout this chapter, evaluations of both the merits and the shortcomings of this study's SSM, will be outlined. This provides the platform for the transition to chapter 4, which outlines this study's research methodology and subsequent data collection and analysis.

3.2 Transition from Senior Cycle to Third Level Education in Ireland

3.2.1 Introduction to the Irish Secondary School System

Before seeking entry to an Irish Higher Education Institution (HEI), students complete either five or six years in secondary school. The secondary school experience begins with the three-year junior cycle, culminating in a formal evaluation known as the "Junior Certificate". Over 80% of schools then offer students an option of taking a one-year transition (Moynihan, 2015) to broaden student experiences. This year is known as the transition year. Completing secondary school, students undertake the senior cycle for two years, which culminates in a set of state examinations called the "Leaving Certificate".

3.2.2 Leaving Certificate and the CAO Points Race.

Entry into Higher Education is through a competitive process which in Ireland is managed by the Central Applications Office (CAO). Each student, seeking a place in tertiary education, completes a CAO application form where they indicate their preference for what programmes they want to gain entry to. Student performance in the Leaving Certificate is the mechanism used to determine entry through a points system.

Students completing the Leaving Certificate take a combination of mandatory and optional subjects. Each subject has a higher-level option and an ordinary level option. On completion of the examination, each subject is assessed, and a grade is awarded. Each individual grade award equates to a certain number of CAO points, as stated in the tables below.

Student performance in their best six subjects is calculated into their total CAO points. Students can undertake over 6 subjects, but only the best 6 are considered for their total points.

For Students taking a higher-level subject, the following table depicts the points that they can

earn based on the grade they receive:

Mark Awarded out of 100	Grade	Number of CAO points
Between 90 and 100	H1	100
Between 80 and less than 90	H2	88
Between 70 and less than 80	H3	77
Between 60 and less than 70	H4	66
Between 50 and less than 60	H5	56
Between 40 and less than 50	H6	46
Between 30 and less than 40	H7	37
Less than 30	H8	0

Table 3.1 CAO Points Allocations Associated with Leaving Certificate Higher Level Subjects

The points available to students taking a subject at the ordinary level are:

Mark Awarded out of 100	Grade	Number of CAO points
Between 90 and 100	O1	56
Between 80 and less than 90	O2	46
Between 70 and less than 80	O3	37
Between 60 and less than 70	O4	28
Between 50 and less than 60	O5	20
Between 40 and less than 50	O6	12
Between 30 and less than 40	O7	0
Less than 30	O8	0

Table 3.2 CAO Points Allocations Associated with Leaving Certificate Ordinary Level Subjects

Bonus points are available for students who take higher-level mathematics. Any student who receives a grade of H6 or better in higher-level mathematics will be awarded an extra 25 points. Overall, the maximum points on offer to students is 625 points if they get a grade of H1 in each of six higher level subjects, including mathematics.

The competitive nature of entering third level through the CAO process means that the more points a student has, the more programmes for which they will meet the minimum entry points

requirement. Students strive to get the maximum amount of points that they can, through their Leaving Certificate. This has become known as the "points race". Many students find it very stressful. The impact on their experience was highlighted in a report entitled *Supporting a better Transition from Second Level to Higher Education*.

> The effect of the points system is further supported by research conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) into student experiences of their schooling (Smyth, Banks and Calvert, 2011) where the findings clearly point to the impact of the impending exams on young people's experience of teaching and learning in sixth year (Department of Education and Skills, 2013, p.6).

3.2.3 The Purpose of the Leaving Certificate and Implications for Student Participation in Higher Education

Considerable reflections about the usefulness of the Leaving Certificate examination and how it prepares students for the third level have been undertaken in Ireland. A summary of these reflections was included in a specially commissioned report (Hyland, 2011) entitled *Entry to Higher Education in Ireland in the 21st Century,* which became the seminal report associated with the transition from senior cycle to higher education in Ireland.

3.2.3.1 Purpose of Leaving Certificate

In her report, Professor Hyland considered the goals of the leaving certificate as stated by the Department of Education and Science:

> According to the Department of Education and Skills' website, the Leaving Cert programmes today "emphasise the importance of self-directed learning and independent thought; a spirit of inquiry, critical thinking, problem-solving, self-reliance, initiative and enterprise; preparation for further education, for adult and working life and lifelong learning" (Hyland, 2011, p.7).

Recognising that the Leaving Certificate performs a wide function in relation to education provision, there has been an emphasis on considering how the Leaving Certificate should develop the broad skill-sets students need, for whatever path they choose after school.

> In its recent consultative document on the revision of the senior cycle curriculum, the NCCA recognises the need for greater emphasis on key skills, and has developed a key skills framework for senior cycle. The intention is that "the five key skills of information processing, being personally effective, communicating, critical and creative thinking and working with others will be embedded in senior cycle curriculum and assessment, thus helping learners to think critically and creatively, to innovate and adapt to change, to work independently and in a team and to reflect on their learning." These skills, which were developed in consultation with higher education and business interests, underpin the new mathematics syllabus and the recently launched draft Leaving Certificate syllabi in science subjects and

physical education. These skills will also be incorporated into other new subject syllabi as they come up for revision (Hyland, 2011, p.10).

3.2.3.2 Implications of Points Race on the Leaving Certificate

Striving for points and the desire to maximise student performance has resulted in both teachers and students inevitably focusing their energies in predicting what will come up on the exam paper. This may inhibit the Leaving Certificate's broader goals, identified in the report, *Supporting a better Transition from Second Level to Higher Education*.

> Examiners in a subject will usually try to ensure that all topics on the syllabus receive reasonable coverage over time. This inevitably results in attempts to second guess the examination, based on an analysis of the topics that have been examined in recent times. This generates many predictions that may or may not be realised. Those involved in drafting examinations may themselves be influenced by perceived past patterns in the selection of content, and this could lead to their selection of content being, to some extent, predictable (Department of Education and Skills, 2013, p.14).

Given the need for the Leaving Certificate to meet a broad set of requirements, it is interesting to note the contrasting perspectives of post–primary teachers in a report *Senior Cycle Review: Analysis of Discussions in Schools in Senior Pathways and Structures in Ireland* which was commissioned by the ESRI. They considered the Leaving certificate as having too great an orientation towards entry into the third level system, in contrast to the broader goals described above. The teachers believed the orientation towards third level entry encourages the students to learn by rote:

> Teachers pointed to some negative features of the current senior cycle. Overall, senior cycle was seen as more oriented towards third-level entry and not inclusive of the full range of skills and capacities, especially of those with a more practical or vocational orientation. The reliance on largely exam-based assessment for the LCE was viewed as having a negative effect on the nature of teaching and learning, resulting in pressure on students and teachers and the encouragement of rote learning (Economic and Social Research Institute, 2019, p.40).

3.2.3.3 Rote Learning and the Leaving Certificate

A recurring theme featured regularly in commentary regarding how students' approaches in aiming to pass the Leaving Certificate is rote learning. In the context of the Leaving Certificate, rote learning was defined in the report *Supporting a Better Transition from Second Level to Higher Education: Key Directions and Next Steps* as:

> Rote Learning is a process of committing information to memory by frequent repetition, so that it can be recalled immediately, word-for-word, when required. The fact that a person has learned something by rote does not necessarily imply that they do not understand what they have learned, or that they are not able to

use, adapt, apply, or evaluate the information. However, the term is often used in such a way as to imply a lack of such understanding or ability (Department of Education and Skills, 2013, p.13).

Hyland reported that the parliamentary committee, which was already considering transitions, heard from multiple sources how the focus on rote learning left leaving-cert students ill-equipped for third level.

> At a meeting of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education in December 2010 which focused specifically on the transition from second to third level education, several speakers said that the Leaving Certificate, with its focus on rote learning, left students ill-equipped to meet the challenges of third level. It was stated that an increasing number of students entering third level education exhibit serious deficiencies in basic literacy and analytical skills. Tom Boland, Chief Executive of the Higher Education Authority, said that there was growing concern about the Leaving Certificate across the third-level sector – particularly its failure to foster problem-solving and independent learning (Hyland, 2011, p.8).

Consensus on rote learning appropriateness has not been reached. Identifying that rote learning has solely negative connotations is not a universally held view. Learning by rote is often considered necessary for students to have a platform to display other required learning skills.

> Learning information, by whatever means, is still a necessary part of learning in general. In order to understand, adapt, apply, analyse, synthesise and evaluate information, we need to have access to that information in the first place. Unless the information is available from another source at the time we need it, we have to recall it in order to use it. In those circumstances, the capacity to recall relevant knowledge is a prerequisite to displaying other higher order skills (Department of Education and Skills, 2013, p.13).

3.2.4 Level of Tertiary Education Preparedness Post Leaving Certificate

A key question emerges given the concerns that the points race has resulted in an overemphasis on rote learning at the expense of other educational facets, such as higher order thinking, in the Leaving Certificate. The question is: how prepared are students for the demands of third level? This question and the SSM's rationale are closely linked.

Levels of preparedness among the student cohort entering higher education are important in the context of transition and retention. The extent to which students felt they were ready, was highlighted in a report entitled *Leaving School in Ireland: A Longitudinal Study of Post-School Transitions.*

> A large majority of leavers reported significant differences in teaching and learning between their second-level education and their post-school course. They indicated particular difficulties in relation to the standard expected of them, the difficulty of the course, and managing their workload. A key factor emerging from the in-depth interviews was the need to engage in self-directed learning in further/higher

education, especially the challenges in managing deadlines, which was contrasted with the more directive approach adopted in school (McCoy *et al.*, 2014, p. xiii).

The gap between Leaving Certificate and Higher Education means students experience a considerable change of approach after transitioning to higher education, in relation to teaching and learning, the nature of coursework and assignments, all of which differ from senior cycle.

> A substantial majority indicate that the nature of teaching and learning on their course is very different to school. This is particularly the case for participants in higher education, over 90 per cent of whom feel this to be the case. The nature of course work is also found to differ from school – 80 per cent of higher education course participants, 86 per cent of PLC participants and 92 per cent of other course participants agree that their course involves/involved a lot of project work. It is interesting that large numbers also indicate that their course involves a lot of tests and exams; in this case, participants in higher education courses are slightly more likely to hold this view (McCoy *et al.*, 2014, p.128).

Perhaps of most significance from the research conducted by McCoy *et al.* was the extent to which respondents in the study showed that the Leaving Certificate prepares them well for higher education.

> The survey findings yield new insights into the extent to which young people feel that school prepares them for later study. School leavers who progressed to higher education were less likely to hold the view that their 'schoolwork prepared me for my studies'. Just over half of all school leavers who progressed to further study felt that second-level schooling prepared them for their course, with a slightly higher figure among PLC participants (62 per cent) as compared with higher education entrants (52 per cent) (McCoy *et al.*, 2014, P.129).

Overall, the context of how the Leaving Certificate prepares students for higher education was summed up below in the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*. This context is very important in demonstrating the student need for the creation of the SSM under evaluation.

> Many people believe that second-level education does not prepare students adequately for the challenges of higher education. Students entering higher education directly from school often lack the critical thinking, problem solving and independent learning skills required for successful engagement in higher education (Higher Education Authority, 2011, p.55).

Given the consistent criticism of the Leaving Certificate in developing student preparedness for higher education, it is clear that a gap exists between the 2nd and 3rd level. Measures at the national level can address this in the long term. Attempts supporting the transition to higher education, such as the SSM, can be considered both necessary and timely.

3.2.5 Reform of the Senior Cycle

In March 2022, the Minister for Education announced a vision for senior cycle education in Ireland. According to a press release from the Department of Education, the three tenets of Senior Cycle reform are to empower students to meet the challenges of the 21st century; to enrich the student experience and build on what's strong in our current system; and to embed wellbeing and reduce student stress levels (Department of Education, 2022).

The new vision incorporating proposed changes to senior cycle education were informed by an advisory report on the senior cycle published by the NCCA.

That report acknowledged that the senior cycle had experienced more "conservation than change". Emphasising that point, the report stated:

> The last structural changes to senior cycle curricula and programmes took place more than 20 years ago and since then, much has shifted in learning, schools, education systems, the wider society and in the national and global environment (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2022 p.5).

Based on this report, the Minister for Education proposed key changes to the senior cycle. New subjects are to be developed, with current subjects to be revised. A key proposal is to ease the burden of a single summative exam for students. Measures such as bringing forward papers in English and Irish, to the end of the 5th year, coupled with oral and practical examinations to be held at Easter, are components of this proposal.

Devising new subjects such as Climate Action and Sustainable Development, is to be pursued. Such a process will incorporate consultation with teachers, students, and school communities. Many of the reforms will be piloted by designated "network Schools". These schools will represent different types and sizes of secondary schools.

Critically, the plan envisages assessment components worth 40% of total marks to be incorporated into the curriculum of new and revised subjects. This measure might impact positively on student stress levels besides reducing the dependence on rote learning. It also is similar to what students can expect in higher education.

There has, however, been increasing speculation that some stakeholders will resist the proposed changes. Such resistance might slow or prevent change. The Irish Times reported on the initial stance that was taken by the teachers' unions.

> The Teachers' Union of Ireland says its members are fundamentally opposed to assessing their own students for State certificate purposes, while the Association of Secondary Teachers' Ireland insists certification in State exams must be "entirely externally assessed" (O'Brien, 2022).

3.3 International and Irish Context

3.3.1 International Context of Widening Participation and Implications for Student Attrition.

Higher education participation has been increasing internationally among the member states of the OECD. These increased participation levels raise questions about the potential of how individual students can succeed, besides how institutions and national higher education systems can facilitate an increase in student numbers. In one of a series of OECD reports entitled "State of Higher Education 2015-16" summarised the international higher education context:

> The expansion of higher education is being driven by students' ambition to go to higher education, as a result of parental and societal aspirations. Higher education, especially university-type higher education, has a very high social status, which exerts a pull not achieved by other non-tertiary post-secondary provision. On the other hand, as discussed, higher education institutions (HEIs) in some countries are becoming increasingly dependent on tuition fees for their financial sustainability. These conditions may allow for some HEIs recruiting students who are not adequately prepared for higher education, either because the school system failed them or for other reasons. In addition, these institutions may not provide these students with the necessary academic support to make up for their lack of preparation (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017, p. 24).

Regarding individual choice, the OECD sets out the advantages for people participating in higher education, from both from the perspective of the individual and to broader society.

> Based on current patterns of graduation, an average of 50% of today's young people across OECD countries is expected to graduate from higher education at least once during their lifetime. The attraction of higher education is explained by the fact that it clearly pays, both in the labour market and in life. Adults with higher education qualifications have the best outcomes in the labour market: they are less likely to be unemployed, and, on average, they earn more than adults with upper secondary education who, in turn, earn more than adults with below upper secondary education. In addition, continuing higher education after a bachelor's degree also pays off on average. The benefits of education are not only financial; more highly educated adults tend to be more engaged in the world around them. Adults with higher education are more likely to report desirable social outcomes, including good or excellent health, participation in volunteer activities, interpersonal trust, and political efficacy (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017, p.33).

The increased participation levels and associated challenges for institutions, highlighted above, contribute to the completion rates across the OECD. Completion rates for students entering higher education are quite low across the OECD countries. Listed below are key metrics highlighted in the OECD report entitled *Education at a glance 2019: OECD Indicators:*

- On average, across countries with true cohort data (data on individual students), 39% of full-time students who enter a bachelor's programme graduate within the theoretical duration of the programme. The average completion rate after three additional years increases to 67%.

- The completion rate (within the theoretical duration of the programme plus three years) of students with a general upper secondary degree (70%) is higher than that of students with a vocational upper secondary degree (58%), on average across countries.

- On average, 12% of students who enter a bachelor's programme full time leave the tertiary system before the beginning of their second year of study. This share increases to 20% by the end of the programme's theoretical duration and to 24% three years later (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019, p208).

The OECD is cautious in placing too much emphasis on the statistics to judge or compare different national education systems. They also recognise the complexity associated with student attrition:

> Tertiary completion rates can indicate the efficiency of tertiary education systems, as they show what proportion of the students who enter a tertiary programme ultimately graduate from it. However, low completion rates do not necessarily imply an inadequate tertiary system, as students may leave a programme for a variety of reasons. They may realise that they have chosen a subject or educational programme that is not a good fit for them, or they may find attractive employment opportunities before completing the programme. In some educational systems, it may also be common for students to enrol without intending to graduate from a specific programme, but rather to pursue a few courses as part of lifelong learning or upskilling (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019, p.209).

3.3.2 Australian Approach

Student progression is important in many OECD countries. A proactive country in this regard is Australia. Such was the level of priority placed on student progression in Australia, they commissioned an expert panel to publish a report entitled *FINAL REPORT - Improving Retention, Completion and Success in Higher Education*. Contextualising the importance placed on attrition, the report states:

> Higher education attrition is an issue that has concerned government and institutions for decades, and, indeed, is an issue that continues to cause concern. Extensive research over the years has consistently shown the drivers of attrition to be both student and institution-based (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2017, p.4).

The report places heavy emphasis on each Australian HEI and places responsibility on them:

The Panel stands by its view that higher education institutions should ensure that the students they admit have the capacity to succeed in higher education and are given the best chance to complete their studies through the appropriate provision of academic and other support services. It is for this reason that those services are required by the Higher Education Standards Framework (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2017, p.13).

Recognising the work of some institutions in reducing their attrition statistics, in the context of multiple factors contributing to student attrition, the report identifies that not all of its institutions succeed to the same degree:

While the Panel accepts the complexity of factors contributing to attrition, it reflects on the attrition data contained in its discussion paper. There are some institutions supporting higher-risk students to succeed to greater effect than others (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2017, p.13).

3.3.3 Irish Context Regarding Student Progression and Retention

3.3.3.1 Broadening Access, Increasing Participation and Student Attrition associated with Irish Higher Education

Broadening access to Higher Education has also been prioritised in Ireland. *The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2014-2019* identified and classified underrepresented groups:

- Entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education.
- First time, mature student entrants.
- Students with disabilities.
- Part-time/flexible learners.
- Further education award holders.
- Irish Travellers (Higher Education Authority, 2015, p.34).

Broadening participation is reinforced in the *Higher Education System Performance Framework 2018-2020* which seeks to "significantly improve the equality of opportunity through education and training and recruits a student body that reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population" (Department of Education and Skills, 2018 p.15). This objective is complemented by a separate top-level objective centred on enhancing the overall quality of education provision. Within that objective is a target to improve problematic non-progression rates by 10% (Department of Education and Skills, 2018, p.17).

National policy in Ireland is consistent with other OECD countries, in widening and increasing participatory levels in tertiary education. It also recognises similar challenges arising out of

enhanced participation as potentially increasing attrition. Monitoring student progression and retention issues and trends has been a priority in Irish Higher Education. As highlighted in Chapter 1, since the publication of the first report in 2010, the HEA publishes about student progression annually, underlining the importance of progression in the national context. Widening college entry to traditionally underrepresented groups is welcome, but recognising the necessity of provision to ensure these students succeed, is identified as a challenge.

> The system must be open to and supportive of all learners, not just the traditional school leavers seeking full-time provision, but also the growing proportion of new types of learners: a first generation in many families from underrepresented regions and socio-economic groups; those already in the workforce, and adults outside of the education system looking to further their education and skills. This continuing evolution in the diversity of learners is further emphasised in the new National Access Plan, which sets ambitious targets for growth of part-time learners, mature learners, and learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds. It is imperative that these ambitions are realised to both ensure the availability of capabilities and skills and talent across the economy, and to provide everyone with the opportunity to reach their full potential (Department of Education and Skills, 2016, p.25).

Mirroring the international context, Ireland has identified the link between widened participation and attrition. This correlation has been flagged in many reports by Irish state agencies. In order to promote institutions to become proactive about retention, the nature of progression was considered regarding the funding model for higher education:

> A key guiding principle of relevance to both the organisation and funding of higher education is access, participation and progression among all socio-economic groups (Department of Education and Skills, 2016, p.25).

Based on Irish public policy to broaden education participation, coupled with the national and international experience of the impact such a broadening has in terms of student retention, the SSM is a timely and welcome attempt to prioritise reducing non-progression.

3.3.3.2 Increased Participation in Institutes of Technology

Policy makers acknowledged the role that the Institutes of Technology play in enabling a broadening of student participation, even though it is believed to contribute to higher attrition rates.

> However, their new entrant profile is in line with national priorities to increase participation of students from underrepresented groups, such as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, mature students and students transferring from further education institutions. When one considers these factors, the chances of progressing in many institutes of technology are as high as in many universities. In fact, given the lower points on entry and more diverse profile of those entering the

institutes of technology, 79% of students' progressing is a good performance for the students, for the sector and for Ireland (Higher Education Authority, 2018, p.5).

3.3.3.3. Differences in Minimum CAO Entry Points and Non-Progression Rates between Universities and Institutes of Technology

Students who attain the highest number of CAO points usually opt to attend a University. Students who attain a more modest CAO point total often pursue their studies in Institutes of Technology. The following tables indicate the cut off CAO points for two Irish Universities and two Institutes of Technology for the years 2013 (mid-evaluation) and 2017 (final year of evaluation). This is an example of the points total with respect of students' choices, in the context of business programmes. The figure in brackets shows the percentile cut-off of students who got that level of points. Table 3.3 shows the higher points totals for the university programmes.

Institution	Programme	Points Cut Off 2013	Points Cut Off 2017
University College Dublin	Commerce	475 (15.6)	499 (14.2)
National University of Ireland, Maynooth	Business (2017); Business and Management (2013)	430 (25.6)	405 (36.3)
Athlone Institute of Technology	Business Studies	285 (63.3)	296 (64.1)
Waterford Institute of Technology	Business Studies	290 (61.2)	278 (68.8)

Table 3.3 CAO Minimum Entry Requirements for Level 8 Business Programmes

The next table shows the extent to which Level 6 programmes, which are not offered by universities, have a much lower entry requirement.

Institution	Programme	Points Cut Off 2013	Points Cut Off 2017
Athlone Institute of Technology	Higher Certificate in Business	180 (80.1)	185 (84.3)
Waterford Institute of Technology	Higher Certificate in Business	200 (77.2)	190 (82.9)

Table 3.4 CAO Minimum Entry Requirements for level 6 Business Programmes

CAO minimum points levels contribute to differences in attrition rates between Universities and Institutes of Technology. The HEA identified a correlation between high Leaving Certificate Points and progression in third level.

> Those with higher prior educational attainment are more likely to progress to the second year of study than those with lower educational attainment, when individual and institution-related variables are controlled for in a model (Higher Education Authority, 2018, P.8).

Lower points total for entry are part of the reason for the striking difference in non-progression statistics between University and Institutes of Technology.
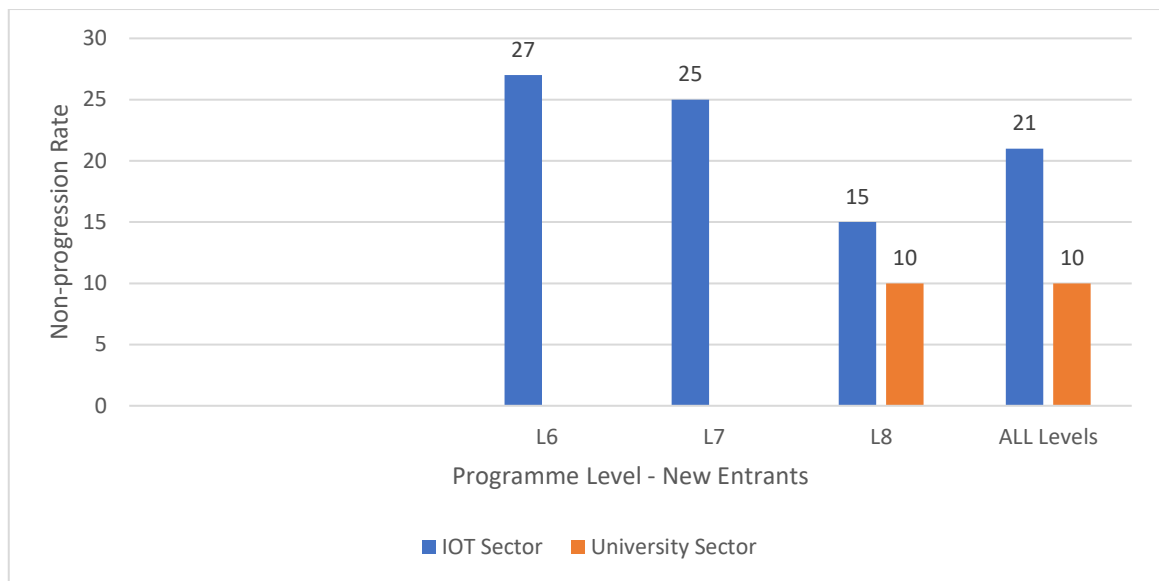
Figure 3.1 Levels of non-progression in third-level institutions in Ireland 2014/15 (Higher Education Authority, 2018). p17

Non-traditional students and those with lower points gravitate towards Institutes of Technology and, as a result, have a lower level of student preparedness, which contributes to their progression outcomes.

> The importance of academic preparedness prior to admission on entry to higher education is highlighted in the findings. Differences in progression rates across levels, sectors and disciplines are observed with students obtaining the highest Leaving Certificate points entering the university sector, resulting in a marked difference in progression rates to those entering the institutes of technology. The diverse student profile and academic preparedness of the new entrant cohort entering the institutes of technology is negatively impacting on the sector's overall progression rates (Higher Education Authority, 2018, p.5).

3.3.3.4 Importance of First-year Experience

Ireland's National Policy, outlined in the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030,* emphasised the importance of a positive first-year student experience in achieving the goals of

higher education:

> Failure to address the challenges encountered by some students in their first-year contributes to high drop-out and failure rates, with personal and system-wide implications (Higher Education Authority, 2011, p.56).

Underpinning the overarching national strategy is a series of targets which individual third level institutions must endeavour to achieve. These targets are set out in the *Higher Education Systems Performance Framework 2018-2020*. Regarding the issues of student retention, the performance framework identified the following two specific targets:

> All HEI's will have a student success strategy in place by 2020, which will embed whole-of-HEI approaches to institutional access strategies (Department of Education and Skills, 2018, p.15.)

> Completion rates for students from disadvantaged cohorts will be specifically targeted for improvement (Department of Education and Skills, 2018, p. 16.).

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the HEA publishes about student progression annually, since the publication of the first report in 2010: -The iteration *A study of Progression in Irish Higher Education 2014/15 to 2015/16* stated:

> International research has shown that if a student progresses to second year, he or she is more likely to complete their programme. It is important for the higher education system that we seek to address reasons as to why a student may not progress, as this has significant personal and possible financial implications for the student, but also for the institution and for the State in funding the course (Higher Education Authority, 2018, p.5).

To assist individual HEIs in Ireland, the HEA and Ireland's National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education published a report entitled *Understanding and Enabling Student Success in Higher Education.* A key goal of the report was to establish a shared national understanding of success, which they defined as:

> Student success optimises the learning and development opportunities for each student to recognise and fulfil their potential to contribute to, and flourish in, society.

> To be achieved, this requires a culture in Irish higher education that values inclusivity, equity and meaningful engagement between students, staff, their institutions and the wider community (O'Farrell, 2019, p.28).

The report identified 5 key themes to support student success:

Engagement and Student Partnership

Professional Development and the Centrality of Staff Who Teach

Evidence-based Decision-making

Supporting Transitions and Cultivating Belonging

Assessment and Feedback

3.3.3.5 The Student Voice

The Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) is conducted annually. Measuring student engagement, the purpose of ISSE:

Accordingly, for the purposes of the ISSE, student engagement reflects two key elements:

> The first is the amount of time and effort that students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities. The second is how institutions deploy resources and organise curriculum and other learning opportunities to encourage students to participate in meaningful activities that are linked to learning. (Higher Education Authority, 2017 p.7)

The survey is taken by first, final year and postgraduate level students. Available data is only based on results at faculty level as opposed to that of the department, so while useful, does not constitute hard data for first-year at departmental level.

With information provided in the AIT internal report entitled *The Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE), Athlone Institute of Technology Report 2017*, the only basis for comparison relates to how the faculty compares with other faculties within AIT and to other institutions, at their institutional level.

Despite not being a reliable like for like comparison, it is noteworthy that if the FB&H was a stand-alone institution, it would have had the highest rating in 4 of the 9 ISSE categories, for the IOT sector.

3.4 Historical Background of Student Progression

This chapter has contextualised the student transition from senior cycle to higher education, and established why student retention is important in an Irish and International context. It now addresses what has been published regarding student experience and transition related theory.

Chapter 2 described the SSM developed in the AIT. It is a wide and varied model that encompasses many elements associated with the first-year higher education experience. The model is very broad. So too is the published research associated with the model's components. When considering the historical review, the author reviewed the broad base of literature from the perspectives, categorisation, and organisation of other authors.

In commencing the historical review, the author selected a peer-reviewed examination of the literature on the first-year experience, which comprised a review of over 750 publications. Harvey, Drew and Smith (2006) identified that the first-year experience had been well researched worldwide, at that juncture, for over forty years. Their review of literature on the first-year experience also considered breadth and depth, addressing a wide array of factors associated with the first-year experience. The goal of the review was described as:

> This literature review aims to consider the research literature and institutional 'grey material' exploring the undergraduate and postgraduate first-year experience and to identify key emerging issues to inform university policy makers, practitioners, researchers and other interested parties (Harvey, Drew and Smith, 2006, p.1).

The Authors identified that the range of enquiries into the first-year experience was broad but they identified 4 key themes. Harvey, Drew and Smith (2006):

1. Performance and retention, including predicting success, assessing performance and withdrawal and retention.

2. Factors impacting on performance and persistence, including institutional, personal and external factors.

3. Support for the first-year, including induction, adjustment and skill support.

4. Learning and teaching, including new techniques for first-year groups and first-year learning behaviour.

Given the broad nature of the SSM, this researcher has identified and grouped the most relevant research, according to the categories established by Harvey, Drew and Smith in their review. The author conducted snowballing of the material from this review and included the most appropriate research. As the report was published over a decade before the researcher embarked on this study, more recent publications have been added within the categories outlined above.

To achieve this, all of the titles for the sub-paragraphs contained within the overall section of the historical background were subject to additional searches using fifteen databases. The most relevant papers were then included.

3.4.1 Performance and Retention, Including Predicting Success, Assessing Performance and Withdrawal and Retention

Academic researchers have sought to determine if the likelihood of a student not progressing can be identified, by means of determining key predictors that identify students most likely to drop

out of Higher Education. Little effort was made in the construction of the SSM in attempting to identify predictors of success prior to students registering on a first-year programme.

In their report, Harvey, Drew and Smith suggested that there are no straightforward generic predictors that transcend institutional and student types, in addition to cultural boundaries. In relation to the use of state or entrance exams, there are bodies of research to suggest that performance in school exams is at least somewhat of a predictor of performance in Higher Education (Williams, 1950; Kelsall, 1963; Choppin *et al.*, 1973; Westrick *et al.*, 2015). A key consideration on balancing the need for data to enhance student success is coupled with the risks of creating institutions that are beholden to algorithms at the expense of human decision making (Fynn, 2016).

3.4.1.1 Student Performance Prior to Third Level Entry

The extent of the influence of A level results in the UK was measured at just 8% in a meta-analysis carried out for social studies courses (Peers and Johnston, 1994). In a wider international context, numerous studies have identified that attainment in school is a significant, if not the most important, key indicator relating to student performance in higher education (Touron, 1987; Ott, 1988; Birch and Mill, 2006; Van Rooij *et al.*, 2017). Mid-term performance of first-year students related not just to entrance examination grades but also academic self-esteem, expectations and study strategies (Van Overwalle, 1989)

Regarding business education provision, Bargate (1999) showed that there was no correlation between passing the first-year accounting programme and the school matriculation level in mathematics, whilst Duff (2004) identified prior academic achievement as the strongest predictor of first-year performance and progression.

Research conducted by Cox (2000) used the level of prior performance as a mechanism to inform teaching, learning, and assessment strategies, as opposed to using it as a predictor of success. Pokorny and Pokorny (2005) identified that there was no single predicator of success but that the presumption that students can rapidly become independent learners upon initial entry to higher education is unrealistic, mirroring the SSM's underlying principle.

Historically, countries such as the USA which uses aptitude tests (SATs) for higher education enrolment, sought to use these scores as predictors for first-year and subsequent success (Willingham, 1990) but the value placed on these correlations has diminished as several studies (Fincher, 1990; Morgan, 1990; Rothstein, 2004; Richardson, Abraham and Bond, 2012) identify a

decline in the potential predictor of the SAT, especially in relation to the influence of poverty and ethnicity (Dixon-Román, Everson and McArdle, 2013).

In the immediate context of this research project, the literature suggests that this study should include some level of analysis of students with varying amounts of CAO points, which will be considered in the later chapters.

3.4.1.2 Students with Prior Knowledge of Subject

Having prior knowledge of the subject area seemed to suggest the first-year students would at least have some advantage (Hagedorn *et al.*, 1999; De Clercq, Pearson and Rolfe, 2001; Meyer and Shanahan, 2001; Madigan, 2006) albeit that research is mostly based on individual subjects. Prior knowledge of pre-requisite subjects can lead to enhanced student performance at programme level (Buskes and Belski, 2017).

3.4.1.3. Early Performance of Students

In relation to predictors of first-year success, Harvey, Drew and Smith (2006) identified intermediate grades in the first-year as a much better predictor of final first-year grades and future retention. This is widely supported by an array of research seeking to identify the correlation between early student performance and progression from the first-year (Wilson, 1983; Johnes, 1990; Creon, Reichgott and Spencer, 1991; Hyers and Joslin, 1998; Alzahrani *et al.*, 2005). McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) showed that the preceding academic assessment is the most significant predictor of the next assessed performance at university. Students benefit from feedback on early assessment (Espinoza and Genna, 2021). Given the genesis of the model under evaluation was the "habit-forming initiative", including an early first assessment that students found achievable, the literature endorses the inclusion of this measure in the model.

There were many studies which sought to identify student learning behaviour as a good predictor of likely student success in the first-year. A study conducted in an Irish Context determined that students who borrowed most from the library performed best at first-year exams, albeit no similar correlation was found in final year students (Brazier and Conroy, 1996).

Numerous studies (Watkins, 1986; Matthews, 1991; Wilkie and Redondo, 1996; Owens, Clark and Norton, 2004) showed there was little evidence that learning behaviour is a good predictor of first-year success. As analytics evolves however, the evidence suggests that there are correlations between learning behaviour such as engagement with learning platform Moodle and student success (Ademi, Loshkovska and Kalajdziski, 2019). Using Automated Machine Learning to enhance the accuracy of predicting student performance using data available prior to the start of

the academic program (Zeineddine, Braendle and Farah, 2021) is likely to become more widespread.

3.4.1.4 Programme Selection and Late Entry

Choosing the wrong programme has been put forward as a reason for student attrition (Sadoyama *et al.*, 2020). Students who enrol late for their programme are not as successful academically as students who enrol early (Shriner, 2014) and that late entry leads to further disadvantage for students, in the context of programme selection (Baxter and Hatt, 2000).

3.4.1.5 Overall Perspective on Predictors of Student Success

The capacity to predict student academic outcomes is of value for any educational institution aiming to improve student performance and persistence (Helal *et al.*, 2018, p.134). In relation to the SSM under evaluation in this dissertation, little attention was given to predictors, albeit that some aspects, such as prior performance based on CAO points, were assumed in the model's development.

3.4.1.6 Student Self Esteem and Ability

Student esteem is one pillar of the model under evaluation. Wong and Chiu (2019) argued that self-esteem, pride and fear can prevent students from maximising their available opportunities and that early successes are critical for students to re-evaluate their self-esteem suggesting that the conduct of the first assessment with the potential for high marks is appropriate, particularly in the context that some students enter their studies with low self-esteem and resilience (Mendes *et al.*, 2021).

Studies into the ability of First-Year Students have identified many interesting ideas, such as that standards are decreasing over time (Eurich and Kraetsch, 1982; Taylor and Nightingale, 1990) or that students attending full time develop greater critical thinking skills than those attending part-time (Pascarella *et al.*, 1996). Students' self-perception does not match their performance in tests or their lecturers' perceptions (Cros *et al.*, 1986; Jacobs, 1989; Robertson, Ketaing and Cooper, 1998; Meyer and Shanahan, 2001) but students' perceptions about their performance becomes more accurate as they progress through first-year (Osterhage *et al.*, 2019).

More mature students were found to have greater problem-solving skills that younger students (Macpherson, 2002) and mature students with the highest level of success in first-year had enhanced cognitive abilities, particularly verbal reasoning, than personal competencies (Kotzé and Massyn, 2019).

Regarding gender, it was reported that female students had significantly greater time management skills than their male counterparts (Trueman and Hartley, 1996) but male students improved more after undertaking time management skills in a workshop setting (Wilson, Joiner and Abbasi, 2021). Based on the literature, including self-esteem as a pillar, in its own right, in the model, besides the influence of esteem elsewhere, is consistent with the published research.

3.4.2 Factors Impacting on Performance and Persistence

The SSM this study evaluates sought to enhance the first-year experience and also increase student progression rates. Recognising that there are multiple factors, rather than individual reasons for students dropping out, has been observed on multiple occasions (Schedvin, 1985; Nora *et al.*, 1996; Adamson and McAleavy, 2000; Flowers *et al.*, 2001; Murray, 2014; Hearn *et al.*, 2021). The typical reasons students drop out relate to the institution, their choice of programme, family and domestic issues and other factors. Determining if these specific reasons factored into student withdrawals in the context of this study will be ascertained in the primary research.

3.4.2.1 Factors Associated with Student Success

In contrast to ascertaining reasons student dropped out, some studies identified what helped students achieve their learning outcomes. Drew (2001) identified four student factors (self-management, motivation & needs, understanding and finally support needs) and three contextual areas (course orientation, resources and facilities) as the main contributors to success. Fontana et al. (1986) identified 12 attributes in order for students to succeed. These attributes which they listed in order of importance are:

Study habits; lecture content; lecturer; social; interest; motivation; ability; domestic security; peers; luck; financial security and health.

A more recent study suggests specific behavioural factors, specific personal factors, and specific environmental factors each appear to influence student success (Kinkle, 2020).

Determining the level of social and academic integration has seen many publications identify the importance of such integration when identifying student success (Christie and Dinham, 1991; Zea *et al.*, 1997; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Schaeper, 2020). These factors will be considered in the primary research conducted later in this study.

3.4.2.2 Student Preparedness

Student preparedness describes the level to which each individual student or a collective student body is ready to undertake their third-level study. The Irish context of students going from secondary to tertiary education has already been addressed earlier in this chapter.

In a series of studies focused on the first semester in a UK University, it was found that lack of preparedness was important in the context of student withdrawal. Over two-thirds of student withdrawals were associated with the selection of the wrong course, and almost 4 in 5 departing students cited course difficulties (Rickinson and Rutherford, 1995, 1996; Rickinson, 1998). Their findings were supported by research and showed students withdrawing due to course related issues or poor course choice selection were in the majority (De Rome and Wienke, 1982; Thomas, Adams and Birchenough, 1996). Further reinforcement of this concept was offered by van Rooij, Jansen and van de Grift (2018), who determined that only satisfaction with the degree programme predicted the success of academic adjustment and intention to persist. A considerable focus of the models' actions complements the literature by creating early student satisfaction with their programme choice.

3.4.2.3 Factors Associated with Student Attrition

Professor Mantz Yorke conducted research on 6 Higher Education Institutions in the UK, through a series of publications, deduced that student attrition can be reduced to 6 factors relating to preparedness:

> Poor quality of the student experience
>
> Inability to cope with the demands of the Higher Education Programme
>
> Unhappiness with the social environment
>
> Wrong Choice of Programme
>
> Matters related to Financial Need
>
> Dissatisfaction with aspects of the institutional provision (Yorke, 1999, p.39).

Subsequently, Yorke and Longden (2004) contended that the focus should be on student success through teaching, learning, assessment, and institutional support services, rather than focusing on retention and completion. A considerable focus of the model was the pillar on programme design, besides many individual actions, such as the role of the academic staff.

Supporting the overall notion that there are multiple factors associated with student withdrawals (Aljohani, 2016b), there are many studies to suggest that academic matters are to the primary

reason for student withdrawal (Pascarella and Chapman, 1983; Goldman and Gillis, 1989), while others conclude that non-academic matters contribute greatly to the reasons students withdraw (Mackie, 2001; Wintre *et al.*, 2006). Van Der Zanden *et al.* (2018) found that academic achievement and social-emotional well-being were particularly related to factors within the student, whereas critical thinking skills were more related to the learning environment.

3.4.2.4 Student Diversity

No first-year cohort is homogenous and non-traditional students can experience additional difficulties (Archer, Hutchings and Ross, 2003; Bowl, 2003; Christie, Munro and Wager, 2005; MacDonald, 2018). Students are also more likely to leave their studies if they come from a lower social class (Biggs *et al.*, 1991; Scott, Burns and Cooney, 1996; Liljander, 1998) or take longer to complete their degrees (Zarifa *et al.*, 2018).

"First-generation students" whose parents did not attend higher education tended to believe that the supports in HE would be similar to what went before and struggled more, in terms of persistence, when compared with other students (Grayson, 1997; Duggan, 2004; University of Teeside Retention Team, 2005; Lambert and Mamiseishvili, 2019).

During the development of the SSM, no additional consideration was given to differentiating between mature students and young students. AIT has a mature students society, but it has been identified that mature students have different challenges, such as financial or family difficulties, that further inhibits their progression relative to younger students (Thomas, Adams and Birchenough, 1996; Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998; Bowl, 2003; Heagney and Benson, 2017). Despite these additional considerations, mature students perform as well, if not better academically than their younger counterparts (Richardson, 1995; Simonite, 1997; Harris and Brooks, 1998; Pearce, 2017).

The SSM gave absolutely no consideration to the diversity of students based on gender or ethnicity, despite studies highlighting differences in these categories. In relation to gender, Porter and Swing (2006) suggested that males have a lower persistence rate, while Nora *et al.* (1996) found females were positively affected by extracurricular interactions with academic staff, which increased their level of persistence. Ethnicity has mainly been researched in the US and this research has found that ethnicity alone is not a determinant of student success but rather influenced the context in which students conducted their studies (Mallinckrodt, 1988; Zea *et al.*, 1997; Amelink, 2005).

3.4.2.5 Financial Issues

In relation to the profile of students who have withdrawn, finance has proved to be a major factor in determining the decision to discontinue (Fontana *et al.*, 1986; Thomas, Adams and Birchenough, 1996; Harrington *et al.*, 2001) besides being one of the major stress factors for first-year students (Fam, Murugan and Yap, 2020). Financial hardship impacts early withdrawal of students from the two lowest social groups, more likely to withdraw for financial reasons, than students from the highest two social groups (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998).

Further research identified student funding requirements favour traditionally affluent students (Woodrow, 2000; Callender, 2001), with the first-generation students finding tuition costs the biggest barrier to participating in college (Rubio *et al.*, 2017). A study conducted in two institutions found that students from low-income groups who received bursaries were more likely to be retained than those from low-income groups who did not receive bursaries (Hatt, Hannan and Baxter, 2005).

Measuring the number of students who dropped out for financial reasons from the Department of Business and Management will be articulated in Chapter 5, in the context of early withdrawals.

One cannot consider the financial context in which students attend college, without also considering the impact of part-time paid employment on their studies. The majority of students enrolled in college today work part-time at least (Remenick and Bergman, 2021 p.34).

Research on this issue has been divided with some studies indicating a lower level of student achievement and a higher rate of attrition amongst students who are engaged in paid employment (Callender and Kemp, 2000; Choy, 2002; Hovdhaugen, 2015) while others have also shown that students, despite perceiving that participation in part-time work, resulted in them getting lower grades, also felt there was a benefit associated with learning and earning (Broadbridge and Swanson, 2005). A study conducted by Yanbarisova (2014) concluded that professionally employed students can perform better than students who are not professionally employed or employed at all. Students also opt for part-time work partly out of a desire to gain work experience to enhance future employment (McInnis, James and Hartley, 2000). Benefits included developing skills for the world of employment and gaining knowledge about the world of business (Curtis and Shani, 2002).

3.4.2.6 Wider Issues

Health and stress also influence student persistence and attrition. Stress experienced by students attending higher education is a common experience (Hughes, 2005; Porter and Swing, 2006; Mohamad *et al.*, 2021). Maymon, Hall and Harley (2019) highlighted the importance of evaluating

the quality of support received by first-year students during the transition to higher education and show faculty/staff support to be an important contributor to student well-being.

Broader health issues experienced by students had a negative impact on student performance in exams and assessments (Tooth, Tonge and McManus, 1989). In recent years, there has been an increase in mental health issues for students which inhibit their progress (Beiter *et al.*, 2015). Unsurprisingly, it has been shown that students with health problems are more likely to withdraw from college (Szulecka, Springett and De Pauw, 1987). Again, the impact of health issues will be addressed from withdrawal data to be considered later in the dissertation, as will the issue of attendance, given that Bijsmans and Schakel (2018) found that attendance mattered in the context of measuring student success.

It is acknowledged that there is a vast array of literature associated with the benefits of students living on campus, none of which was considered in this review, as AIT has no on-site campus accommodation. Many students in AIT live at home and stay at home students there is an additional importance of family, friendship and community influence their time in higher education (Pokorny, Holley and Kane, 2017).

3.4.2.7 Summary of Factors Impacting on Performance and Persistence

Multiple factors contribute to how an individual student or cohort of students persist with their third-level studies. These factors, identified in the previous paragraphs, contribute to reasons students withdraw but also influence the extent to which student progress. A primary goal of the SSM was to mitigate these factors and enhance opportunities in order for student to progress with their studies.

3.4.3 Support for the First-year, including Induction, Adjustment and Skill Support

Higher Education Institutions providing various forms of assistance for students, is very evident and wide-ranging. Support measures emanate from both academic and non-academic sections within an institution. Because of the wide nature of supports available, the literature provides a wide base, and this section of the review will focus on the type of supports and the impact they have been shown to have on student performance and retention.

3.4.3.1 Student Induction

First impressions matter, so the importance of student induction, an action in the SSM, is considerable. When highlighting its importance, Harvey, Drew and Smith described induction:

One key area for support of first-year students is induction, which is seen as important in retention and enabling adjustment to the higher education culture. Induction of first-year students is often criticised for being confusing, sometimes overly bureaucratic and, whilst providing information, not providing it in a user-friendly way and in a context that can be readily assimilated. Various studies report induction programmes and longer-term active processes designed to ameliorate the confusion and information overload of the induction period. They suggest more gradual provision of information and better integration and socialisation of students. There are separate issues for integration of distance students (Harvey, Drew and Smith, 2006, p.70).

Providing students with too much information during the start of their programme has been consistently defined as problematic during the last 4 decades (Lewis, 1984; Hargreaves, 1998; Woodfield, 2002; Suhaimi and Hussin, 2017). Despite the best of intentions, students are often left confused. Although transitioning is an ongoing process throughout higher education, it is still relevant to consider what happens during induction (Gregersen, Holmegaard and Ulriksen, 2021).

There is broad agreement in the literature on the benefits of replacing the one day induction, with a more extensive programme, incorporating innovations similar to AIT connect, which takes place over several weeks in the first semester (Hargreaves, 1998; Edward and Middleton, 2002; Edward, 2003; Gerodetti and Nixon, 2019).

Although the research was written in the context of an integrated induction, the work carried out by Gaskin and Hall (2002) found from focus groups, that there were many student benefits associated with the inclusion of an orienteering exercise, for their geography students, around the city of London. Their research complements the work of the model under evaluation in terms of the inclusion of the team building event.

In the United States, the freshman year is characterised by the inclusion of a first-year seminar programme which seeks to help students to adjust to higher education (Gardner, 1986; Culver and Bowman, 2020). The primary reason for their inclusion was assisting retention (Barefoot, 2000) but participation also enhanced student performance (Keup and Barefoot, 2005). Enriching the student experience through learning seminar programmes, study abroad, student-faculty research, reported greater gains in learning and personal development (Faletta, Meier and Balderas, 2016).

3.4.3.2 Student Adjustment

The majority of students will adjust well to the new environment in which they find themselves. Adaptability plays a significant role in first-year achievement and course satisfaction (Holliman *et al.*, 2019). However, a significant minority has difficulty making this adjustment (Lowe and Cook,

2003). In France, first-year is considered an adjustment vehicle in addition to education provision (Leroux, 1997).

Levels of interactions with the academic staff also play a role in how students make the adjustment to tertiary education. Students can feel a greater sense of belonging through positive interactions with the teaching staff where those interactions are positive and form part of a supportive environment (Dennis, 2000; Kember, Lee and Li, 2001; Krause, 2001; Ahn and Davis, 2020). Meyers *et al.* (2019) argue that teacher empathy enhances student learning.

Heavy social media use, however, was associated with poorer outcomes of student adjustment (Bowman *et al.*, 2019). With similarities to the HOD student interviews, it was found that coaching helped with student retention (Lancer and Eatough, 2018).

3.4.3.3 Institutional Habitus

Institutional Culture is fundamental to any decisions made by students to withdraw or remain (Roberts, 2018). A significant publication from an institution that was widening participation, stated that students' decision to continue or withdraw was based on the Institutional habitus (Thomas, 2002). Institutional habitus research involves inquiring into how schools, collectively, think, perceive and have an impact on their students. It implies asking about the shared beliefs of teachers from one institution as to the nature of students, education and the schools themselves (Tarabini, Curran and Fontdevila, 2017). Students with a greater sense of belonging to their institution have a greater level of well-being, with reduced dropout intentions (Suhlmann *et al.*, 2018).

In an article entitled *Student Retention: the role of Institutional Habitus,* Thomas identified the following recurring themes for assisting students from non-traditional backgrounds:

- staff attitudes, and relationships with students, which minimise the social and academic distance between them, and enable students to feel valued and sufficiently confident to seek guidance when they require it;
- inclusive teaching and learning strategies which do not assume that the habitus of `traditional HE students should be the habitus of new cohorts. This includes an awareness of different previous educational experiences, the language of instruction and implied requirements, alternative learning styles and needs and other assumed norms;
- collaborative or socially-orientated teaching and learning, which promotes social relations between students through academic activities;
- a range of assessment practices that give all students, irrespective of their preferred method of assessment, the opportunities to succeed, and which do not assume the same access to time and other resources. This includes utilising a range of assessment tools, providing opportunities and support for re-

assessment and consulting students about other (academic and non-academic) commitments when planning assessments;

- choice, flexibility and support with regard to accommodation, which allows students to find the living arrangements that best suit them and to move if necessary;
- a diversity of social spaces: the Students Union bar is an important social facility for some students, but alternative spaces need to be provided for students with different needs. Particular attention is needed with regard to local students who are not able to socialize through their living arrangements;
- students are allowed to be themselves, and not expected to change to fit in with institutional expectations, which are very different to their own habitus (Thomas, 2002, pp.439-440).

3.4.3.4 Pre-entry Programmes and Transition Modules

A study conducted evaluating whether pre-entry programmes foster successful transition to higher education (Pennington *et al.*, 2018) indicated that pre-entry programmes may have a positive impact on students' sense of academic self-efficacy. Similar findings were made by Van Herpen *et al.* (2020), who concluded that students who participated in a pre-academic programme enhanced their first-year GPA.

Introductory modules to assist with student transition to higher education are offered by many institutions. Windham *et al.* (2014) found that retention rates improved amongst students who participated in this type of module in US Community Colleges. Similar findings were made regarding student success courses (Kimbark, Peters and Richardson, 2017). Other initiatives, such as the provision of optional extras to develop key skills, have been introduced across a wide array of disciplines (Hargreaves, 1998; Edward and Middleton, 2002).

Regarding the local context of the SSM, Langan (2018) evaluated the use of the transition module, Learning and Development for Higher Education, employed in the Faculty of Business & Hospitality, as part of an evaluation of 3 Irish institutions. The research showed a strong level of student satisfaction with the inclusion of the module with "70% rating the module either excellent or good" p138. The recommendations of that study that contributed to the model's evolution relevant to this evaluation were:

Recommendation 1. HEIs need to take ownership of the issues associated with the leaving cert program.

Recommendation 4. Transition related modules should be subject to continuous review.

Recommendation 6. Careful consideration should be given to who delivers the module. (Langan, 2018, pp.143-145)

3.4.3.5 Summary of Supporting First-years

Student support services at many institutions expanded in line with increased participation. The extent to which these supports are co-ordinated is especially relevant to the students. Determining the extent to which the student support services developed in the SSM under evaluation, besides identifying those support services with the maximum impact, is central to this study.

3.4.4 Learning and Teaching, including New Techniques for First-year Groups and First-year Learning Behaviour.

An extensive body of literature looks at the innovations in learning and teaching in first-year settings in higher education.

3.4.4.1 Approaches to Learning

As previously outlined, student approaches to learning were given consideration, in the context of their transition from the leaving certificate. Students' cognitive development occurred more in the first-year than any other year in college (MacGregor, 1991). First-year has been identified as being full of clusters of critical incidents which will either enable or hinder students' learning throughout their college experience (Ramsay, Barker and Jones, 1999; Light, 2001). Significantly given the goals of the SSM's habit-forming pillar, students demonstrated that the habits they showed from their final year in second-level education persisted into the first-year of university, despite staff expectations that their students would work more independently (Cook and Leckey, 1999; Hassel and Ridout, 2018).

Blair (2017) found that students largely had a realistic expectation of what to expect in University albeit they had some unrealistic expectations that teaching would be similar to what they experienced in school. Applying changes to incorporate group assessments into the curriculum reported a significant increase in students' deep learning approach (Hall, Ramsay and Raven, 2004)

3.4.4.2 Learning Approaches and Student Performance

Consideration both in the literature and the model, has also been placed on the role that reflective practice has on first-year student performance and how desirable it is for graduates to acquire high critical thinking skills (Procter, 2020).

Students who have a higher level of reflective practice perform better (Higgins, Flower and Petraglia, 1992) and that the concept of reflective practice can be taught (Masui and De Corte, 2005) albeit that it does not happen naturally for all students (Mitchell, 1993). Many students dislike the concept despite understanding the importance of reflective practice (Rees, Shepherd and Chamberlain, 2005).

There has been a considerable focus on students' approaches to learning and to establishing if there is a correlation between student approach and performance. Many studies (Norton and Crowley, 1995; Schatteman *et al.*, 1997; Morris, 2001; Norton, Owens and Clark, 2004; Smallhorn *et al.*, 2015; Mørk *et al.*, 2022) have identified an improved level of performance or increased correlation between conceptions and learning outcomes where students have either attended workshops or one-to-one sessions. Contrastingly, a study on problem based learning Groves (2005) found no correlation between learning approach and examination results. A later study (Fernandes *et al.*, 2020) however, determined a strong correlation between PBL and developing student autonomy.

Preconceptions that students have formed in advance of undertaking their programmes and the contrast with the delivery of those programmes has been investigated from the perspective of first-year attrition. Some students will be disadvantaged or inhibited by their prior views (Kember, 2001; Meyer and Shanahan, 2004), whereas students with strongly formed conceptions will find the adjustment less difficult (Schon, 1983; Mitchell, 1993).

Harvey, Drew and Smith (2006) considered that first-year is important to develop learning strategies and study skills for students. First-year is where there is cognitive growth, potential for deep learning and reflection. Overall, learning behaviour and prior attitudes can influence student performance to certain degrees.

3.4.4.3. Autonomous Learning and the SSM's Underlying Principle

Chapter 2 described one of the foundation blocks as the "underlying principle of the model that it takes four years to bring a student all the way to becoming an independent learner". A description of the pillar entitled "habit-forming" was also outlined. There is a certain level of overlap between the underlying principle and the habit-forming pillar to how Harvey, Drew and Smith (2006) describe autonomous learning. Complementing the model's underlying principle is the argument that students can't rapidly become independent learners without help (Pokorny and Pokorny, 2005; Ali, 2015).

Fazey and Fazey (2001) indicated such help needs to be addressed by teaching staff. Hughes (1998) found a correlation between student autonomy and self-confidence achieved through the acquisition of enabling skills. A student's autonomous learning allows them to form independence and self-management of their learning activities (Bukhteeva et al., 2019) which complements both the underlying principle and also the graduate attributes in the model.

Whereas the model contains a pillar entitled "Student Esteem" and there are many of the model actions associated with enabling skills, that correlation is not strong in the model under evaluation in this study. The model depicts that curriculum planners and teachers need to think of ways to develop student autonomy (Chan, 2001) and that students are positive about what and how they learn where interventions are trialled (Thompson, Pilgrim and Oliver, 2005).

A concept that does not appear in the model under evaluation is that of a learning community, albeit there are aspects included within the student experience pillar. Tinto stated:

> The faculty and students join together as collaborators in dealing with the content of the courses in a manner which provides both for thematic unity and synthetic wholeness. In these instances, the process of collaborative learning is as important as is content. Though the latter is not insignificant, the primary intent of the course is to actively involve students in the learning process in a collaborative, rather than competitive, manner. Such programs seek through that involvement to promote both student learning and the development of academic and social communities in college. And they do so via the vehicle of the educational experience of the classroom, not despite it (Tinto, 1993 pp.168-169).

Considering the value of autonomous learning as something to which students both need and should aspire to and that through the provision of flexible learning by institutions, Harvey, Drew and Smith (2006) identified that self-confidence is key to students becoming autonomous learners.

3.4.4.4 Teaching Techniques and Innovations

The model's pillar entitled "Role of the Academic Staff" incorporates changes and improvements in teaching introduced over the lifetime of the model. Students have identified that academic staff really matter to their experience (Meehan and Howells, 2018). In relation to student preference, students respond better when their lecturers are more interactive and engaged in student-centred learning (Williams, 1992; Sander *et al.*, 2000).

Various new methods of teaching and experiential learning proved beneficial to students for over half a century (Sherman and McWhinnie, 1969; Adamson, 1979). An array of studies have demonstrated the benefits of experiential learning, especially when pre–preparation for practical

activities takes place (Tan, Asmawi and Yusof, 1989; Williamson, 1999; Beylefeld, Nena and Prinsloo, 2005; Aronson *et al.*, 2005; Chiu and Lee, 2019).

Curriculum innovation and reconfiguration have been identified as another key variable in relation to the first-year experience. In the model, the programme design pillar incorporates this. Tinto (2017) identified that students' perception of the curriculum influence their motivation and persistence levels. Strayhorn (1989) suggested that improving the quality of a school's learning environment can positively impact the students' perceptions of their overall well-being.

The value of problem based learning in relation to the first-year experience and its associated benefits, especially in relation to the level of student experience and satisfaction levels, has been well documented (Feletti *et al.*, 1988; De Volder and De Grave, 1989; Havenga and Du Toit, 2019). Interestingly, problem-based learning did not seem to benefit first-year students in a large class settings (Roberts *et al.*, 2005).

In relation to the transition to higher education Nardi (1987) conducted a successful project that sought to integrate teaching styles for first-year students, with the manner in which they were previously being taught in school while ensuring that the mechanisms that characterise mathematical thinking were taught to the students.

3.4.4.5 The Role of Assessments

Complementing the teaching endeavours of any first-year programme is the assessment strategy employed, as students often frame their learning around assessment tasks (Thomas, 2018). The value of assessment was defined by Carless as:

> Assessment tells students what is valued and what they need to achieve to be successful in their studies; it captures their attention and study time and may act as a spur; its results inform them of their progress, which in turn impacts on how they view themselves as individuals; and following from these results, it may provide satisfaction or discouragement. Assessment is a major factor in the exclusion and attrition of students, so the cost of unsophisticated practice can be high (Carless, 2015, p. 8).

Early innovations moving away from terminal exams, such as including multiple-choice questions as part of the first-year experience (Faulkner, 1977), became incorporated into programmes over previous decades. Innovations in the 1980s continued through first-year students marking each other's scripts (Gray, 1987), formatting questions differently to incorporate the link between theory and practice (Taylor and Ishaku, 1989) and by incorporating answers using both oral and written formats (Seddon and Pedrosa, 1988).

A move away from the traditional individual assessment through incorporating group work is also evident. Many positive outcomes of group learning, both for the individual students and for the group (Durham, 1990; Mitchell, 1992; Garvin *et al.*, 1995; Leveson, 1999; Zedda, Bernardelli and Maran, 2017) have been highlighted. The challenges and difficulties associated with group work, such as fear, uncertainty, tension and stress, have also been identified, besides the advantages (Bourner, Hughes and Bourner, 2001; Carver and Stickley, 2012; Bramley, 2020).

Technological advances have introduced the concept of incorporating online assessment as part of first-year programmes. Progress has been reported in students' engagement and learning through regular online assessments (Holmes, 2018), including when combined with peer interaction in semi-structured groups (Ariwa, 2003; Mostert and Snowball, 2013) and resulted in greater student commitment combined with faster feedback to students (Gaylard-Baleni, 2015). There was also a positive correlation between student performance in an online assessment and students' final IT examination where an assessment that was both formative and summative was included (Aisbitt and Sangster, 2005). Students have found formative online assessments useful for monitoring their progress, encourage future study, and increase their learning and understanding (McCallum and Milner, 2021).

3.4.4.6 Peer Tutoring and Mentoring

Peer tutoring and mentoring is a well-established mechanism that is used to enhance both student success and student retention (Andreanoff, 2016). Centrally, AIT provided the PASS system. It has been found that peer mentoring provides added value to teaching in higher education, especially in the first-year experience (Webb, 1990; Mabrito, 1991; Topping *et al.*, 1996).

Critics of the peer mentoring process, such as Meldrum (2002) claimed that the associated literature was preoccupied with technique and efficiency of assessment of teachers rather than focusing on peer assessment as a social tool. Peer interaction in assessment has also shown to facilitate learners positively if they engage in such a process (Hodgson, Chan and Liu, 2014).

3.4.4.7 Summary of Learning and Teaching

Any model of delivery in a third level institution has teaching and learning at its heart. Harvey, Drew and Smith (2006) concluded that many teaching and learning innovations had resulted in positive student outcomes. Given the focus on both academic staff and programme design in the SSM, the primary research will attempt to assess what the extent that learning and teaching had on student progression.

3.4.5 Context of Historical Overview and Models of Retention

Research into outcomes associated with individual measures is what has largely been considered in this historical background section. Much of the research that was conducted concerned individual projects or interventions, undertaken by individual academics or arising from institutional projects. Building on this research leads to the formulation of models. Harvey, Drew and Smith identified this pattern:

> Retention is one area of the first-year experience where there has been a sustained attempt to develop theory and this has resulted in various models of student retention (Harvey, Drew and Smith, 2006, p.31).

The next section of this literature review considers some models that have built upon some of the research outlined above.

3.5 Models of Departure and Holistic Approaches

Many models have attempted to integrate the different functions within an institution in a coherent manner, with a view of reducing retention. The enhancement, in terms of student performance that can come from a more focussed institutional approach, has been identified (Pitkethly and Prosser, 2001; Yorke and Longden, 2004; Porter and Swing, 2006).

Chapter 2 described the SSM. It is broad by nature, encompassing three foundation blocks, six student success pillars and twenty-seven actions, supports or interventions. Many of the themes included earlier in this chapter either directly match or are similar to the model's component parts.

The models and approaches that will be reviewed, are the IEO model and the student involvement theory that were put forward by Alexander Astin, Vincent Tinto's Departure Model and Sally Kift's Whole of Institution approach.

3.5.1 Astin's IEO Model and Student Involvement Theory

An attempt to model aspects of student attrition and retention was undertaken by Alexander Astin in both his IEO model and later the student involvement theory. Exploring the interrelationship between a student's input, their college environment and their desired outcomes is central to Astin's IEO model, depicted below in Figure 3.1.

The main thrust of the model is that to make a complete evaluation of any educational process, information about inputs, educational environment, and student outcomes must be taken into account (Al-Hadrami, 2011). Depicted below, the model has 3 elements: inputs are students' pre-

college characteristics they bring to college in the beginning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Ani, 2013). Barrett (2015) identified that the output or outcome of the education process would be the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviours that students would exhibit after leaving college and that these outcomes would be influenced by the college environment that is people, programmes, policies, cultures and experiences that students encounter in college.
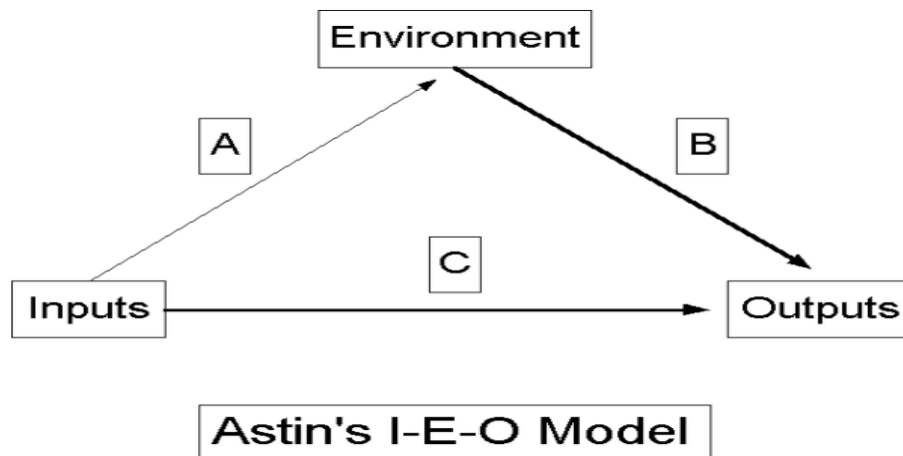
Figure 3.2 Astin's IEO Model

Whereas, according to Astin's model, student inputs influence outputs in their own right, tertiary education providers can evaluate the student inputs and then seek to adjust the environments in order to achieve the desired outcomes. Examples of adjusting the environment are numerous in the SSM where influence or control the environment took place through additional measures introduced to assist the student achieve the desired outcome.

Developing further on his IEO theory, Astin's student involvement theory identified that the greater the students' involvement, the greater the amount of student learning and personal development (Astin, 1999), meaning essentially that students learn by becoming involved (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Aljohani (2016) summarised the theory:

> Astin postulated that the amount of students' involvement in college is positively related to the amount of their learning and personal development. Although the Student Involvement Theory is an educational theory that focuses on enhancing the student development and learning environment in higher education, it has some implications for the student retention phenomenon. First, it was partially derived from Astin's (1975) study of college dropouts. Second, according to Astin (1984), student retention is the other face of student involvement, whereby the greater the students' involvement in their academic institutions, the greater is the rate of their persistence. Astin also argued that most of the reasons given by

students for dropping out of college indicate a lack of involvement, which provides support for this theory (Aljohani, 2016, p.12).

This model is related to Tinto's integration hypothesis and focuses on the "intensity of involvement" in the social and academic life of the college community (Smith and Naylor, 2001). The influence of Astin is quite visible in the SSM especially in the context of the model's attempt to softly promote involvement in terms of the team building event, international and domestic field trips, the parents' evening and the AIT connect programme.

3.5.2 Vincent Tinto's Departure Theory

As this researcher was conducting this review of literature, the importance of Vincent Tinto became clear. Tinto has been one of the most influential and cited researchers when it comes to the topic of student attrition.

One of the most cited pieces of individual research concerning student retention and transition theory is Tinto's 1993 publication entitled *Leaving College: rethinking the causes and curses of Student Attrition,* which remains very popular today despite being almost forty years old.

In this publication, Tinto produced his model of institutional departure, which describes why a student either progresses or withdraws from third-level participation. Tinto was influenced and built his work on earlier models, described above, such as the IEO model and the student involvement theory (Astin, 1984).

Tinto's model, as depicted below (Tinto, 1993), is effectively an exploration of why students reach a departure decision regarding their higher education participation. Students' pre-entry attributes, such as family background skills and abilities, besides both formal and informal academic experiences, are included in the model. These pre-entry attributes are not just a list of influential factors, as the essence of the model is to ascertain the impact these factors have on a student's integration into a range of college communities. It is that level of integration or belonging that Tinto believes a student has, which will ultimately lead to a decision, to either persist on their programme or depart from college.

An institutional setting comprises a range of communities. A student more prepared from their prior experiences, to engage in a meaningful manner with the institutional communities and who integrates well, is more likely to persist with their studies when faced with setbacks or challenges. Equally, a student who does not integrate in a meaningful way, with any of the set of communities within an institution, is more likely to reach a decision, to leave their studies, which could be either on a voluntary or an involuntary basis.
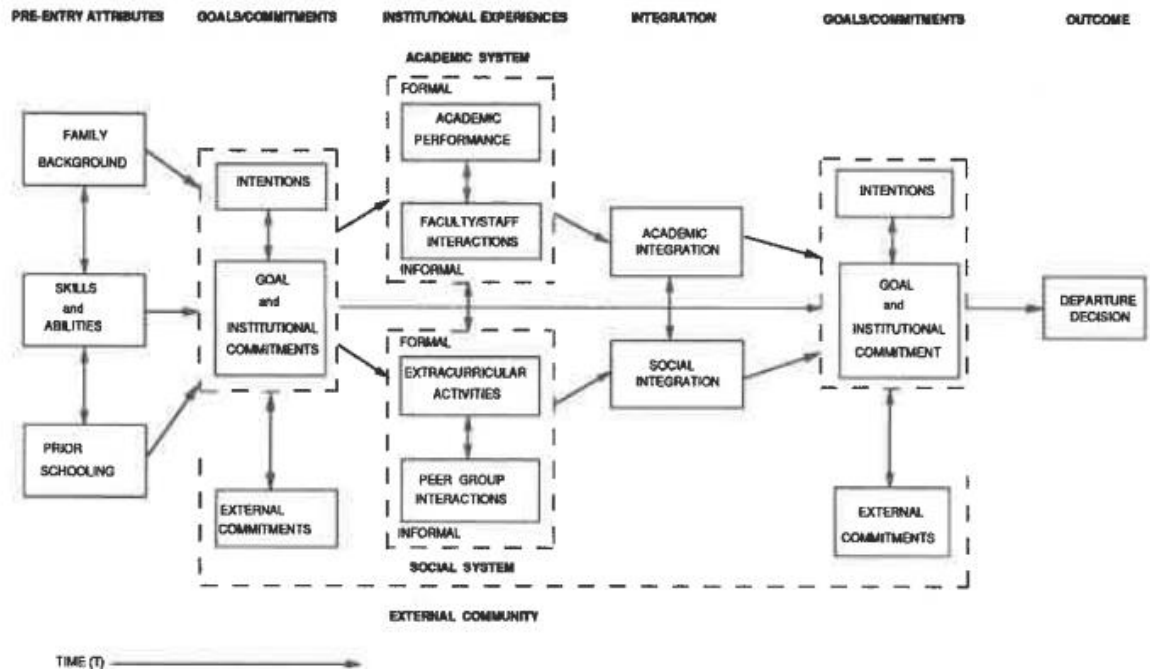
Figure 3.3 A longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure (Tinto, 1993, p.114)

Determining the extent to which Tinto's model either complements or contrasts with the SSM being evaluated is worth considering. On the positive side, many of the facets of the SSM are designed to increase the level of student integration with their peer group, their programme, and the wider institutional community. On the negative side, no real attempt has been made in the formulation of the SSM to differentiate between individual first-year students' ability or background. Evaluating whether their inclusion would have enhanced the overall model will need consideration during this study's primary research phase.

3.5.3 Sally Kift's Whole of Institution Approach

There are two main reasons for giving considerable attention to Sally Kift's Whole of Institution approach in the context of this dissertation. Firstly, as outlined earlier in this chapter, the *Higher Education Systems Performance Framework 2018-2020* requires all providers to embed a whole of institute approach as part of their student success strategy. The terminology used in the report is almost identical to the title of Kift's approach. Secondly, Kift's work greatly influenced two of the foundation blocks of the SSM in that it is very much management led and driven, albeit at policy and institutional level, as opposed to local level. Her approach also has a team-based orientation, which she describes as "everybody's business".

By way of narrative, the overall approach, conducted in the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Australia, incorporated a transition pedagogy (TP), from the top down. Critically and in

contrast to the approach taken in devising the SSM, it was identified as a strategic priority at the institutional level in 2002. The plan initially sought to achieve two things:

1. Students must be engaged primarily as learners if they are to have a successful university experience. The informal curriculum of social and community interactions, and external commitments such as work and family need to be acknowledged, incorporated and supported, but it is within the formal or academic curriculum that students must find their places, be inspired and excited, and work towards mastery of their chosen area.
2. Students in their first-year have special learning needs arising from the social and academic transition they are experiencing. From multiple starting points, all students are on a journey to becoming self-managing or self-directed learners and the first-year curriculum must help get them there (Kift, 2004, p5).

Over a decade later, the distinctive features of TP, by then embedded in QUT were considered threefold:

1) an intentional curriculum-focus to engage commencing students holistically in their learning, to mediate just-in-time, just-for-me support, and to inculcate a critical sense of academic and social belonging. This 'whole student' focus built on earlier work at the Senior Fellow's home university (Kift, 2002; Kift, 2003; Kift, 2004; Kift & Nelson, 2005; Nelson, Kift, Humphreys, & Harper, 2006; Kift, 2009a; Kift et al., 2010; Nelson, Smith, & Clarke, 2012);

2) a whole-of-institution philosophy (Kift, 2009a), in the sense that TP, as a third generation FYE approach, requires "first generation co-curricular and second-generation curricular approaches [to be] brought together in a comprehensive, integrated and coordinated strategy that delivers a seamless FYE across an entire institution and all of its disciplines, programs and services";

3) the enabling capacity of academic and professional staff partnerships (Kift, 2009a): "Third generation strategies will require an institutional vision for the FYE that is shared by academic and professional staff who form sustainable partnerships across institutional boundaries to ensure its enactment" (Kift, 2015, pp.58-59).

Kift (2015) asserts that TP is framed around what she terms First-Year Curriculum Principles (FYCPs) of which there are 6. The FYCPs (Transition, Diversity, Design, Engagement, Assessment, and Evaluation and Monitoring) focus on supporting the commonality of curriculum in the student experience, rather than problematising dissimilarity. She concludes the students find commonality through the curriculum, which defines student experience and engagement. As the QUT model of TP evolved, they recognised the importance of an "all of institution approach" making the first-year experience "everybody's business".

The evidence here presented, of a broad range of significant policy, practice and process outcomes, demonstrates that it is possible to move from theory to action

and sustainable implementation, even in a large, diverse institution in the face of many change challenges. The most important outcome, I think, has been the capability to work across and within existing organisational structures and processes, both academic and professional, to create a shared vision of the FYE at QUT as "everybody's business" (Kift, 2008, pp19-20).

The demands of what the first-year experience must deliver for students is considerable. Kift specifies the challenges associated with delivering the initial year to students.

Consequently, the FYE bears a heavy burden if it is to cut through and mediate these complexities. It may be trite to say, but the first year must be foundational. It must lay down the learning platform for an end clearly in sight. It should foster a critical sense of belonging and student identity, through involvement and connectedness with the student's university and discipline experiences. It should facilitate the delivery of just-in-time, just-for-me tailored support, especially for time-poor students whose differing social and cultural capital on entry demands the equitable unpacking of the 'hidden' rules and expectations of and for learning success (Kift, 2015 p.54).

3.5.3.1. Similarities between TP and the SSM

Central to introducing TP was the necessity to intervene and not merely allow the first-year experience to happen by chance.

Quite fundamentally, we need to adapt, both culturally and structurally, the prevailing character of the first-year student experience to ensure that student success is not left to chance, at least not in those aspects over which we have agency (Kift, 2009, p.15).

The approach taken at QUT aligns with the SSM to some extent. The model includes the "management led and driven" foundation block, albeit that the leadership came at an institutional level in QUT and at the local level of academic management in AIT.

"Everybody's business" captures the team-based approach identified in the SSM. There are similarities in how the two models sought to change the first-year experience from a series of one-off measures, to something more integrated and coherent.

What these studies show is that, with relatively few exceptions, and certainly not until the last decade, most of the work on conceptualising the FYE had not considered the centrality of the curriculum to the commencing experience. Primarily, the focus had been on the individual characteristics and behaviours of first-year students that worked against their successful integration into their university experience. Accordingly, recommended interventions generally targeted remediations from a deficit perspective, and from outside the curriculum; commonly designed to "make students fit" into the world of higher education and engage with university learning on its unadjusted terms (Brennan, 2014; Krause, 2003; Lawrence, 2005) (Kift, 2015, p.56).

There is also a similar approach to ensuring the first-year curriculum is consistent with the broader efforts of the first-year experience:

> The locus of a successful and sustaining FYE must be the curriculum and its framing of student learning and engagement. It is beyond question now also that, to deliver the necessary FYE quantum leap, we must move away from disparate, one-off initiatives and isolated examples of good practice. They are unsustainable and usually not scalable; staff are demoralised on their inevitable demise; and student success is left to chance by virtue of their ad hoc, incoherent deployment (Kift, 2015, p.68).

Consistently throughout this literature review, there has been evidence that the SSM did not factor-in a sufficient analysis of the students who were entering first-year. Kift suggested that the curriculum was one way to give them commonality and give the institutions control over their engagement.

> In all of their diversity, with their multiple identities and changing patterns of engagement, the curriculum is what all students have in common. It is within our institutional control and is the one assured engagement we have with them all. As discussed in the preceding pages, and in common with the optimal first year we strive to deliver, researchers and practitioners have laid a robust foundation of evidence-based, research-lead practices on which we may all now build (Kift, 2015, p.68).

Managing the curriculum through changing assignments to be immediate, regular and often were changes introduced in the SSM. These actions offer a response to Kift when she called on academic staff to respond to the first-year experience through the curriculum.

> The research on the FYE is clear and compelling. Students have spent far too long languishing on the curriculum's periphery in search of unmediated transition assistance. The professional staff interventions of previous decades are necessary but not sufficient. Academics must step up and leverage the curriculum and its delivery to influence the experience of all students and to make equitably explicit the implicit rules and expectations of disciplinary engagement and success (Kift, 2015, p.69).

3.5.3.2 Shortcomings of SSM in the Context of TP

A key component of TP is that it is owned by the institutions and not championed by some individuals. Creating the SSM only occurred at a local academic management level. This presents a great risk to the model's sustainability. Kift expressed concerns about projects conducted by key individuals or champions. Without the institute taking ownership of it, the future would be uncertain. Therefore, the SSM could be seen as another ad hoc attempt to address student non-progression.

> No institution, now or in the future, can afford to deliver or duplicate ad hoc service provision or invest in initiatives that prove unsustainable once their champion moves on or funding runs out (Kift, 2008, p.65).

Similar to the issues identified earlier in this review, the SSM has given little consideration to individual student's ability or prior experience on entry to AIT. Kift addresses this issue:

> But, whatever an individual's prior experiences, making a successful transition to university is never a given. While many students adjust relatively easily, thrive and survive—many do not and consider leaving (Kift, 2015, p.52).

Kift also identifies the social difficulty students may have that is again not considered by the SSM. The implication being that besides students transitioning to a new institution and type of education; they are also, most times, learning to live by themselves for the first time.

> Transition success may be further confounded as younger students attempt the simultaneous transition to independent learning and independent living (Kift, 2015, p.53).

3.6 Literature Review Conclusion

This chapter aligned with the multiple purposes of a review that Ridley (2012) established. Revisiting those principles, student non-progression has been identified as a key challenge within higher education both nationally (Higher Education Authority, 2011; Department of Education and Skills, 2013; Department of Education and Skills, 2018; Higher Education Authority, 2018) and internationally (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017; Higher Education Standards Panel, 2017; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019) which supports both the timeliness and the necessity for introducing strategies to reduce student non-progression such as this SSM.

Within the body of literature, a consensus has emerged that reasons for student withdrawal are multifactorial and widespread (Schedvin, 1985; Nora *et al.*, 1996; Adamson and McAleavy, 2000; Flowers *et al.*, 2001; Murray, 2014, Hearn *et al.*, 2021). As a result, the chapter combined a comprehensive review of a wide breadth of historical research and the depth associated with crucial aspects of why student attrition occurs and which potential remedies have been identified.

Throughout the chapter, similarities and contrasts between the literature and the model have been identified. So too have aspects of the literature which informed the SSM's evolution to the version being appraised.

Notably, the model's development has been influenced and informed by the models identified in this chapter. The team-based approach, one of three foundation blocks, has many parallels to the whole of institution approach advocated by Kift, where she describes their approach as "everybody's business".

Parallels also exist between the "whole of Institution approach" and the "management led and driven" foundation block, albeit a potential divergence emerges as the leadership approach is identified at a local academic level in the model, as opposed to the institutional level by Kift.

The primary research will take the opportunity to further explore the commonality and differences between the two models. Tinto's departure model also influenced the SSM as actions included such as the team building event, PASS and the open-door policy attempt to promote the concept of student belonging.

Evidence from the literature suggests that a considerable SSM shortcoming is that it considered none of the many predictors identified with student success. The impact of not incorporating these predictors will need to be considered in the remaining chapters.

Evaluating the model must be considered in the context of the foundation blocks, pillars, and actions within it. Many published articles identified in this review have parallels with individual aspects of the model, but it identified no similar model so broad in interventions.

In addition, while quantitative analysis on individual interventions was often offered in publications, no quantitative or mixed methods evaluation of such a full SSM was discovered, which signifies a potential gap in the literature that this study could address.

Supporting this is the fact that many aspects of the relevant theories associated with student attrition and retention concepts which underpin the topic have been discussed in this review section. Relevant terminology has been introduced clarifying how these terms are being used in the context of the SSM.

Chapter 4 will consider what the most appropriate research methods for conducting the evaluation will be in the context of this mixed methods explanatory sequential evaluation of the SSM. This literature review will inform the primary research and explore the extent to which the model might be improved through further consideration of the model's attributes and shortcomings flagged during this literature review.

Chapter 4 Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction to Research Methodology

The previous chapters have described the genesis and formation of the SSM that was developed in AIT's Faculty of Business and Hospitality. Chapter 1 gave an overview in terms of student non-progression rates that indicated an improvement in the Department of Business & Management. This research project set out to fully evaluate the SSM and to determine the full extent of the change, in levels of student non-progression and what drove that change.

This chapter sets out the research aims and questions in greater detail. How the researcher set about answering these questions is outlined in his approach to research, which arrived at a determination that a mixed methods explanatory sequential model (Creswell, 2014) was to be followed.

Details of how each step of this explanatory model was followed are provided in this chapter, as are details as to how the researcher approached his own positionality, bias, ethics and validity that concerned this evaluation. In conclusion, this chapter will look ahead to how the research is to be reported and analysed in later chapters.

4.2 Research Aims

In the opening chapter, the importance and relevance of the international, national and local contexts of student progression was outlined. Student non-progression is a global problem with significant gaps in the knowledge regarding how that problem should be addressed.

This research project is important as it addresses how to deal with some of these significant gaps by evaluating an SSM developed by an academic faculty, which impacted an individual academic department.

Based on the headline statistics that saw student non-progression fall from 36% to 12%: this project appeared to have been successful. The project aims to offer a template for others to follow, which could be of a great significance to numerous first-year students in higher education globally.

4.3 Research Questions

The title of this dissertation is: "A mixed method approach evaluating the impact of the Faculty of Business and Hospitality's SSM within the Department of Business and Management in AIT, over eight academic years".

The research question offered in Chapter 1 and based on an assertion by Tinto (2006) is:

> Can the SSM's impact in the Department of Business & Management over eight years be considered a substantial gain in student retention?

In order to conduct the evaluation, the research question was broken down into 2 components:

> Did the SSM result in changes in student performance and to the rates of student non-progression and how were these changes measured?

> Why did these changes occur and how were they achieved?

4.4 Research Approach

Given that the researcher is from the field of business and management, coupled with the fact that the research itself was conducted in a Business & Management department, a business and management approach to research was the starting point, when the methodology was first considered. A popular approach in the field of business is the research onion (Saunders, Thornhill and Lewis, 2016 P.124.). For the purpose of defining the research approach, the procedures established by the research onion were followed.

4.4.1 The Research Onion (Saunders, Thornhill and Lewis, 2016 P.124.)

Data collection and analysis are the critical components of any research study, including this one and therefore are placed in the centre of the onion. The concept of the research onion is that a researcher must understand and explain the outer layers of the onion rather than peel and throw away. The onion requires any researcher to go through layers from the outside inwards, to arrive at how they collect data and analyse it.

The research 'onion'

Source: © Mark Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhi, 2015.
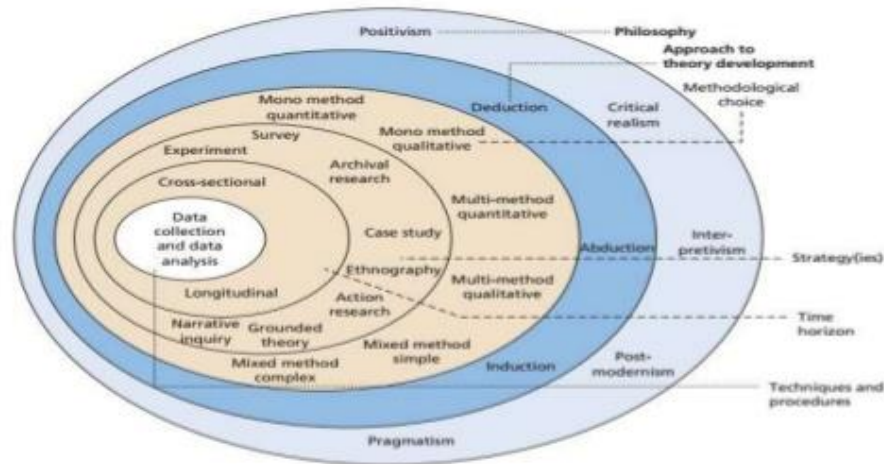
Figure 4.1 The Research Onion

4.4.2 Research Onion Layer One: Philosophy.

The outer layer of the research onion is about philosophy. Sometimes termed epistemology, Burrell and Morgan (1979) argued that philosophy concerns assumptions about knowledge, what constitutes knowledge, valid and legitimate knowledge, and how we communicate knowledge to others.

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2016) identify five epistemological stances in their research onion: positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, postmodernism and pragmatism. A substantial amount of reading informed consideration of these stances. The researcher wanted to determine what philosophy was the best fit for him, in this research project's context and also his philosophy in his professional and personal life. These considerations identified a pragmatic philosophy as the optimum selection.

Pragmatism was not selected by the process of elimination. The researcher has been a manager for nearly 30 years. Situations involving people often can't always be solved by any set of rules or guidelines. An old-fashioned contingency type of approach (Fielder, 1967) to management is often required. With such an approach, the action depends on the situation and circumstances. This researcher approaches professional life as a manager, where being a pragmatist trumps any managerial ideology. From the researcher's personal perspective, both individually and as a parent, a pragmatic approach is also a deliberate choice.

4.4.2.1 Historical Evolution of Pragmatism

In their article entitled "Mixed Methods Research: A research paradigm whose time has come," Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) identified that there had been a century long dispute between advocates of both the quantitative and qualitative research paradigms. On one side of the dispute, quantitative purists (Ayer, 1959; Popper, 1959; Nagel, 1986; Schrag, 1992;) maintained that social science inquiry should be objective and that social science outcomes could be determined reliably with validity. Quantitative purists also advocated that educational researchers should eliminate their biases and remain uninvolved in their study.

Opposed to this paradigm were the qualitative purists (Smith, 1983; Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln and Guba, 2000; Schwandt, 2000) who advocated that their paradigm was superior. Guba (1990) contended that there were multiple constructed realities abound and that distinguishing fully between causes and effect was impossible, besides being unable to separate the knower from the known as the subjective knower is the only source of reality. Qualitative purists also disliked a detached and passive style of writing, preferring detailed description written directly and informally (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Purists on both sides viewed their paradigm as ideal for research and discounted the alternative perspective, thus advocating what was known as the "incompatibility thesis" (Howe, 1988) which posited that the quantitative and qualitative research paradigms and their associated methods, should not be mixed.

Currently clearly recognised as a mainstream epistemological stance, pragmatism was favoured by many researchers (Pierce, 1878; James, 1907; Dewey, 1920) who were interested in

> examining practical consequences and empirical findings to help in understanding the import of philosophical positions and, importantly, to help in deciding which action to take next as one attempts to understand real-world phenomena (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p17).

Pragmatism is not committed to any one philosophy or paradigm but rather inquirers draw liberally from both quantitative and qualitative assumptions when they engage their research (Creswell, 2009). It strives to reconcile both objectivism and subjectivism.

Feilzer (2010) argues that pragmatism orientates itself to solving real-world problems by accepting there are singular and multiple realities open for inquiry which relate to this study as it combines analysis from quantitative data about retention and qualitative data from participants based in the faculty.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) described the focus of pragmatism as:

The focus is on the consequences of research, on the primary importance of the question asked rather than the methods and on the use of multiple methods of data collection to inform the problems under study. Thus, it is pluralistic and oriented toward "what works" and real-world practice (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018, p.37).

4.4.3 Research Onion Layer Two: Approach to Theory Development

All three approaches to theory development, deduction, induction and abduction were considered having advantages in this study's context. A deductive approach could have been followed in this project by testing the theoretical proposition that the SSM reduced the non-progression rate within the DB&M. A potential research strategy could then have been devised to test that proposition.

Beginning with interviews of the participants in the DB&M, a deeper understanding of all the model's working parts could be determined. Different contexts which impacted on student performance would have emerged, if an inductive approach had been exclusively followed.

Given the potential of both deductive and inductive alternatives, it was reasonable to conclude that a combination of the two approaches might be optimal. An abductive approach, as advocated by Suddaby (2006) moves back and forth, in effect combining deduction and induction. Applied to this project, an abductive approach would combine both an approach creating a hypothesis that the model is fit for purpose from the statistics complemented by gaining the experience of those who participated in various ways to the development of it.

4.4.4 Research Onion Layer Three: Methodological Choice

Given the wide variety of choices that could be made in the approach to methodological choice, following a path that enabled more than one choice to be exercised followed naturally from the two outer layers. For that reason, the mixed method complex choice was determined to be the most suitable.

Mixed Methods research is the natural complement to traditional qualitative and quantitative research (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004 p.14.).

Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) recommended three core mixed methods designs.

The Convergent Design: This is used when both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies are applied concurrently. The findings from each are then compared to see if the two sets of results combined answers the research question.

The Explanatory Sequential Design occurs in two distinct and interactive phases (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018, p.65). The design starts with the collection and analysis of the quantitative

data. This allows for an expansion of the first phase quantitative results. After the analysis of the quantitative data, qualitative research is conducted in order to explain the findings of the quantitative data.

In the particular mixed method entitled the Exploratory Sequential Design, the qualitative research is prioritised initially in the sequence. Building from the exploratory results, the researcher conducts a development phase by designing a quantitative feature based on the qualitative results (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018, p.67). The third phase is that the researcher quantitatively tests the new feature, which in turn allows for an interpretation of how the quantitative results build on the qualitative data.

In evaluating the SSM, several factors inputted in to the selection of the appropriate mixed method design approach. In the first instance, the genesis of establishing the model came from an undesirable level of student non-progression of 36% in the DB&M. What prompted this particular evaluation was that the non-progression rate started to fall.

Falling non-progression rates are only one aspect of the evaluation. Other quantitative indicators could help establish if the overall trend in the headline rate of non-progression could be explained with other complementing metrics. Only after the statistical changes could be quantified and analysed could the explanation for the changes be sought. For those reasons, this dissertation followed the Explanatory Sequential Design approach. Cresswell (2014) describes this model where priority is given to quantitative data and when you want to explain the data, you do so by a series of qualitative measures.

4.4.5 Research Onion Layer Four: Strategy

The strategy followed two phases. The first phase was an analysis of quantitative data that measured student non-progression and performance to determine what changes took place during the rollout of the model. This was followed by collecting qualitative data from participants in the model's creation and implementation to gather their perspectives. Details of the research strategy are outlined in greater detail later in this chapter.

4.4.6 Research Onion Layer Five: Time Horizon

The time horizon associated with the project had two options: Cross Sectional and Longitudinal. As cross sectional only deals with a moment in time, it was not appropriate for selection. A longitudinal study within the timeframe outlined in Chapter 1 using statistical data enriched by qualitative data considering eight academic years, was more appropriate given the opportunity to

place the emphasis on the capacity to study change and development (Saunders, Thornhill and Lewis, 2016 p.200) that such a timeframe offers.

4.4.7 Research Onion Layer Six: Data Collection and Analysis

At the centre of the research onion lies the data collection and analysis. A Mixed Methods approach was selected in one of the outer layers. When an explanatory sequential design of data collection was selected as the mixed methods approach, the data collection and analysis closely followed that method.

4.5 Basic Procedures in Implementing an Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design

For the decisions on how to implement the explanatory sequential design approach, the procedure based on the following flowchart was used (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018, p.79).

STEP 1

Design and Implement the Quantitative Strand:
- State quantitative research questions and determine the quantitative approach.
- Obtain permissions.
- Identify the quantitative sample.
- Collect closed-ended data with instruments.
- Analyze the quantitative data using descriptive statistics, inferential statistics, and effect sizes to answer the quantitative research questions and facilitate the selection of participants for the second phase.

STEP 2

Use Strategies to Follow From the Quantitative Results:
- Determine which results will be explained, such as
  ○ significant results,
  ○ nonsignificant results,
  ○ outliers, or
  ○ group differences.
- Use these quantitative results to
  ○ refine the qualitative and mixed methods questions,
  ○ determine which participants will be selected for the qualitative sample, and
  ○ design qualitative data collection protocols.

STEP 3

Design and Implement the Qualitative Strand:
- State qualitative research questions that follow from the quantitative results and determine the qualitative approach.
- Obtain permissions.
- Purposefully select a qualitative sample that can help explain the quantitative results.
- Collect open-ended data with protocols informed by the quantitative results.
- Analyze the qualitative data using procedures of theme development and those specific to the qualitative approach to answer the qualitative and mixed methods research questions.

STEP 4

Interpret the Connected Results:
- Summarize and interpret the quantitative results.
- Summarize and interpret the qualitative results.
- Discuss to what extent and in what ways the qualitative results help to explain the quantitative results.

Figure 4.2 Flowchart for Explanatory Sequential Design (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018, p.79)

4.5.1. Step 1: Design and Implement the Quantitative Strand

4.5.1.1. State the Quantitative Research Questions and Determine the Quantitative Approach

Stating the quantitative research questions and determining the quantitative approach is the initial requirement when following the explanatory sequential design. The overall research question regarding the SSM's evaluation was divided into two parts. The question's quantitative component was described as:

To what extent did first-year student performance improve from a quantitative perspective?

In order to determine the level of student performance, the quantitative research question was broken down into four components, each with the potential to generate multiple data sets, details of which are provided in the next paragraphs below.

The change in the official student non-progression rate submitted to the HEA annually.

The official non-progression rate is the% decline in the number of first-years registered on March 1st of any year to the number from the same cohort registered in second-year of the following year or classified as repeat and attend in first-year. The time period in question covers half a semester of first-year and a semester and a half of second-year.

Changes in the official departmental non-progression rates are the key to this section. Besides exploring trends on a year-by-year basis, the evaluation looked at both simple and weighted three-year averages in order to negate the impact of outliers regarding either especially good or especially poor performance by a particular yearly intake.

These weighted averages, as advocated by Saunders, Thornhill and Lewis (2016), were calculated by the researcher through the use of formula inserted, on to an excel spreadsheet.

There is a certain type of symbiotic relationship between the departmental non-progression rate and that of the institute. Despite this, the performance of the DB&M in the comparison with institute performance will be considered.

Concluding this particular element of the quantitative evaluation will be provided by the official non- progression rate of the individual programmes within the department. Including this data was to consider trends in performance at programme level and to give consideration to whether the SSM had a uniform impact on the departmental or was more pronounced in relation to particular programmes.

The change in the number of first-year formal student withdrawals.

A formal student withdrawal is where a student submits a form to withdraw formally from the programme. If a student withdraws from a first-year programme between September and March 1st, the non-progression statistics won't include them.

Several sets of statistics were considered relevant besides the withdrawal rate. These statistics concerned both the timing and reasons for student withdrawal. Finally, withdrawal data

facilitated calculating the maximum potential rate of student attrition by combining the withdrawal data with the non-progression data.

The Change in the nature of student performance.

First-year student performance differs from the non-progression rate. It is focused on results from first-year only and does not include any aspect of second year, as the non-progression rate relates to. Efforts to enhance the FYE therefore, can be measured by this indicator.

A mechanism for measuring student first-year performance comes from determining the rate at which students pass their subjects. After each year, data is available on the total number of modules passed and failed by each student.

Determining the aggregate student performance is where you divide the overall numbers of modules passed by the total number of first-year students by the total number of modules that students should have attempted.

Student performance using this mechanism at both departmental and programme level was conducted for each of the eight academic years. Comparisons between student performance and non-progression also took place.

The non-progression rate can include cases where successful students choose to leave college to progress their lives. This "positive non-progression" is captured as part of the official non-progression rate, but it will be important to understand what, if any, impact this issue has on overall non-progression rates.

The change in the pass rate from the autumn repeat exam sitting of students with failed modules.

Students who fail modules during the academic year have the opportunity to repeat in the Autumn sitting. The change in the pass rates in the Autumn sitting seeks to measure the effectiveness of the model in assisting failing students. Two distinct rates were part of this review, namely the trends in participation among repeating students and their success levels, once they participated.

4.5.1.2 Obtain Permissions

Access to the internal reports was gained as the researcher was on the approved distribution list for those reports. Additional permission was given by the DOF to the researcher. Ethical approval

was sought and granted both by DCU's and AIT's ethics committees. Ethical approvals are included in Appendix G and Appendix H.

4.5.1.3 Identify the Quantitative Sample

The quantitative sample was all the students who registered to a first-year programme in the DB&M, over the duration under review.

4.5.1.4 Collect Close-ended Data with Instruments

The close-ended quantitative data was collected directly from 2 internal published reports, issued to managers in AIT. The researcher had no input into the gathering or presenting the data in these reports. The two reports are:

1. *The AIT Internal Audit Student Retention Review,* which was prepared by Accountancy firm Price Waterhouse Coopers and spanned the academic years 10/11 to 11-12 to 14/15 to 15/16 (Appendix C).
2. *The Non-Progression Analysis Year 1 to Year 2 Full Time New Entrants,* which was prepared by the AIT MIS Unit and spanned the years from 15/16 to 16/17 to 17/18 to 18/19 inclusive (Appendix D).

Additional customised data received from the internal MIS unit was requested periodically by the researcher, both before undertaking this dissertation and during the conduct of the study. This data would have been extracted directly from the banner system in AIT by the MIS Unit, independent of the researcher, who later cross checked and verified their accuracy. Only one anomaly arose, which the MIS unit manager clarified.

4.5.1.5 Analyse the Quantitative Data using Descriptive Statistics

The data was then analysed using changes in rates, expressed in percentages, which are presented in the next chapter. Consideration was given by the researcher regarding the implications arising from the quantitative data generated. Aspects to the overall research question that the quantitative data answered were stated as were aspects of the results, which required explanation when the qualitative phase was conducted. The data also influenced the selection of participants for the qualitative phase.

4.5.2 Step 2: Use Strategies to Connect from the Quantitative Results

4.5.2.1 Determining Results to be Explained

Differentiating between what are significant results and non-significant results was approached based on the research questions. Every statistical trend that related to the research question was

included. Other statistics, such as the number of students achieving over 70% (1st Class Honours) were excluded from the study as they did not relate directly to either the quantitative questions or student non-progression.

Group differences were highlighted by student performance levels on their respective programmes, with the impact of outliers being negated by the use of moving averages in the form of three-year simple and weighted averages when determining the key rate trends. The goal was to smooth out any variation in the data so that the trend would be more easily identifiable to the reader (Saunders, Thornhill and Lewis, 2016).

4.5.2.2. Use the Quantitative Results

4.5.2.2.1   Refine the Qualitative and Mixed Methods Questions

With the results from the quantitative steps, both collected and analysed, the qualitative and mixed methods questions needed to be refined. At the outset, the qualitative element set out to enrich the quantitative results by seeking answers to the following questions.

   a. How did these quantitative changes in student performance occur and what is the perception of key participants of the SSM?
   b. Which particular aspects of the model do key participants and architects believe were central to the recorded outcomes.

After the analysis of the quantitative strand was complete, the data showed improvements in most but not all the statistics that were examined. The researcher was cognisant that explaining this was the reason for the qualitative element being undertaken.

> The important consideration lies in collecting enough qualitative information so meaningful themes can be developed that provide explanation for selected quantitative results (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018 p.191).

It was determined by the researcher that the two questions outlined above remained as relevant to the study as they had from the beginning. Analysis of the quantitative results raised many specific issues.

Although these issues could be contextualised in the two key questions above, they did not become apparent to the researcher until the quantitative data was analysed. These issues required the composition of supplementary or complementing questions that needed to be answered from within the qualitative strand.

4.5.2.2.2 Determining the Selection of Participants for the Qualitative Sample.

Careful consideration was given to the selection of participants for the qualitative strand. Purposeful sampling (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018) was chosen, and the researcher selected the participants on the basis that they were best placed to provide answers to both the original research question and supplementary questions but were also able to consider specific results arising from the quantitative elements.

A further decision was based on the concept of maximal variation sampling, as described by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) as:

> One of the most common strategies is maximal variation sampling, in which the diverse individuals are chosen who are expected to hold different perspectives on the central phenomenon (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018 p. 176).

One of the primary concerns was to ensure the participants had enough experience in relation to both establishing and implementing the SSM combined with enough independence from the researcher.

Participants were selected based on various levels of seniority and experience from both FB&H team members, former members of the faculty, and participants from outside the faculty, to provide different perspectives. Although they were not part of the design of the model, the experience of students who completed first-year during the development of the model was very important to include in the study.

4.5.2.2.3 Rationale for Focus Groups

A focus group or group interview is a semi-structured or in-depth interview conducted on a group basis (Saunders, Thornhill and Lewis, 2016, p. 416). Focus groups can be used for an array of situations when conducting research. They afford the researcher the opportunity to respond to answers that are put forward by the participants that enable a subsequent level of probing. Saunders, Thornhill and Lewis (2016) defined a focus group as:

> Group interview, composed of a small number of participants, facilitated by a moderator, in which the topic is defined early and precisely and there is a focus on enabling and recording interactive discussion between participants (Saunders, Thornhill and Lewis, 2016 p.716).

Data from the quantitative element of the study needed to be explained in a way to determine the extent of the impact that had taken place because of introducing the SSM. Again, a pragmatic approach was used, in the choice of conducting focus groups with participants who were involved in the design and implementation of the model.

Initially, the researcher favoured conducting semi-structured interviews. The selection of focus groups as a mechanism for gathering qualitative data instead of semi-structured interviews was based on several factors.

First, the qualitative element of this research project was planned during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2021. All the data was to be collected related to a pre-pandemic era when all participants were conducting their work in a manner very different from what they were doing when the data was gathered.

Some of the participants would have had their roles altered dramatically, going from full time face-to-face traditional lecturing to fully online delivery during the pandemic. For this reason, focus groups which would enable participants to feed off each other's synergy in recalling the implementation of the model were considered essential, as Morgan (1998) advocated that they can stimulate discussion without much moderator involvement.

Given the impact of COVID-19, participants could remind each other of the rollout of the model and also piggyback off each other (Paxton-Buursma and Walker, 2008), by questioning or disagreeing with each other's statements.

In the context of education provision, focus groups have been utilised successfully in other evaluations where the review was being conducted by practitioners involved in the delivery most notably when termed collective memory groups in an evaluation of a doctoral programme (Lesko *et al.*, 2008). In an evaluation of teacher training, focus groups provided opportunities for qualitative feedback and elaboration rarely received through other evaluation methods (Panyan, Hillman and Liggett, 1997p.37).

4.5.2.2.4   *Qualitative Data Collection Protocols*

A number of protocols were used during the conduct of the focus groups, with full details communicated to participants in advance. All focus groups were conducted on Zoom because of public health recommendations, issued because of Covid-19. Each focus group session was recorded on two devices.

Focus group members were provided with an informed consent form and a plain language statement before participation. The content was revisited orally at the start of the focus groups. Participants were informed that the information they offered would only be used for academic purposes relating to this evaluation or further research on the topic carried out by the researcher.

Given that consent serves to legitimise the researcher's actions (Sim and Waterfield, 2019, p. 3004), individual participants were initially asked to formally consent, albeit that at any time such consent was revocable (Faden and Beauchamp, 1986).

Subsequently, participants were informed that their contributions were confidential and would be treated as such by the researcher. Every effort would be made to ensure they would not be identified or identifiable at any time. Full anonymity was not guaranteed at a local level, as the potential for other participants compromising such anonymity was beyond the control of the researcher. This point was clearly articulated to all groups. The purpose of the research was explained, as well as the rationale for their participation. They were asked not to refer to others (such as lecturers) by name and they were informed if they did so inadvertently that the name would be replaced during transcription.

A clear indication was also articulated to the groups that whilst their individual views would be recorded that it was the overall group perspectives that would be reported (Finch and Lewis, 2003; Warr, 2005; Sim and Waterfield, 2019).

Augmenting the focus groups was the use of stimulus materials. Before the focus groups, the participants were given the SSM (appendix A) that is under consideration. At various stages, material was introduced on a shared screen with elements of the quantitative data to encourage further commentary or disconfirming evidence from the participants.

Steps were taken to build rapport with the participants and encourage them to feel comfortable. Where possible, they were encouraged to arrive at shared understandings without moderation. Intervention by the moderator occurred if the groups were going off topic or further confirmation or disconfirmation was sought.

4.5.3 Step 3 - Design and Implement the Qualitative Strand

4.5.3.1 State Qualitative Questions that Follow Quantitative Results

Having completed the first two steps of this explanatory sequential mixed methods design, the third step began with stating the supplementary or complementing questions, arising from the quantitative results, which were required to augment the two specific qualitative issues identified earlier.

These supplementary questions were determined as follows:

1. Why did the official non-progression rates vary so much both between programmes and within programmes, in certain instances?

2. Why did Business Psychology perform so well and the offerings in Social Media Marketing/ Digital Marketing relatively poorly by comparison?
3. Were there specific interventions that reduced the non-progression rate on the Business and Law programme?
4. Why was the improvement in the decline in the rate of withdrawal not maintained?
5. Why did the rate at which students both attempted and succeeded in the repeat examination sitting improve dramatically in the last 3 years under evaluation?

4.5.3.2 Obtain Permissions

Having received the necessary permissions and ethical approval from both institutions (Appendix G and Appendix H), the researcher selected his qualitative sample that could explain the quantitative results.

4.5.3.3 Purposefully Select a Qualitative Sample to Explain the Quantitative Results

Determining the composition and purpose of each focus group followed the concept of homogeneous sampling (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018) by selecting participants who could clearly be categorised as a clear and distinct group. Five groups were constructed, namely a management group, two lecturing groups, a student graduate group, and an administrative group.

4.5.3.3.1   The Management Group (MG1)

The first focus group was the management group. All the managers who were involved either as a HOD or DOF were asked to take part in this focus group. The former DOF was invited to participate as he, along with the researcher, had been involved as one of the architects of the model, from the beginning. In terms of active participation, he was also involved in organising many of the actions and interventions.

A second former academic manager, the ex-HOD of A&BC, had contributed to the development of the model as HOD for two and a half years before he reverted to a lecturing role within the faculty. In the latter role, he would have experienced students who had come through first-year after the model's inception when they completed modules in their final year. The final two participants were the remaining incumbent HODs for the other two departments in the FB&H.

4.5.3.3.2   The First Lecturing Group (LG1)

Two lecturing groups were identified. The reason two were chosen was initially because of fears that too many people would be involved and, subsequently, the focus group itself could become unwieldy. The two groups were constituted differently in order to yield potentially different results.

Participants for the first lecturing group were chosen from the academic staff who had been lecturing first-years but who were already deployed in the DB&M, prior to the development of the SSM. The benefit of identifying such a homogenous group is that they would have seen the changes implemented over time.

4.5.3.3.3   The Second Lecturing Group (LG2)

The second lecturing group again comprised lecturers who were involved both in terms of delivery of first-year modules but this time had either been appointed to their posts after the commencement of the SSM or they are lectures from other departments who were deployed into first-year, again after 2013. On introduction to the department, all of this particular group would have been made aware of the priority of focus that was placed on the FYE.

Selecting participants from the cohort of lecturers involved in teaching first-years was important. Selecting a lecturer involved in delivering the module "Learning and Development for Higher Education" (LDHE) was important to ascertain if LDHE was critical to the rollout of the model.

Lecturers who taught key subjects across first-year, namely financial accounting and economics, were also considered in the first instance. Lecturers involved in the delivery of the programmes in Business Psychology, Social Media/Digital Marketing and Business & Law were included to address some of the supplementary questions.

4.5.3.3.4   The Student Graduate Group (SGG1)

Hearing the students' voice was crucial in this study. As outlined already in chapter 3, a brief commentary on the ISSE results is included depicting student levels of satisfaction. In terms of the constitution of the student focus groups, the researcher invited fifteen former students to take part that met the key criteria.

Only students who registered as first-years after September 2013 and before September 2017 were considered. This was to ensure that participants had registered after the development of the SSM had commenced. None of the students who participated were still registered as AIT students when the focus groups took place, which was done for ethical reasons.

By way of composition, three students were identified from each of the five programmes (treating Social Media Marketing/ Digital Marketing as one) and invited to take part. They were both identified and subsequently contacted by the researcher through the use of the social media platform, LinkedIn. Several former students were unable to participate and the focus group was conducted with six former students.

The Administrative Group (AG1)

The final group was the administrative group. The faculty administrative team consisted of a faculty administrator and three departmental secretaries. All of them had been appointed both to AIT and to their roles within the faculty before the SSM was developed, making them well placed to share their experiences about it. They would also act as the first point of contact between the students and faculty management, besides being the people tasked with organising many of the actions that were introduced as part of the model.

4.5.3.4   *Collecting Open-Ended Data with Protocols Informed by the Quantitative*
        Results

In order to elicit the best possible response from the participants, the researcher developed a discussion guide to design and structure the focus groups. A discussion guide is a list of topics, or more commonly a series of actual questions used by the moderator to guide the discussion and keep it focused on the study topic (Hennink, Hutter and Baily, 2020 p.143). Specifically, the structure selected followed the funnel design of the discussion guide depicted below.
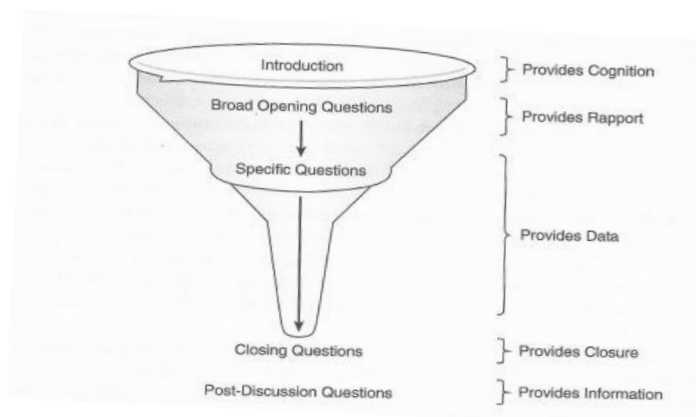
Figure 4.3 Funnel Design of the Discussion Guide (Hennink, Hutter and Baily, 2020 p.144).

During the focus groups, the introduction saw the researcher provide the participants with information about the study and the quantitative results. The sessions were conducted in as friendly and informal a manner as possible, to place the participants at ease.

The opening question was very broad and sought to identify the role that the participants played in the model and their overall perspective of it. Considerable scope for the participants to provide an answer and get comfortable was afforded. A set of introductory questions followed, which were primarily focused on the SSM in particular its structure and the aspects the participants identified as the most important.

Opportunities to move towards specific questions were taken as they arose or through the use of transition sentences (Hennink, Hutter and Baily, 2020). This strategy was used to keep a flow to proceedings and also to build momentum on points made by participants that needed follow up. Use of statistics gathered from the quantitative research was generated as stimulus material (Morgan, Fellows and Guevara, 2008) by the moderator to provoke further discussion.

Concluding the focus groups with closing questions that afforded the participants to make further comments, or that gave the researcher the opportunity to seeking further specific or general comments about the model or to clarify information arising from the focus group itself.

4.5.3.5 Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data

Data gathered during the focus groups was analysed using a six phase approach to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012) which identified the following phases:

> Phase 1: Familiarizing Yourself with the Data.
>
> Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes.
>
> Phase 3: Searching for Themes.
>
> Phase 4: Reviewing Potential Themes.
>
> Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes.
>
> Phase 6: Producing the Report.

The data was codified through the use of NVIVO. Themes emerged both relating to the qualitative research questions and also regarding how the data linked to components of the SSM. Gathering the data thematically in this manner linked the set of outcomes to the SSM.

4.5.4 Step 4 Interpret the Connected Results

4.5.4.1 Summarising and Interpreting the Quantitative Data

Presented in the next chapter, the quantitative results are presented in the sequence in which the quantitative questions were posed at the very beginning of this study. The data sets, presented in both graphic and tabular form, show entries for each year, besides weighted averages. After each table, there are several bullet points describing the trends and identifying the most important individual results from the data set.

Performance metrics, such as the non-progression rates and the aggregate total number of modules passed, are presented for the full department besides individual programmes. The rationale for which, is to see if the model had a uniform impact, or whether there were significant variances which could be described in the qualitative element of the research.

4.5.4.2 Summarising and Interpreting the Qualitative Data

Given that the qualitative research had a dual function that both related to the overall evaluation being conducted in this study, besides explaining the quantitative results, a thematic sequence was followed. Presented in Chapter 6, each theme identified includes data collected from the focus groups.

Beginning the sequence is the participants' overall perception of the SSM. These perceptions are grouped together where there is commonality or agreement among participants. The chapter also identified where perspectives differ or where there is disagreement. The key qualitative questions concerning the model's utility and determining the key individual components are then presented. Concluding the qualitative data set is the results gathered from the specific questions that arose out of the quantitative results.

4.5.4.3 Discussing to What Extent and in What Ways the Qualitative Results Help to Explain the Quantitative Results

Chapter 7 evaluates the model both by explaining the quantitative results through the qualitative process and determining the total utility of the model. This utility is considered both in terms of performance but also in relation to how it aligns, enhances, or challenges the established body of literature associated with student retention.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethics is concerned with the attempt to formulate codes and principles of moral behaviour (May, 1993, p.59). The three ethical principles of beneficence, respect and justice were followed in the conduct of the focus groups. The researcher commenced with a set of themes, but was prepared to vary the order in which the questions were asked and to ask new questions in the context of the research situation, as Sieber (1992) outlined.

At the core of developing the SSM was a managerial intervention to reduce the student non-progression rates. This study is a historical evaluation, conducted after the event, so no attempt was made to influence the outcome during the conduct of the research. All the students whose data is featured in this study had already completed the first-year of their studies when the researcher registered for this PHD in November 2018.

There are two obvious ethical issues identified: student data and the role of the researcher. The quantitative student data was analysed but no individual students were identifiable from study. As outlined earlier in this chapter, every attempt was made by the researcher to protect the anonymity of all parties in the conduct of the qualitative data collection phase.

Bias, in this study, was a major consideration. The researcher was the chief architect of the SSM and had committed several years of work to its development. Controlling of researcher bias was key to the conduct of this evaluation.

> In quantitative methodological traditions, controlling for bias of all kinds is of vital importance to the quality of the study and is, in fact a driving force underlying methodological advancements. In quantitative traditions, it is method that protects the data and thus the enquiry findings from the idiosyncrasies of the Inquirer (Greene, 2007 p.39).

In the context of qualitative research within mixed methods, Greene (2007) differentiated between what she considered to be bias as opposed to subjectivity based on the expertise and knowledge of the researcher.

> Human inquiry is inherently subjective and interpretive, they argue. No particular kind or number of sophisticated methods can insulate social knowledge from the particular predispositions of the knower. It is not possible for human inquirers to stand outside their own sociocultural history and location in the world and observe human phenomena with complete impartiality. It is only possible to observe from within one's own historical location; thus human inquiry is inevitably interpretive and inherently subjective. Subjectivity is not bias; rather it intrinsically defines the very character of human understanding (Greene, 2007 p.40).

Recognising the role the researcher played in both the development of the model and this evaluation is necessary but does not necessarily mean the research is diluted or less meaningful, as Mantzoukas (2005) argued:

> Bias is not by definition counterproductive for research studies, and that biased studies do not necessarily constitute invalid research (Mantzoukas, 2005, p.279).

Because of the nature of subjectivity associated with qualitative research (Hennink, Hutter and Baily, 2020), the researcher acknowledged the need for and use of reflexivity at every stage of the qualitative process. Reflexivity allows for the role of the researcher to be addressed and facilitates the validity of the research. Finlay and Gough (2008) commented on reflexivity:

> It enables researchers, particularly within the qualitative tradition, to acknowledge their role and the situated nature of their research. In the current climate, which sees the popularity of qualitative methods coupled with increased public and professional scrutiny of research, reflexivity provides a means of bolstering greater transparency and quality in research (Finlay and Gough, 2008, p.1).

Personal reflexivity involves researchers reflecting on their own backgrounds and assumptions that may influence the research process and data collected (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006 p.146). Over many years and prior to this evaluation, the researcher has presented the development of the model at academic conferences, with great pride.

The researcher believes the model is something he and his colleagues should be very proud of. Acute awareness of the fact that if proven by this dissertation that the model was enormously successful, it would lead to potential job opportunities and possible acclaim, was never denied or disregarded. In order to ensure that any bias did not undermine the objectivity of the dissertation, the researcher worked hard to incorporate measures to protect the integrity of the research.

Following the explanatory sequential model (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018) starting with quantitative data, was the first step in ensuring research bias was negated. As advocated by Green and Thorogood (2004), reflexivity was introduced in several aspects of the qualitative process and there was a continuous methodological openness associated with it. At all times, the researcher acknowledged that using reflexivity would not simply make the research objective but establish his positionality and humanise the research in a manner described by (Luttrell, 2000)

> Reflexivity is not a solitary process limited to critical self-awareness, but derives from a collective ethos and humanises rather than objectifies research relationships and the knowledge that is created (Luttrell, 2000, p.499).

4.7 Validity Issues

Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) identified 3 strategies to minimise threats to validation associated with the explanatory sequential design. Employing those strategies, the researcher considered multiple possible explanations for the results with the use of supplementary questions to probe some results, which were surprising. Participants were purposefully selected ensuring the best explanations could be provided.

Because of the nature of this mixed method study, there was an element of sequential validity associated with the project. Greene identified that mixed methods in its own right offer an element of triangulation between a quantitative and qualitative approach:

> When two or more methods that have of setting bias is are used to assess a given phenomenon, and the results of these methods converge or corroborate one another, then the validity or credibility of enquiry findings is enhanced (Greene, 2007 p.43).

The quantitative data has been used directly from two internal published reports, issued to managers in AIT. The researcher had no input in the gathering or presenting the data in these reports. Additional customised data received from the internal MIS unit were requested by the researcher. This data would have been extracted directly from the banner system in AIT and cross checked and verified by the MIS Unit.

Validity of the qualitative data incorporated three types of validity (Carmines and Zeller, 1979): criterion-related, construct, and content validity. Data gathered from the focus groups are subject

to criterion- related validity when assessed against the quantitative metrics. The relationship between outcomes and the elements of the model constitutes construct validity and the conduct of the focus groups themselves, encouraging and exploring different perspectives, facilitated content validity.

4.8 Conclusion

Informed by the Literature Review Chapter, this section has justified the selection of a mixed methods approach as the optimum choice to answer the research questions posed as part of this evaluation.

The reasoning behind how the SSM's efficacy is measured by quantitative data: how that data was gathered and analysed, has been provided in this chapter. Progressing through the explanatory sequential model to the qualitative data collection has been set out on a step-by-step basis following the flowchart for the sequence (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). How the qualitative data was analysed and linked to the quantitative data, has also been outlined.

Results arising out of the methodological choices are presented in the next two chapters. Aligned to the sequential model, the quantitative data will be presented in Chapter 5, followed by the qualitative data in Chapter 6. Combining and analysing both sets of data and how they relate to the literature and the SSM are considered in Chapter 7, the discussion on findings.

Chapter 5 Presentation of Quantitative Findings

5.1 Introduction to Presentation of Findings

The preceding chapters have described the SSM that is under evaluation in this study. The model has been contextualised why its formulation was important and timely. Placing the model of how it relates to previously published material has also been established.

The primary research question augmented by supporting supplementary questions, has been stated. Chapter 4 described the methods used to seek answers to those questions. The next two chapters present the results of the research conducted.

Careful consideration was given to the format of these two chapters. It is particularly of relevance to address how best to present the findings, in the context of this mixed methods dissertation. The nature of the challenge associated with presenting mixed methods findings was summarised by Greene (2007):

> In short, just as the analysis phase of mixed methods inquiry constitutes the heart of the investigators and interpretive process, the writing up phase constitutes the heart of the communication and presentation process. As all social inquirers know, crafting a text that presents the story of your work that you wish to tell in clear and compelling language is a significant challenge. This challenge is compounded in mixed methods social inquiry by varied traditions of writing and varied norms for just what makes a text compelling (Greene, 2007, p. 181).

The story this chapter tells addresses what this dissertation sought to evaluate, which was the impact of the Faculty of Business and Hospitality's SSM, within the Department of Business and Management, in AIT, over 8 academic years.

Resulting from implementing the explanatory sequential model of mixed methods, this chapter presents the quantitative findings. The presentation of qualitative findings follows in this dissertation's next chapter.

The opening chapter identified several key metrics for this study's quantitative component. Statistical trends will help to determine what change occurred. Measuring the change is critical to establishing the model's efficacy. The four key quantitative components are:

a. The change in the annual official student non-progression rate submitted to the HEA annually.

b. The change in the number of first-year formal student withdrawals.

c. The change in the nature of student performance.

d. The change in the pass rate from the autumn repeat exam sitting of students with failed modules.

5.2 Presentation of Quantitative Findings

Evaluating the overall model's utility and efficacy from a quantitative perspective is now considered. The quantitative information, in the form of statistical data associated with the research questions posed above, is outlined in the ensuing paragraphs. In relation to sample size, the data set is from the entire first-year population of the Department of Business & Management.

This project's duration was set out in Chapter 1. It considers eight academic years. Year 1 aligns with the cohort of registered first-year students in the academic year 2010/2011. Each subsequent year aligns with the first-year cohort for subsequent academic years. The final year 8 aligns with 2017/2018.

Most of the quantitative information regarding non-progression comes from two sources published internally in the AIT. An initial source for the collection of the data was from an internal audit report of student retention in AIT that was compiled by the accounting firm Price Waterhouse Coopers (Appendix C).

The second source was from a report prepared and published by the Management Information Section, in AIT which overlapped with the PWC report in terms of timeframe (Appendix D). All remaining statistics were extracted from reports circulated internally to managers, periodically.

Statistical data for student performance and withdrawals, provided in this chapter, came from several informal reports and statistical databases that were customised by AIT's Management Information Section. The first report issued in November 2017 at the request of faculty management, before the researcher formally undertook this study. This report was updated at the researcher's request to include the final years of this evaluation in 2021.

All the data generated in these reports were extracted directly from data stored on the banner system. The researcher had no direct role in the compilation of these reports. Subsequently, some statistics were calculated to include in this chapter.

Data on the performance in Autumn exams was gathered entirely retrospectively after this study had begun. Again, the primary source was a customised report generated by AIT's Management Information Section. They produced the report independently of the researcher. Data gathered here was drawn directly from the banner system before final statistical calculations were conducted.

The overarching research question evaluates the SSM and has regard to measuring the overall change in student attrition. Each of the four quantitative questions contributes to that measurement. Where it was appropriate, three-year simple and weighted averages were used to smooth out the variation in data so that the trend can be seen more clearly (Saunders, Thornhill and Lewis, 2016), besides data entries for individual academic years.

5.3 The Change in the Annual Official Student Non-progression Rate Submitted to the HEA Annually

Highlighted earlier in this study, the official non-progression or attrition rate is calculated based on a formula provided by the Higher Education Authority (HEA). It is determined as the% difference between the number of first-year students registered on their programme on March 1st on a given year and the number of second-year students registered on their programme on March 1st on the subsequent year to the given one, in addition to first-year repeat and attending students, who are also registered on the subsequent year.

Evaluating the SSM, aimed at reducing student attrition, places the non-progression rates as the metrics with the greatest level of importance. The first set of statistics presented in this chapter is the official non-progression rate for the department for each year over the selected timeframe. In each case, the figure contributed to the overall official returns that were made, at institute level, to the HEA, as required yearly.
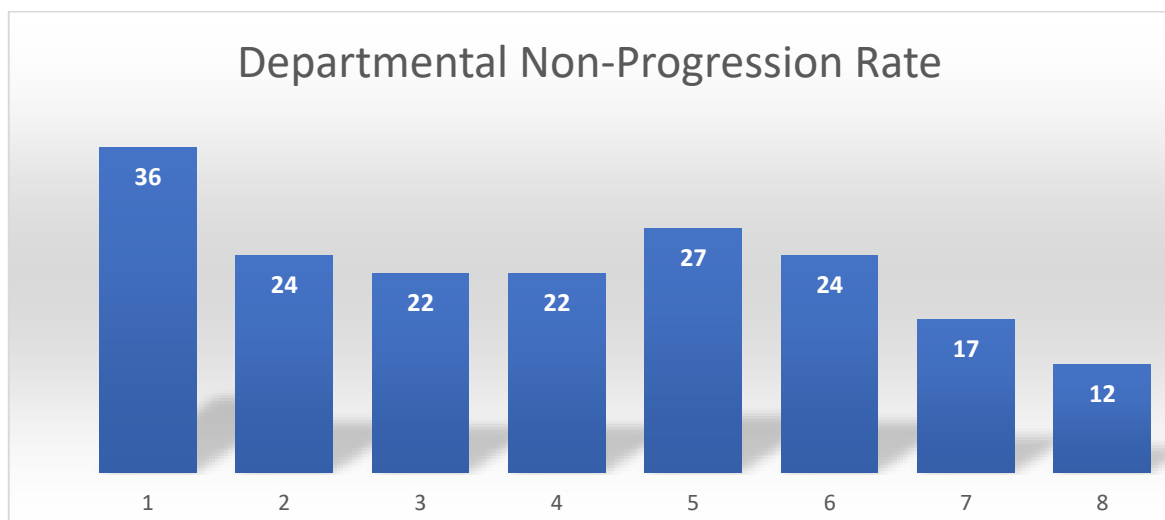
Figure 5.1 Annual Department of Business & Management Non-Progression Rate

Key points about departmental non-progression:

- The departmental non-progression rate declined by 24% over the duration of the project.

- The years that recorded the lowest non-progression rates were the last two years under evaluation.
- The downward trend over the duration under scrutiny would suggest that the model was fit for purpose and succeeded in its goals.

In the context of presenting the changes as they occurred annually over the timeframe, the extent to which the overall attrition rate changed on a year-on year basis is below:

Years	1 to 2	2 to 3	3 to 4	4 to 5	5 to 6	6 to 7	7 to 8
Non- Progression Rate Change	-12	-2	0	+5	-3	-7	-5

Table 5.1 Department of Business & Management % Annual Change in Non-Progression Rate

Aspects of the change in attrition rate that are most important are:

- The non-progression rate declined on five occasions, increasing once.
- The biggest change came between the first two years, recording a decline of 12%.
- The rate came down for the last three consecutive years of the period.
- Notwithstanding the increase between the 4th and 5th years, continuous and incremental improvement is suggested by this data.

5.3.1 Comparison Between Departmental and Institute Levels

An obvious relationship exists between the institutional rate and that of the department. Changes in the departmental rate influences the rate for the institute. Including this information is to seek whether the model introduced at the academic unit level outperformed the institutional efforts on retention.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
■ Institutional Level	26	25	22	21	23	23	19	19
■ Departmental Level	36	24	22	22	27	24	17	12

Non-progression rate

■ Institutional Level ■ Departmental Level
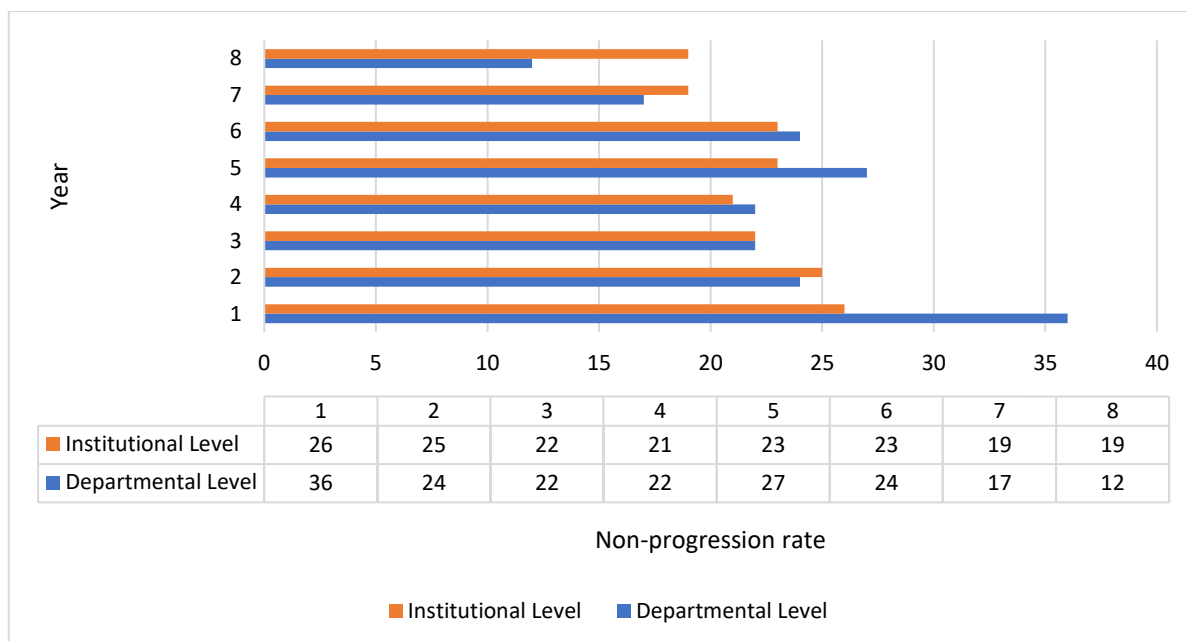
Table 5.2 Comparison between Institutional and Departmental Non-Progression Rates

Despite this symbiotic relationship between the two rates, there are key aspects worth noting:

- The departmental rate went from 10% worse than that of the institution to 7% better over the timeframe.
- The largest differences were recorded in the first year under observation, where the institute performed better by 10% and the final year where the department performed better by 7%.
- The rates were similar in four of the years towards the beginning and middle of the timeframe.
- The data provided above shows that the departmental performance and improvement outpaced the improvement experienced by the institute.

The above comparison was made using statistics from formal reports that have been identified earlier in this study. A further exercise was conducted to calculate the non-progression rate for the rest of the institution, not including the DB&M. This exercise resulted in two statistical differences between the institutional rate and the rate excluding the department. In year 1, the non-progression rate excluding DB&M was 2% lower, while in year 8 the non-progression rate excluding DB&M was 1% higher.

The implication of this exercise is that the departmental non-progression rate went from 12% worse than the non-progression rate of the institute, excluding the DB&M to 8% better over the timeframe under consideration.

Relating to the rate of change, this evaluation also considered three-year averages in showing trends in the official non-progression rate in the department of Business & Management. These were considered in the context of considering the impact of outliers on the data. Both the simple

and weighted averages, besides the official departmental non-progression rates, are shown below.

	2010/11 to 2011/12	2011/12 to 2012/13	2012/13 to 2013/14	2013/14 to 2014/15	2014/15 to 2015/16	2015/16 to 2016/17	2016/17 to 2017/18	2017/18 to 2018/19
Year	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Non-progression Rate	36	24	22	22	27	24	17	12
Three-year Simple Average		27	23	24	24	23	18	
Three-year Weighted Average		28	23	23	24	23	18	

Table 5.3 Annual Department of Business & Management Non-Progression Rate, Three-year Simple and Weighted Averages of Non-Progression

Aspects to note in the context of three-year averages are:

- No significant difference exists between the three-year simple and weighted averages data sets.
- These averages show a steady improvement in reducing student non-progression, recording a decline of 9-10% over the timeframe.
- The level of reduction suggests that the model accomplished its goals of increasing retention.

5.3.2 The Change in the Annual Official Student Non-progression Rate at Programme level within the Department of Business & Management.

The rates associated with individual programmes housed within the department impact departmental non-progression rates. There are three programmes that were offered in every year that this study is evaluating. Those programmes were the Level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree offerings in Business Studies and the programme in Business and Law, besides the Level 6 Higher Certificate in Business programme. A new Level 6 Higher Certificate in Social Media Marketing was introduced in 2012 before it was withdrawn in 2016 and replaced with a Level 7 in Digital Marketing. The department introduced the Level 8 Honours Bachelor programme in Business Psychology in 2014.

Having relatively smaller class sizes is a feature of the programme offerings and student experience in Institutes of Technology relative to the provision offered by universities. A consequence of this feature is that non-progression rates at programme level can vary considerably based on the decisions and performance of a small number of students.

Each student, belonging to a cohort of twenty students, counts as 5% in terms of measuring progression within that cohort. Notwithstanding that issue, evaluating attrition at programme level matters greatly in relation to the totality of retention in a department. A further consideration associated with programme level attrition lies in identifying trends in programmes and generally evaluating the impact of programme specific additional measures taken, at various phases, during the development of the SSM.

5.3.2.1 *The Change in the Annual Official Student Non-progression Rate of Programmes Offered at Level 8.*

Depicted below are details of non-progression for each of the Level 8 programmes in the Department of Business & Management. Before presenting the non-progression rates associated with each programme, it is worth considering what the three programmes contribute in terms of the reduction in non-progression and utility of the model.

It is very clear that the final year of the evaluation was where the lowest non-progression rate was recorded for the suite of level 8 offerings. The final year was the only one where all the programmes had single digit attrition and also the only year in which two programmes had all their students progressing.

5.3.2.2 Bachelor of Business

A four-year honours degree programme, the Bachelor of Business is typical of any generic business degree which combines mandatory and elective subjects and seeks to combine the generic requirements needed from a business graduate with an additional scope to specialise. The following table depicts the attrition rate for the programme for each of the years under evaluation.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Annual Rate	39	35	23	11	32	13	10	4
3-Year Simple Average		32	23	22	19	18	9	
3-Year Weighted Average		32	22	21	17	17	9	
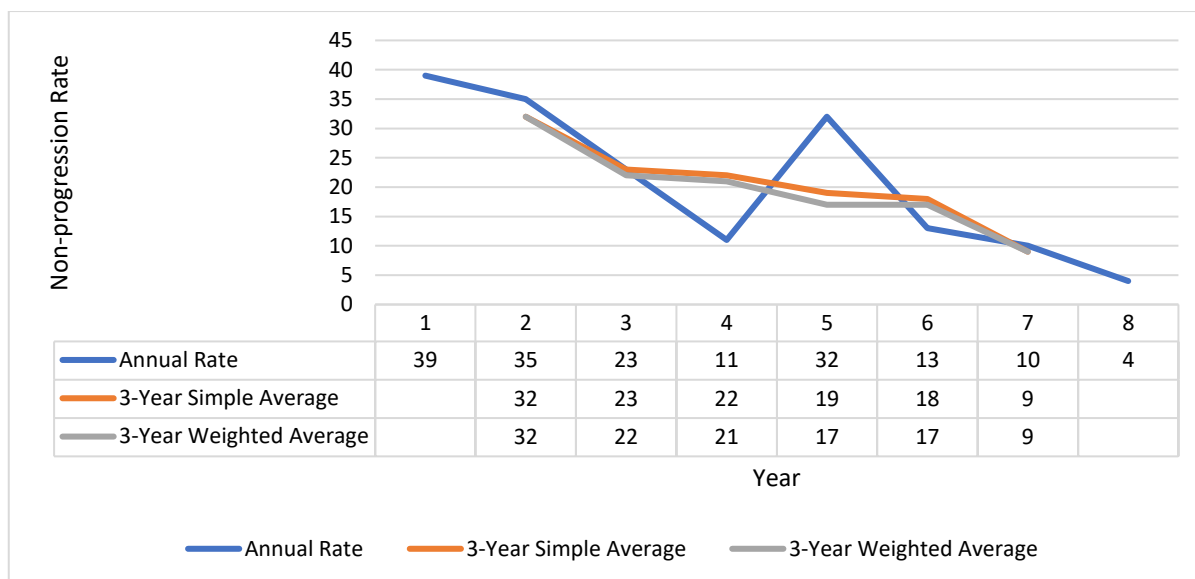
Table 5.4 Annual Bachelor of Business Non-Progression Rate, Three-year Simple and Weighted Averages of Non-Progression

Relating to the Bachelor of Business:

- Overall the attrition rate went from 39% to 4% over the period.
- Both three-year averages display a steady downward trajectory supporting a concept of steady incremental improvement.
- Over the lifetime of the SSM, the rates indicate the model was extremely good at reducing student attrition levels for this programme.

5.3.2.3 Bachelor of Arts in Business & Law

As the title suggests, this programme combines the disciplines of both business and law. The business element comprises subjects that every business degree has as part of its composition. Each of the law subjects is aligned to the set of FE exams that are required for students who wish to practise law, as a professional solicitor in Ireland. The non-progression rate for the programme is presented below:

Year	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Annual Rate	36	21	15	38	38	33	29	0
3-Year Simple Average		24	25	30	36	33	21	
3-Year Weighted Average		25	23	30	37	34	20	
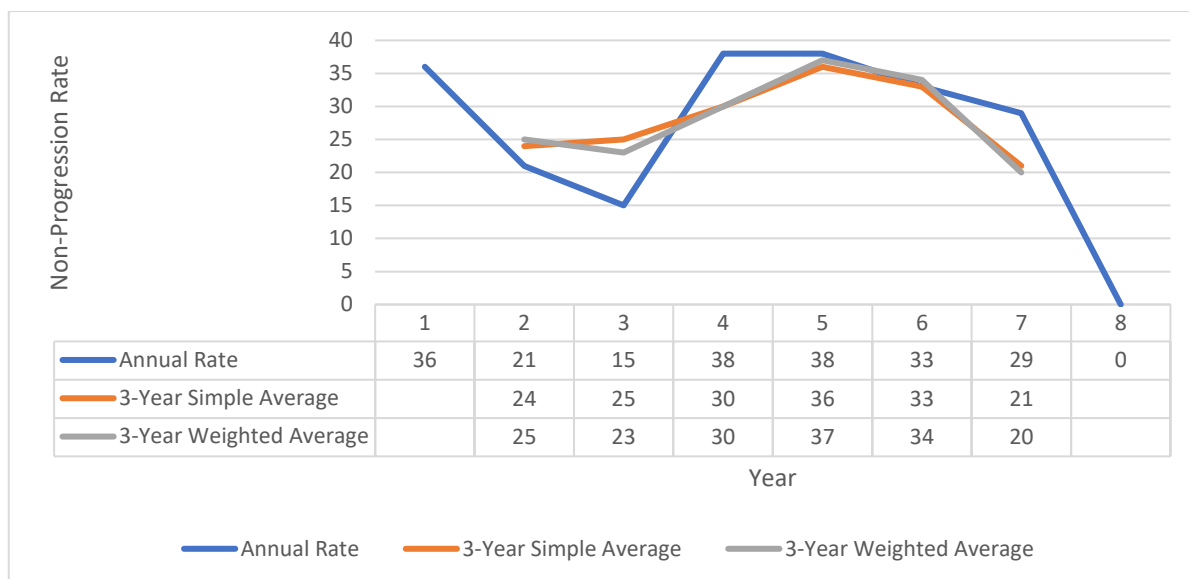
Table 5.5 Annual Bachelor of Arts in Business & Law Non-Progression Rate, Three-year Simple and Weighted Averages of Non-Progression

Aspects to consider about the attrition rate in the Business & Law programme are:

- Over the duration attrition reduced from 36% to 0% noting that the disproportionate fall in the final year enhances the extent of the reduction.
- The worse performing years came in the middle of the timeframe.
- Only two years recorded non-progression rates under 20%.
- The weighted averages suggest considerable dis-improvement before recording the best totals towards the end.
- Despite the fact that the three-year averages had single digit reductions over the timeframe, the model had a disappointing impact on this programme's non-progression rate, until the final year.

5.3.2.4 Bachelor of Arts in Business Psychology

First offered in 2014, the BA in Business Psychology is a 4-year programme that contextualises elements of the field of Psychology in a business context. All 4 years of the programme offer only mandatory subjects. In the first semester, students take Modules in Learning and Development for Higher Education, Psychology, Business Psychology and Marketing. Below is the statistical level of non-progression associated with the programme.

Year	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Non-Progression Rate	Introduced in 2014				0	11	6	0
three-year Simple Average						6	6	
three-year Weighted Average						5	5	

Table 5.6 Annual Bachelor of Arts in Business Psychology, Non-Progression Rate, Three-year Simple and Weighted Averages of Non-Progression

Key aspects when evaluating progression in Business Psychology are:

- Business Psychology consistently had a low non-progression rate.
- In the four years under consideration, all students progressed on two occasions.
- The worse year was 11% with the only remaining statistic of 6% in the penultimate year.
- The figures generated for three-year averages were 6% and 5%.
- Business Psychology was the best performing programme over the duration. The data supports that the programme development team delivered the programme as they originally designed it aimed at maximising the student experience and minimising attrition.

5.3.2.5 The Change in the Annual Official Student Non-progression Rate of Programmes Offered at levels 6 and 7

Highlighted in preceding chapters, was the fact that Institutes of Technology provide different offerings and entry points into Higher Education than traditional universities. On the CAO, this differentiation comes in the form of offering programmes at Level 7 Ordinary Degree and Level 6 Higher Certificate.

Students entering these programmes are required to meet a lower entry requirement in terms of the minimum CAO points' total. Only the Level 6 Higher Certificate in Business had an intake into a first-year in each of the years concerned, with this study. The ensuing paragraphs give an indication of the non-progression rates on each of the Level 6 and 7 programmes offered in the Department of Business & Management:

5.3.2.6 Higher Certificate in Business

The Higher Certificate in Business is a two-year programme. It is similar to many generic business programmes combining mandatory and elective subjects. Besides first-year entry via the CAO, there is also a significant intake directly to second year. This intake comes from students from the

Further Education (FE) sector who have completed one of several qualifying courses and numerous European students mainly coming from the Politecnico di Torino, in Italy. In most years, the second-year cohort of the Higher Certificate in Business constitutes the largest single student group in the institution.

Graduates of this programme are eligible to progress to add on degrees in business at levels 7 and 8. Presented below are the attrition rates for the programme.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Annual Rate	33	23	27	21	39	23	10	24
3-Year Simple Average		28	24	29	28	24	19	
3-Year Weighted Average		29	24	28	27	24	20	

Table 5.7 Annual Higher Certificate in Business Non-Progression Rate, Three-year Simple and Weighted Averages of Non-Progression

Regarding the Higher Certificate in Business, the following information is pertinent:

- Attrition fell from 33% to 24% over the period.
- The range of attrition was from 10% in the penultimate year to 39% in year 5 of the timeframe.
- From the perspective of the three-year trends, the non-progression rate declined by 9%.
- For the most part, the attrition rate remained in the mid to late 20s until the final year of the three-year trends, which recorded a notable decrease.
- Context to the Higher Certificate in Business must be considered because the entry requirements are really low and many students who choose this programme have performed very poorly during their senior cycle at the second level.
- The downward trend in all the non-progression figures underpins the utility of the model.

5.3.2.7 Higher Certificate in Social Media Marketing & Bachelor of Business in Digital Marketing

Introduced to meet industry requirements in 2012, the Higher Certificate in Social Media Marketing ran for four of the years under consideration. Similar to the Higher Certificate in

Business, it was a two-year programme from which graduates could progress to further studies at Level 7 and Level 8 add-on degrees in Digital Marketing. The programme combined generic business subjects with modules associated with social media marketing.

Replacing the Higher Certificate in Social Media Marketing, a Level 7 programme in Digital Marketing was first offered on the CAO in 2016. This offering is considered in the context of the final two years of this evaluation. The first-year of this new programme was an exact replica of the first-year of the Level 6 Social Media Marketing programme described above.

For the purposes of this evaluation, the two programmes are considered together. The rationale behind considering them together is that the first three years of both programmes were effectively the same, only offered in a different manner.

In 2012, the department introduced the level 6 in Social Media Marketing. After two years, students progressed on to a Level 7 Bachelor of Business in Digital Marketing (Add-on). After three-years, all successful students had 180 credits and their highest qualification of a Bachelor of Business in Digital Marketing.

From 2016, the CAO offering was a 180 credit three-year Bachelor of Business in Digital Marketing. After three-years, students had the same qualification as before. Students enrolled after 2016, who left after two years with 120 credits, were entitled to the embedded award of a Level 6 Higher Certificate in Social Media Marketing. The attrition rates for the programmes are included in the following table.

Year	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Non-Progression Rate L6	Introduced in 2012		32	43	26	24	No longer offered from 2016	
Non-Progression Rate L7	Introduced in 2016						30	15
Three-year Simple Average				34	31	27	23	
Three-year Weighted Average				33	31	27	24	

Table 5.8 Annual Higher Certificate in Social Media Marketing/ Bachelor of Business in Digital Marketing Non-Progression Rate, Three-year Simple and Weighted Averages of Non-Progression

Considerations about the Social Media Marketing/ Digital marketing programmes are:

- The year with the largest level of attrition recorded a 43% non-progression rate, the single highest figure recorded in this study.
- The year in which the Higher Certificate had the lowest non-progression rate was in year 6 of the period, recording attrition at 24%.
- A final year recording of 15%, as the Level 7 offering, was the best in the sequence.
- All other programmes recorded lower rates at various junctures throughout the timeframe.
- The two years where the entry point was offered at Level 7, during the timeframe in question, recorded the programme as having attrition rates of 30% and 15%.
- The three-year simple average declined by 11% from 34% to 23% over the duration, with the weighted counterpart reducing from 33% to 24%, a decline of 9%.
- The trend in three-year averages supports the utility of the model regarding student non-progression rates for these programme offerings, albeit in the context of disappointing rates of non-progression compared with other programmes.

5.4 The Change in the Number of First-year Formal Student Withdrawals.

First-Year students typically register and begin their studies in September of each year. Students who withdraw from their first-year of study after their September registration but on or before March 1st are not considered in the overall non-progression rate.

For that reason, the information provided above on the changes in the overall progression rate must be with treated with at least a small element of caution, in terms of measuring the true extent of departmental attrition over this study's timeframe.

The information below shows the number of first-year students who withdrew from the Department of Business & Management who are not included in the non-progression statistics provided above. Withdrawals after the 1st of March are not included in the withdrawal statistics, to ensure they are not double counted as both withdrawals and non-progressed. To place the withdrawals in context, the total departmental intake for first-years is also included so that the% who withdrew can be calculated.

Year	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Total first-year Intake	181	134	144	116	111	120	115	108
Withdrawals	9	9	4	4	4	7	11	6
% Rate of Withdrawal	5%	6.7%	2.8%	3.4%	3.6%	5.8%	9.6%	5.6%
Three-year Simple Average		4.8%	4.3%	3.3%	4.3%	6.3%	7%	
Three-year Weighted Average		4.8%	4.3%	3.2%	4.3%	6.3%	7%	

Table 5.9 Annual Department of Business & Management Total First-year Intake; Number of first-year Withdrawals and Rate of first-year Withdrawal as a% of Total Intake.

The key considerations relating to student withdrawals are:

- All the trends signify a u shape with the years with the least number of withdrawals coming towards the middle of the project.
- The worse year was in year 7 at 9.6% with the best recording 2.8% in year 3.
- Building the SSM begun with the habit-forming initiative. The decrease in the withdrawal rate towards the middle of the study shows that withdrawals declined at this time, but that the decline was not sustained as the model was further developed.
- Results support that the habit-forming pillar might not be as embedded in the model, to the extent to which it was hoped.

5.4.1 Number of Withdrawals Per Programme

Departmental numbers are derived from the sum of the withdrawals at the programme level.

Depicted below are the withdrawals per programme over the lifetime of this study.
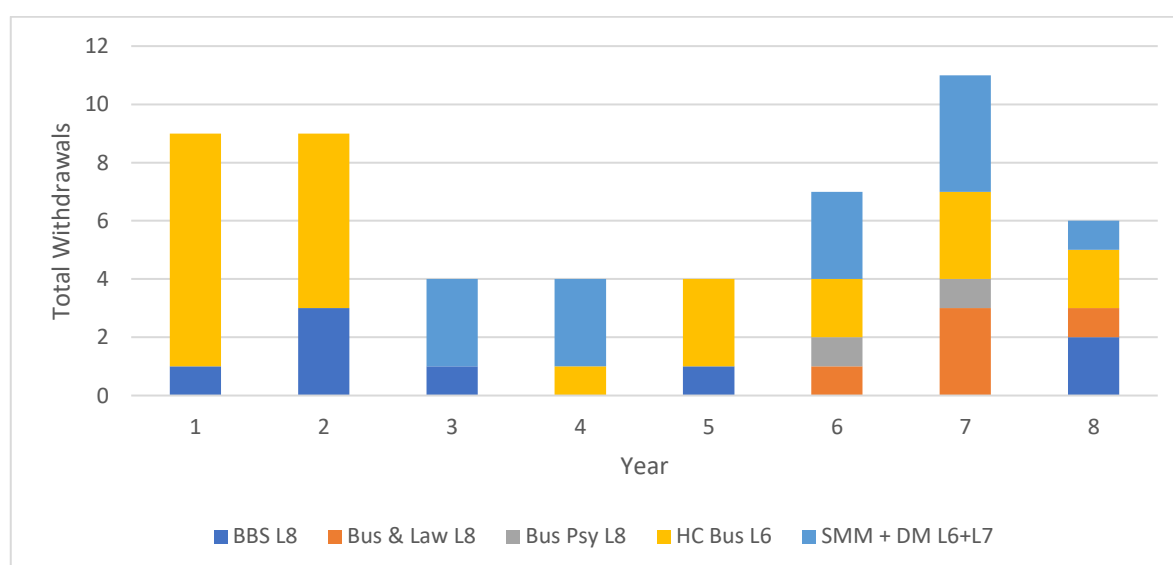
Figure 5.2 Number of Student Withdrawals Per Programme

The most relevant aspects of this information are:

- Of the fifty-four withdrawals, fifteen withdrew from Level 8 programmes, with the remaining thirty-nine withdrawing from Level 6 and 7 programmes.
- The offerings in Social Media/ Digital marketing were the worst performing programmes after all the actions were introduced.
- Both taken in isolation but particularly when augmented with the non-progression statistics, the withdrawal rates in Social Media/ Digital marketing were very high, suggesting potential negative issues with student experience and performance.

5.4.2 Timing of Student Withdrawal

Significance can be placed to some extent on the month that students withdraw. For example, a student who is transferring to another programme in AIT or another institution because of an offer received in the later rounds of the CAO will submit a withdrawal form in early September. Students who wish to change programme and start afresh the following September have until October 31st to do so if they do not wish to pay fees. The diagram below depicts the month of withdrawal, at institute level for the academic year 2014/15. It was selected because of both being representative of the withdrawal data considered throughout the timeframe of this study and also due to it being at the towards the middle of the focused timeframe.
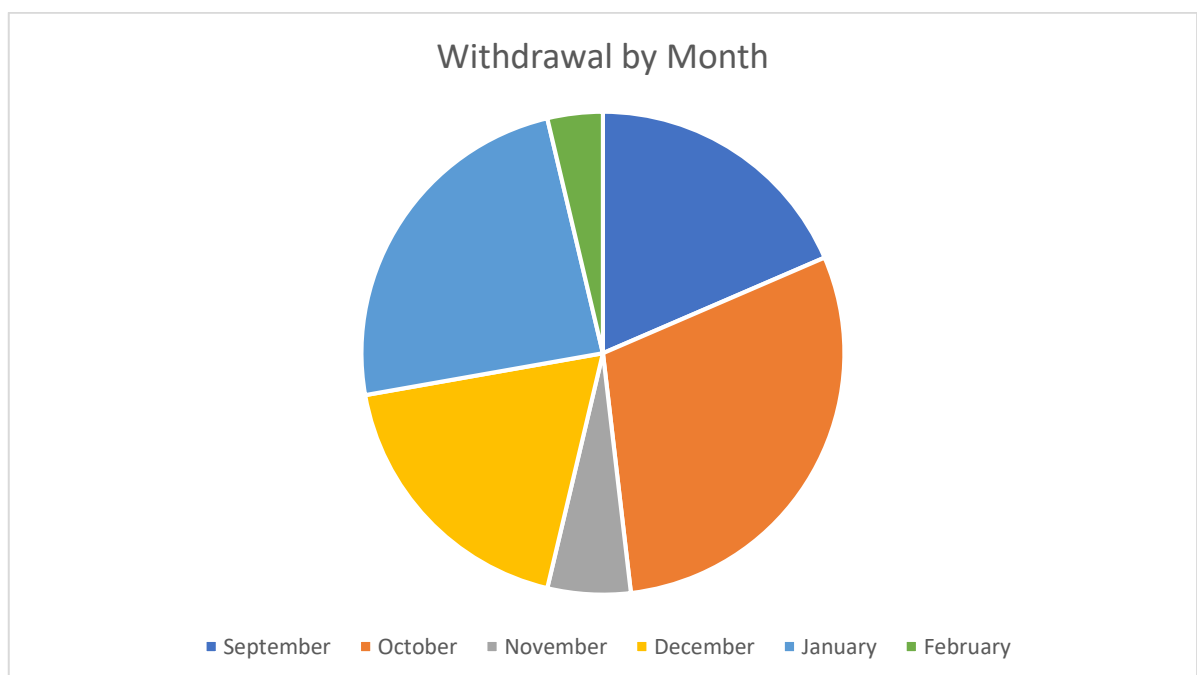
Figure 5.3 First-Year Student Withdrawals by Month–Department of Business & Management.

The aspect that is most apparent is that the withdrawals are heavily front-loaded in the academic year, with just under half of students who withdraw doing so in the first two months, September and October.

5.4.3   Reasons for Student Withdrawal

In order to formally withdraw, a student must fill out a withdrawal form which is then uploaded to the institute's banner system. In completing this form, students are offered the opportunity to state the reason they are leaving college. The form offers a variety of reasons and the students are asked to indicate the cause of their withdrawal. While not mandatory to do so, the reasons offered by students are now indicated:
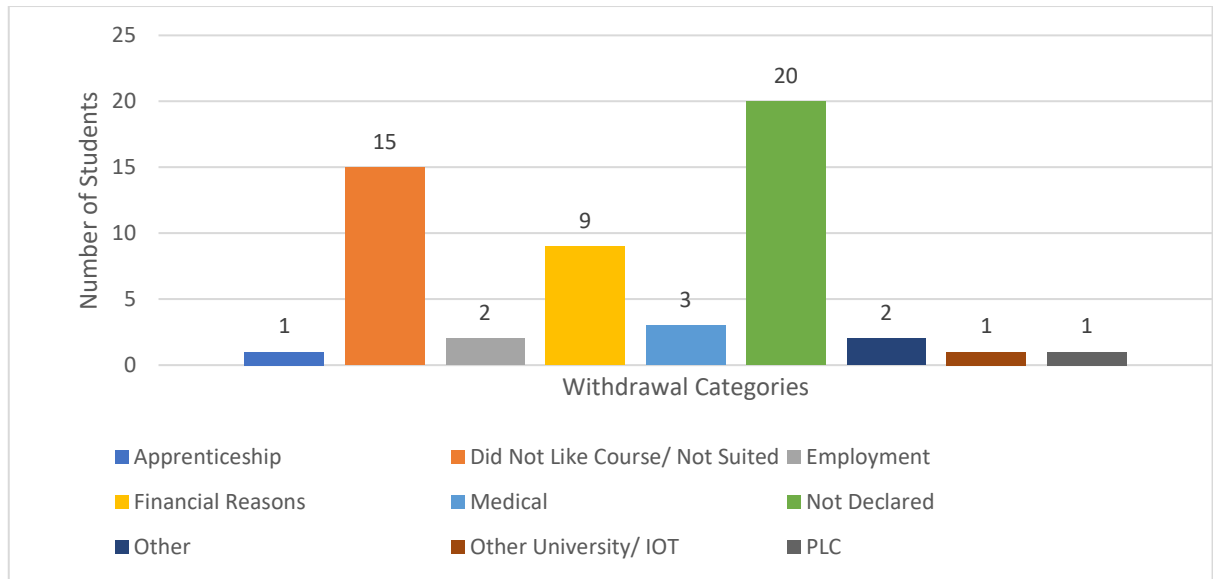
Figure 5.4 Department of Business & Management, Student Reasons for first-year Withdrawals

Student indications as to their reasons for withdrawing college showed some important information:

- Of the fifty-four students who withdrew over the timeframe, 34 made a declaration as to their reason.
- Of the thirty-four declarations, the most common reason indicated was the option of "did not like the course/ not suited" offered by fifteen (44%) students.
- Nine students (17%) who withdrew did so for financial reasons.

The most striking element coming from this data set is the amount of business intelligence lost because of students not making declarations. Issues such as medical, financial and employment are potentially outside the influence of the college.

5.5 Combining Student Withdrawals and the Non-Progression Rates

Determining the true extent of student attrition from a first-year cohort of entrants to Higher Education, is not a straightforward task. The students who formally withdraw before March 1st are not included in any official statistics of non-progression. Combining the official non-progression rate with the rate of student withdrawal, gives you a potential maximum rate reflecting the extent to which first-year students are dropping out.

Adding the two rates, however, is best considered providing a potential range of true rates of attrition, rather than an absolute amount. An example of this is a student who transfers from one first-year programme to another within in AIT after a few weeks is a withdrawal from one programme and a late registration on another.

In reality, a student who does this is not a dropout. A student who withdraws from an AIT programme to register on a programme in a different institution is also included in the withdrawal figures, as there is no mechanism for tracking them separately. Again, a student in this situation is not a college dropout.

The graph below provides the range of the possible maximum level of attrition. In this graph, the blue component is the actual departmental non-progression rate, with the orange component reflecting the withdrawals for the same year. The addition of the withdrawals shows the possible extent to which the official non-progression rate could be adjusted upwards. The manner in which these statistics are presented is deliberate so as not to artificially show rates that cannot be stated with certainty to be accurate in measuring the number of first-year students leaving college.
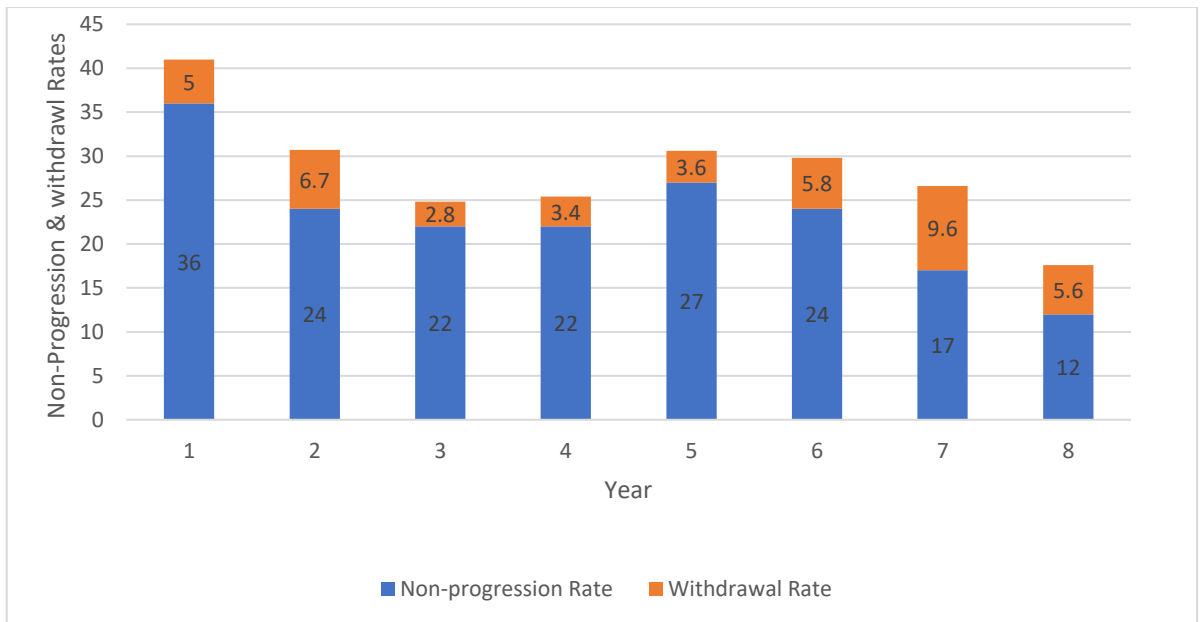
Figure 5.5 Annual Department of Business & Management Possible Range of Maximum Attrition

Recognising the perils of attempting to determine the different reasons and outcomes associated with student withdrawal, it is still an interesting exercise to consider the possible maximum rate of attrition. For speculative purposes and assuming the scenario that every single student who withdraws is a dropout, then the worst year measured, saw a possible maximum rate of attrition of 41% in year one of the evaluation with the best rate of just under 18% coming in the final year of the timeframe considered.

5.6 The Change in the Nature of Student Performance

Non-progression and withdrawal statistics provide information as to the number of students leaving college. Any evaluation of the SSM would have to include a summary of student performance and how it changed over the duration of the project.

5.6.1 Overall Aggregate Student Performance of Modules Passed

Assessing the overall performance of the departmental first-year cohort can be conducted using various methods. One method is to examine the pass rate of the overall number of modules taken by the entire first-year group. Taking the number of modules that each student attempts and multiplying that number by the number of students registered gives you the total aggregate number of modules.

Provided below are the percentages for each year of the rate at which students passed the total aggregate number of modules at the departmental level for the duration under evaluation.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Annual Performance	65	72	76	71	72	81	85	88
3-Year Simple Average		71	73	73	75	79	85	
3-Year Weighted Average		70	73	73	74	78	84	

Year
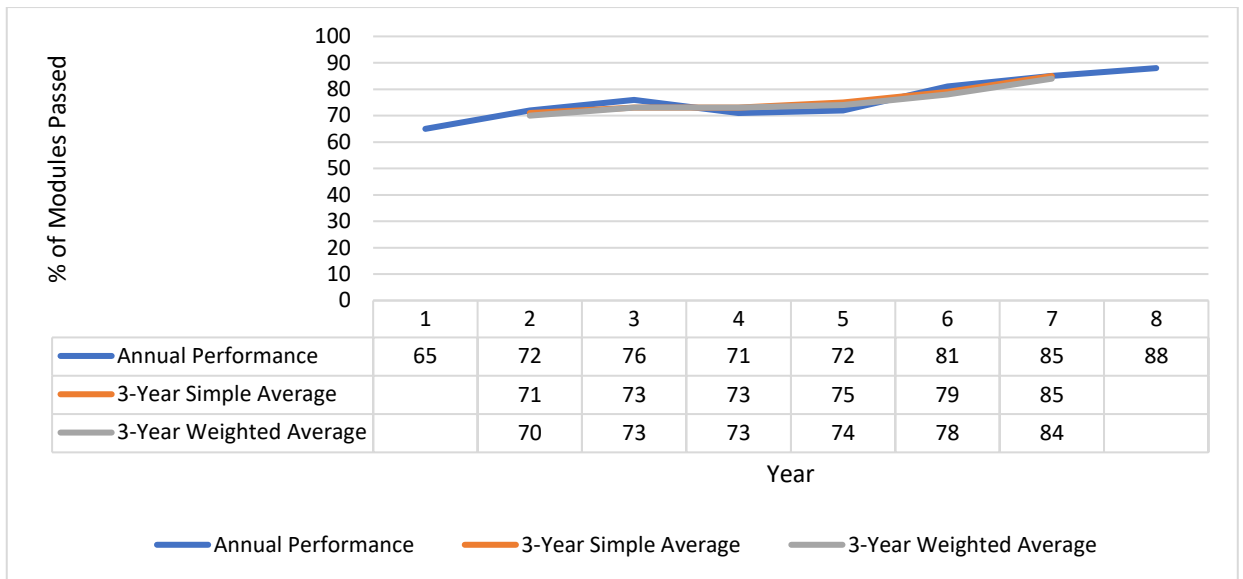
Table 5.10 Annual Aggregate% of Total Modules Passed–Department of Business & Management

From a departmental perspective, the student performance improved over the time under evaluation.

- Students went from passing 65% of the total aggregate number of modules in year one to passing 88% in the final year.
- Both the three-year simple and weighted averages also indicated high levels of improvement of 14% over the duration.
- The trends show that the SSM resulted in a considerable increase in the level of student performance.

5.6.2   Overall Aggregate Student Performance by Programme

In order to determine the impact that the SSM had in terms of student performance, the overall aggregate student performance by programme has also been considered as part of this evaluation.

5.6.2.1 Bachelor of Business Level 8

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Annual Performance	66	71	82	83	78	86	92	95
3-Year Simple Average		73	79	81	82	85	91	
3-Year Weighted Average		74	79	81	83	86	91	
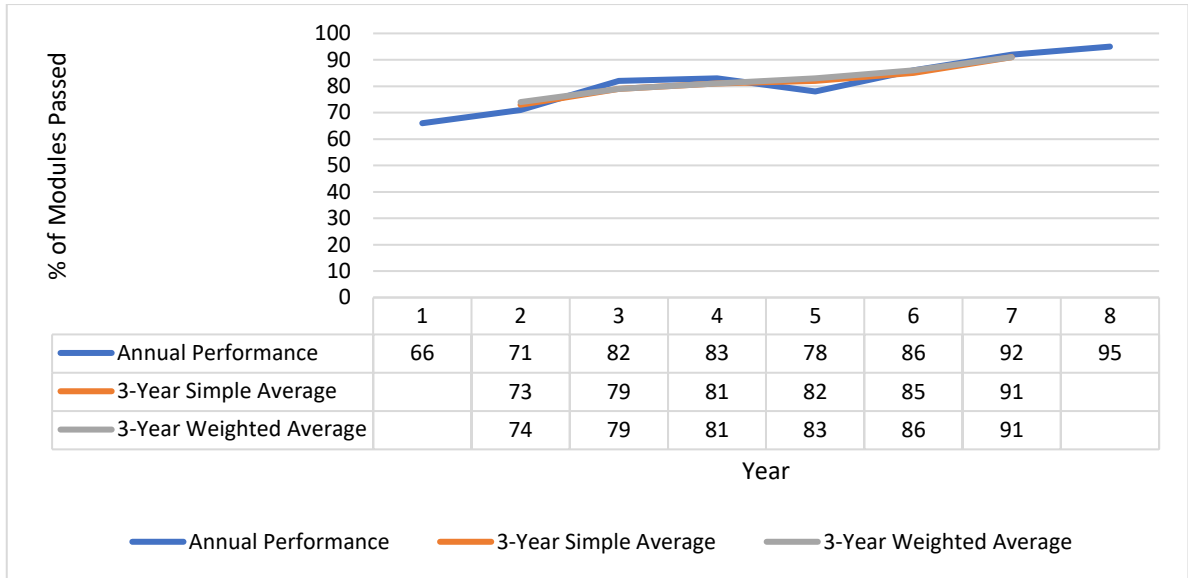
Table 5.11 Annual Aggregate% of Total Modules Passed–Bachelor of Business Level 8

Gradual improvement in the Level 8 Bachelor of Business was recorded:

- The aggregate pass rate climbed steadily. Over the duration, a 29% improvement was recorded.
- In relation to the three-year averages, the same pattern showing an increase in the rate that students were passing modules in the region of 17-18%.
- On each occasion, the performance level improved when considering either of the three-year rates.

5.6.2.2 *Bachelor of Business and Law Level 8*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Annual Performance	62	64	83	62	65	73	79	92
3-Year Simple Average		70	70	70	67	72	81	
3-Year Weighted Average		68	69	70	66	72	82	
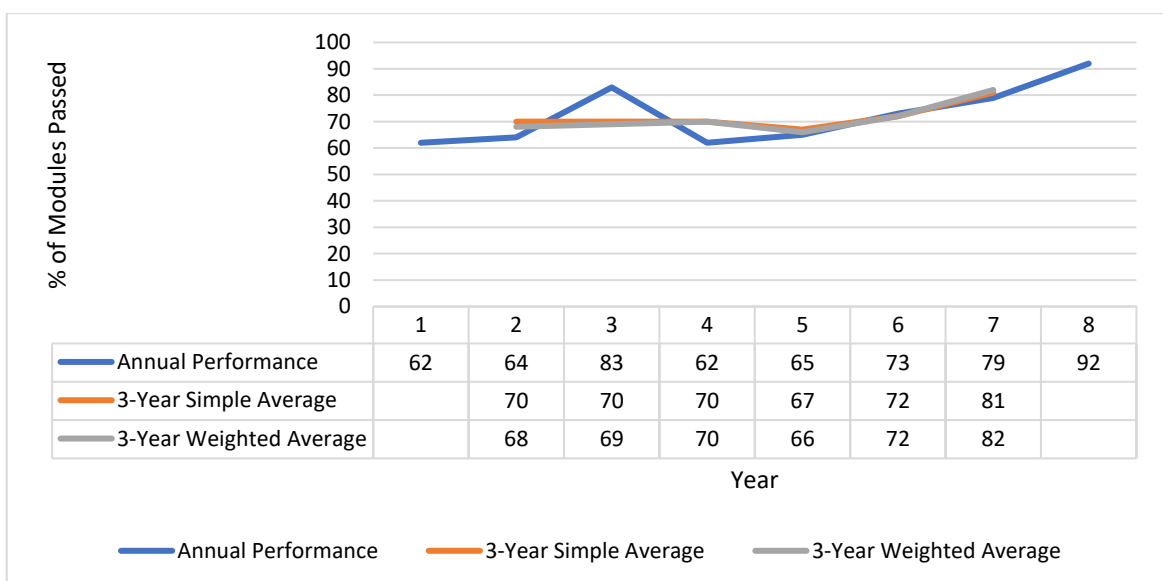
Table 5.12 Annual Aggregate% of Total Modules Passed–Bachelor of Business and Law Level 8

In relation to the Business and Law programme,

- The final two years recorded considerable improvement in student performance.
- Student performance ranged from a low of 62% of modules passed in years 1 and 4 to a high of 92% in the final year.
- Improvement from success rates in the late 60s to the low 80s occurred over the timeframe, in relation to the three-year averages.

5.6.2.3 Bachelor of Arts in Business Psychology Level 8

Year	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
% of Total Modules Passes								
Bachelor of Business Psychology L8	Introduced in 2014				99	93	98	100
Three-year simple average						97	97	
Three-year weighted average						97	97	

Table 5.13 Annual Aggregate% of Total Modules Passed–Bachelor of Arts in Business Psychology Level 8.

Looking at the statistics for this programme:

- The Level 8 Bachelor of Arts in Business Psychology saw the greatest level of student success generating pass levels in the high ninety percentile for each of the project years.
- It should be noted that the 99% of modules passed in the first-year of the programme reflects a single student failing a single module.
- In the final year, all first-year students passed all modules. This was the only time in any programme featured in this study where this occurred.

5.6.2.4 Higher Certificate in Business Level 6

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Annual Performance	65	75	76	73	67	83	89	85
3-Year Simple Average		72	75	72	74	80	86	
3-Year Weighted Average		71	75	73	75	80	85	
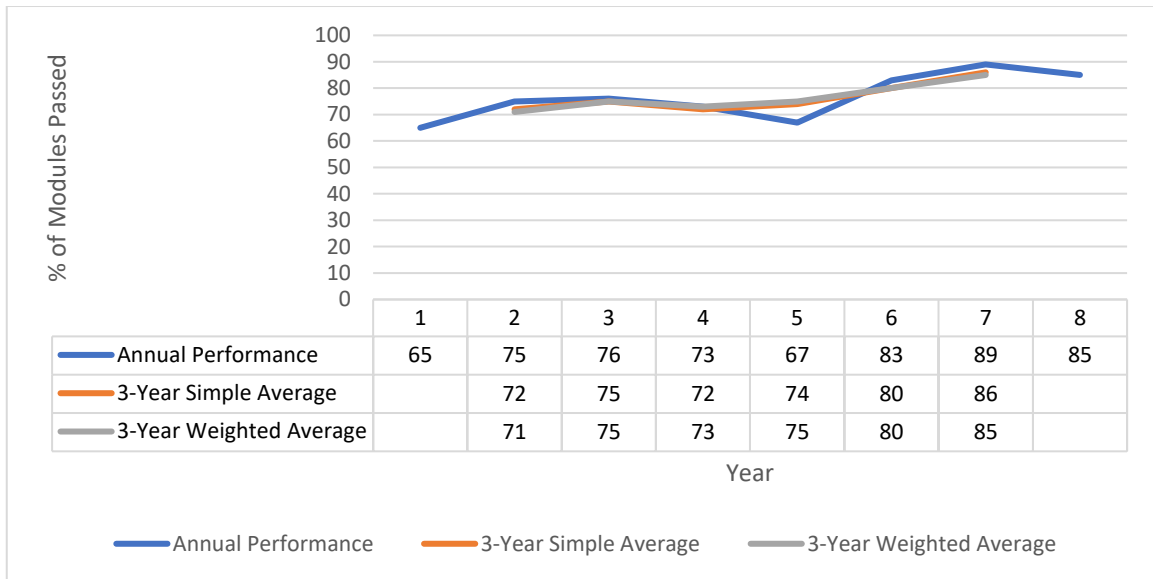
Table 5.14 Annual Aggregate% of Total Modules Passed–Higher Certificate in Business Level 6

Some features associated with student performance in the Higher Certificate in Business are:

- The most striking aspect of the statistics presented for the Level 6 Higher Certificate in Business is in the three years which saw success rates in the 80s. Student performance of this standard might be expected in relation to the level 8 programme but is unusually high for a Level 6 programme.
- A 14% improvement in student performance, in terms of the three-year weighted average, occurred over the course of the project.
- The final three years were when the best level of student performance was recorded.

5.6.2.5 Higher Certificate in Social Media Marketing level 6 / Bachelor of Business in Digital Marketing level 7

As explained earlier, the amount of duplication between these 2 programmes is enough for them to be considered in tandem. Even though they are different programmes, the three-year weighted averages have still been calculated because of the duplication.

Year	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
% of Total Modules Passed								
Higher Certificate in Social Media Marketing L6	Introduced in 2012		66	61	70	76	No longer offered from 2016	
Bachelor of Business in Digital Marketing L7	Introduced in 2016						76	72
Three-year Simple Average				66	69	74	75	
Three-year Weighted Average				65	69	74	75	

Table 5.15 Annual Aggregate% of Total Modules Passed–Higher Certificate in Social Media Marketing Level 6/ Bachelor of Business in Digital Marketing Level 7

Forming a similar pattern as with the overall non-progression rates, these programmes performed poorly in relation to other offerings.

- In the guise of the Higher Certificate in Social Media Marketing, the four years the programme was offered recorded the highest rate of modules passed at 76% with the lowest rate at 61%. Both rates were the lowest of their kind of any programme in this study.
- When offered as a Level 7, the student performance was in the low to mid 70s.
- This was the only offering where student performance did not reach the 80s or 90s in relation to student performance.
- In terms of the three-year weighted average, student performance improved from 65% to 75%.

5.7   Relationship between Student Performance and Progression Rate

An obvious relationship exists between student performance and progression. The more students pass, the more they progress. It is worth examining this relationship in the context of this dissertation. Provided below are details of the student performance measured in the total aggregate% of modules passed with the official progression rate (100% minus the non-progression rate) for the department.
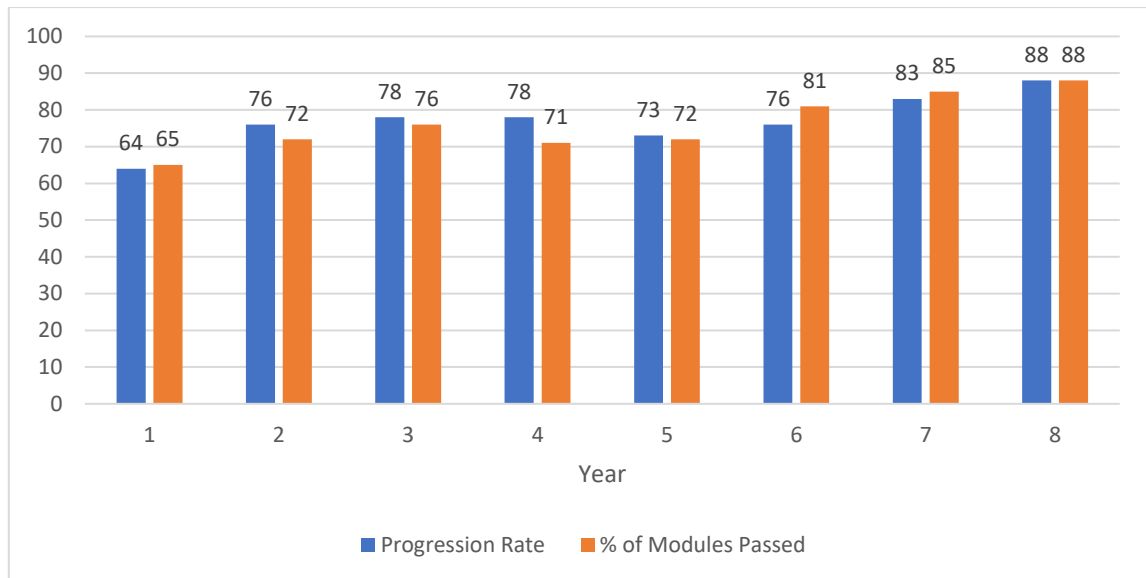
Figure 5.6 Comparison between Departmental Non-Progression Rates and Student Performance

Based on the statistics above, there is a clear relationship between student performance and the attrition:

- The year with the poorest level of student performance coincided with the lowest progression rate.
- The year with the best level of student performance was also the year with the highest progression rate.
- The relationship between the two metrics is not absolute. The 2nd and 6th year of the timeframe both returned a non- progression rate of 24% despite the student performance in modules passed being 9% higher at 81% in the 6th year.
- Student performance was similar between the 4th and 5th years, yet there was a 5% decrease in the level of on progression.

5.8 Students Eligible for Progression Who Dropped out from their Programme

Within the overall cohort of non-progressing students are a distinct subset of those who have the option to progress, based on their academic performance but don't proceed with continuing their education. Students who either have not registered for second-year or who formally withdraw at

the start of their second-year, are categorised, on the institute's banner system, as eligible to progress. The table below shows the number of students who earned enough credits but did not exercise the option to continue.

In terms of the statistical analysis, these students present in two categories because they are both eligible to progress, which is why they are counted below and also they are in the category of non-progressed students outlined earlier in this chapter.

Year	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Number of Students	5	6	6	3	1	4	3	4

Table 5.16 Number of Non-Progressed Students by Year, eligible by ECTS to Progress-Department of Business & Management

Interesting aspects of this data include:

- On average, four students per year had the opportunity to progress from first to second-year, but did not do so.
- For the timeframe under consideration in this study, the average expressed as a percentile is relatively consistent at between 3% and 4%.
- Nothing remarkable had gleamed from undertaking an analysis of students who were eligible to progress in the context of a programme level analysis. The only statistic that differed was that all students who had the opportunity to progress from first to second-year in Business Psychology took their opportunity to enter second-year, for each year in the timeframe.

5.9 The Change in the Pass Rate from the Autumn Repeat Exam Sitting of Students, with Failed Modules.

The Department of Business & Management used a wide variety of continuous assessments and projects. Some subjects also have formal written exams, which are scheduled to take place during designated exam sittings. There were three exam sittings annually in AIT in December, May and August.

The initial sittings are in December for Semester 1 and May for Semester 2. Both are referred to as first sittings. Any student who fails to either complete or pass a module and who does not get

the full 60 credits has the opportunity to repeat that module in the repeat sitting in August. This is referred to as the second sitting or the Autumn Repeat Exams.

One of the key factors when considering the overall progression rate in the department is the performance of students in the repeat examinations sitting. Presented initially is the number of students who failed some modules and the number of those who took part in the exam sitting.

Autumn Exam Sitting Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Eligible to Repeat	133	73	71	71	61	55	43	38
Participated in Repeats	95	47	47	55	42	38	35	31

Table 5.17 Student Numbers Eligible to Repeat and Participated in Repeat Exams- Department of Business & Management

The most notable trend is that the number of students who needed to repeat exams declined substantially over the project duration. This decline supports the utility of the SSM.

Based on the figures above, the annual student participation rate can be determined:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
% of Students	71	64	66	77	69	69	81	82

Y-axis: % Students Participated in Repeats
X-axis: Year
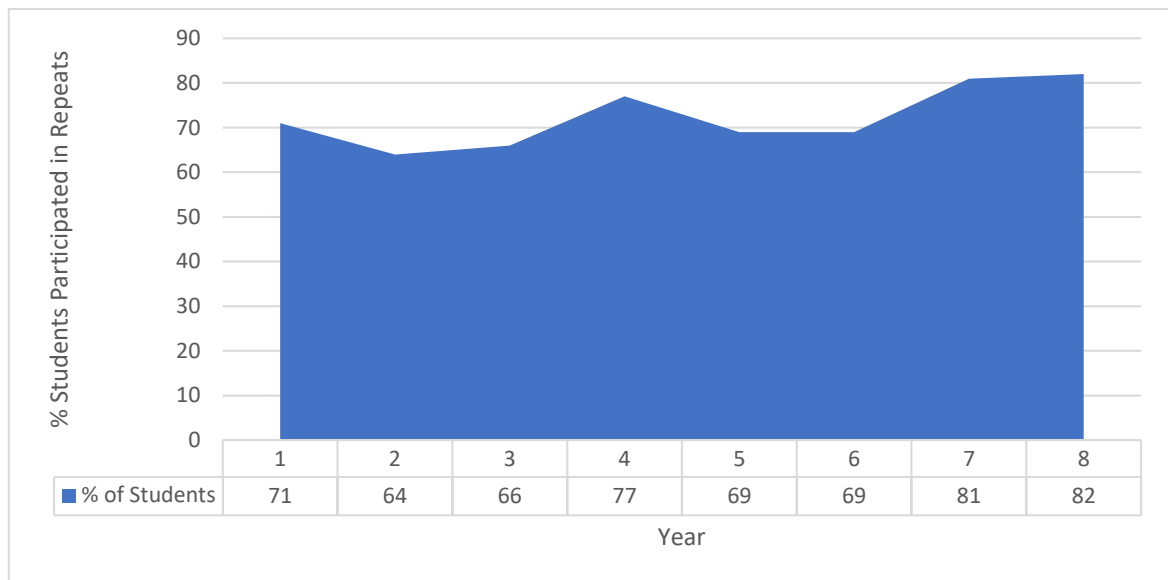
Figure 5.7 Participation Rate of Students Repeat Exams–Department of Business and Management

Over the duration under evaluation:

- An increase in the level of those who took part in the repeat examinations was recorded over the final two years.

- The increase in the levels of participation suggests that measures introduced to encourage students to take their exams had a positive impact.

Among the cohort of students who took part, the rate of success was as follows:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
% of Students	74	77	79	71	67	87	80	87

Year
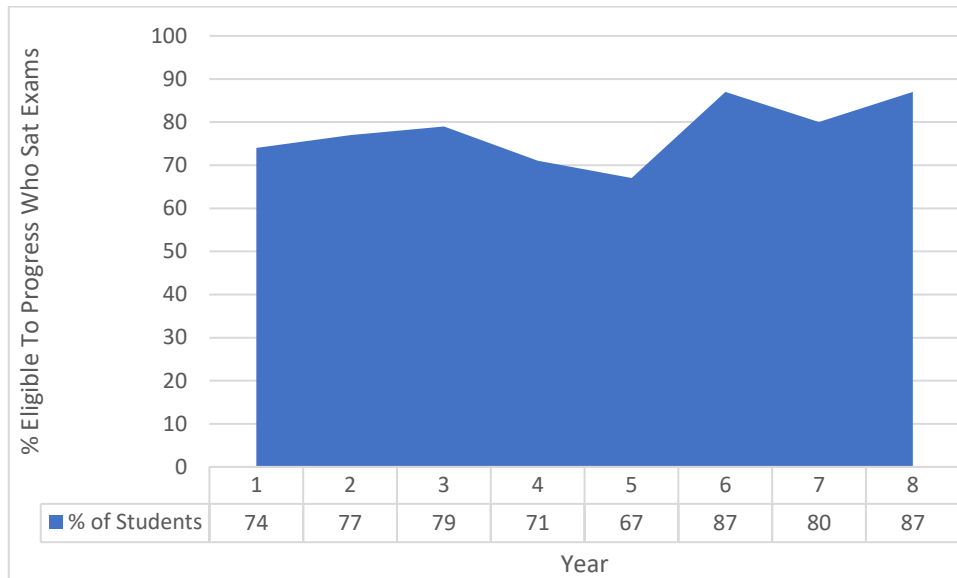
Figure 5.8 Rate of Students Progressing from Participating repeat Exam Students–Department of Business and Management

An interesting aspect of the data indicates there was a significant increase in the rate at which students were successful in their repeat exams, recorded over the timeframe.

Combining the rates at which student participated with the rate at which they succeeded results in determining the rate at which students who were eligible to sit the autumn exams could subsequently progress.

% of Students	53	49	52	55	46	60	65	71
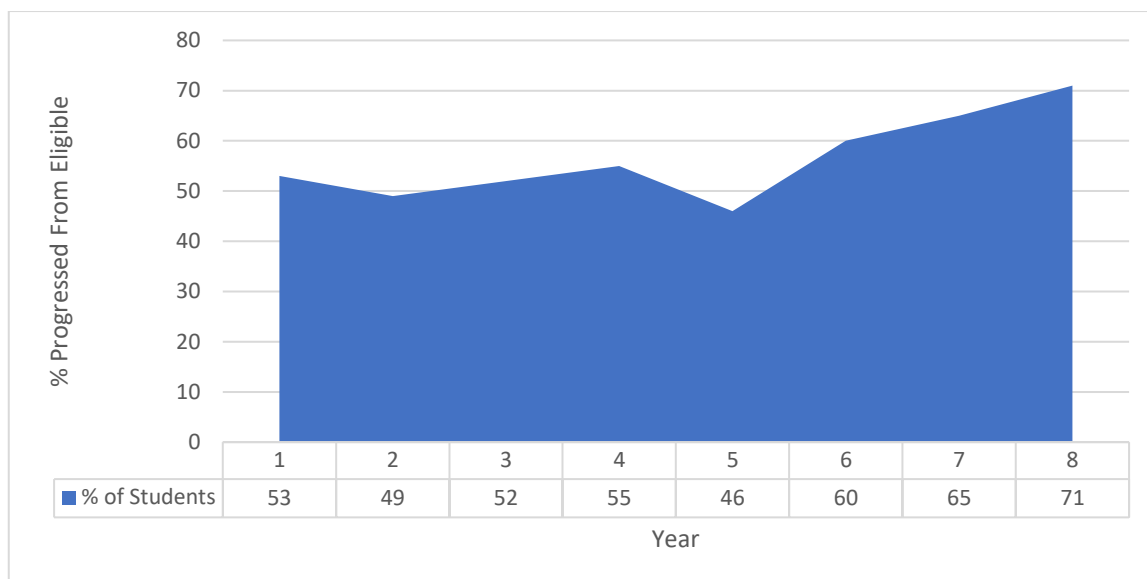
Figure 5.9 Rate of Students Progressing from Cohort Eligible to Participate in Repeat Exams– Department of Business and Management

The most relevant aspects of this information are:

- For the first five years, the range was from the mid-40s to the mid-50s.

- The last three years, all recorded progressing rates of over 60%.

- Overall performance levels in the last three-years of the period suggest that the increased number of measures in place worked to a greater extent than the reduced number of measures that were in place at the start of the timeframe.

5.10   Conclusion

This chapter set out the significant quantitative results of the primary research findings. Following the mixed methods explanatory sequential model, it was appropriate to both conduct and present the quantitative results first. A preliminary analysis of the quantitative database noting statistical results that require further explanation has been undertaken (Cresswell and Plano-Clark, 2018).

Several trends emerged relating to the research question. Rates of student non-progression reduced at departmental and programme level over the time-span. Student performance, measured by the rate at which modules were passed, improved as the model developed.

Improvements in reducing the number of withdrawals were not sustained. More students who failed subjects in first-year undertook the repeat examination sitting towards the end of the timeframe. A higher proportion of those students succeeded.

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After the quantitative data was gathered and considered, several statistical results needed further explanation (Cresswell and Plano-Clark, 2018). Besides the explanation required from the research question described in Chapter 1, new issues emerged. These issues formed the basis for supplementary questions. These supplementary questions were described in Chapter 4. The supplementary questions, besides this study's qualitative data, will be presented in the next chapter.

Following on from the presentation of qualitative findings, Chapter 7 will provide the discussion and analysis of all the findings. The discussion chapter will interpret both sets of data and describe how the qualitative results will help to explain the quantitative results presented in this chapter.

Chapter 6 Presentation of Qualitative Findings

6.1   Introduction to Presentation of Qualitative Findings

Chapter 4 outlined the rationale for selecting a mixed method explanatory sequential approach that this study follows. The preceding chapter presented the quantitative statistics.

Over the duration of the study, the statistical trends were largely positive. The departmental non-progression rate reduced considerably and all departmental programmes showed improvements in the latter part of the time-span.

There were initial improvements to the rate of early withdrawals, but this improvement was not maintained. Student performance, measured by modules passed improved in all programmes and at the departmental level.

The quantitative statistics showed that a higher percentage of students attempted their repeat examinations towards the evaluation's later years. Coupled with this higher participation rate was a higher pass rate of those who sat the set of exams.

A considerable number of the statistical changes reflected an improvement in the DB&M. These changes required an explanation from a qualitative perspective, through seeking to answer the following questions:

  a. How did these quantitative changes occur and what is the perception of key participants of the SSM?
  b. Which particular aspects of the model do key participants and architects believe were central to the recorded outcomes?

Determining this chapter's purpose was that the most important consideration lay in gathering enough qualitative data so meaningful themes could be developed that provide explanations for the selected quantitative results (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018 p.191). The relevant explanations for the quantitative findings, besides identified themes, are presented in the ensuing paragraphs.

6.2   Presentation of Qualitative Findings

Gathering qualitative data is the second phase of this study's explanatory sequential model (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). Preceding sections presented the quantitative data. Presented below is qualitative data gathered from five focus groups:

The Management Group (MG1).

The First Lecturing Group (LG1).

The Second Lecturing Group (LG2).

The Student Graduate Group (SGG1).

The Administrative Group (AG1).

6.3 Qualitative Research Questions

6.3.1 How did these Quantitative Changes Occur and What was the Perception of Key Participants of the SSM?

The first of the two qualitative research questions is presented here in two parts. Initially, participants' response regarding how changes occurred are presented. Subsequently, the perceptions of interviewees will be reported.

6.3.1.1 How Quantitative Changes Occurred.

In response to the statistical data showing trends in non-progression and student performance, most participants indicated that improvements resulted from the model. Manager B, MG1 summarised the managers' perspective:

> There's a consistent improvement there over eight years which one can't contribute to anything except the focus that has been put on student retention, over that period of time. I think it's entirely down to the model, with possibly some fluctuations due to random events or otherwise, but the model is primarily responsible for that reduction (Manager B, MG1).

Administrators shared a similar perspective:

> The reduction is largely based on the model. You know there's no way we would have seen that reduction if some of those supports hadn't been introduced. And a no brainer for me. The model worked (Administrator B, AG1).

Members of LG1 also indicated that the model worked. Considering the weaker students, Lecturer C, LG1 described that the model "bridged the gap" and that "it probably had a massive impact on retention". Lecturer A, LG1 also used the phrase "massive impact on retention" and called it "a great model."

LG2 considered elements outside the model that could explain the changes. Lecturer E, LG2 pondered if economic circumstances explained why the non-progression rates were higher in earlier years. He suggested perhaps "there were people coming to college that probably should never come to college." Supporting Lecturer E, LG2's point but unsure of the exact year, Lecturer J, LG2 recalled students' financial challenges:

There were students who literally didn't have food on the table. Like the hardship fund was just gone because it all been spent. And that was a reality, so a lot of people did fall out of college because they literally didn't have the money to put diesel in the car to get to college (Lecturer J, LG2).

6.3.1.2 Perceptions of Key Participants

Participants expressed surprise at the volume of the model's actions and interventions. There were a variety of reasons for this surprise. SGG1 told a very positive story about their first-year experience. The model's existence was a surprise for them, with Former Student D, SGG1 acknowledging that he "was quite taken aback at how much planning had clearly gone in behind the scenes that I have no idea that was happening." Similarly, Lecturer B, LG1 offered that "it's only when you see it in writing that you appreciate the extent of all those changes that were actually put in place."

Participants used a variety of terms to describe the model. LG1 felt it showed empathy:

I think it's a very empathetic model is the word that I would use. It genuinely tries to show some empathy for how difficult it is for first-year students when they come in. You know, help them to try and overcome you know those difficulties. So, empathy is the word that really strikes me (Lecturer B, LG1).

Lecturer A, LG1 agreed with the comment about empathy, adding that it was "certainly student-centred." She complimented the level of thought behind it, adding that it was "just trying to understand how students might feel and coming at it from all different angles, to try to overcome any obstacles." Subsequently, Lecturer C, LG1 articulated:

I do think it worked really well and I think it gave students this kind of sense of gathering around something. That there was a sort an appreciation for the student and that it was very student-centred learning. And that they did feel like they were at the centre of it. And they appreciate that and they get back a lot, as a result (Lecturer C, LG1).

Offering that, the model "reflected very much what we did," Lecturer G, LG2 described it as "extremely comprehensive." She suggested "their sense of belonging and their sense of connection with the college with each other, with staff, has all benefited from this model." Besides reducing attrition, Manager B, MG1, offered that "it's equally likely that it has enhanced the results and aspects of a huge cohort of students."

Manager C, MG1 spoke of how the model helped him deliver an implied moral obligation:

There's a kind of an ethical duty on us as educators, to give the best you can to the students. This diagram gave us kind of a structure to implement that,

operationalise it, to bring people from first-year to the second-year of their course (Manager C, MG1).

Additionally, Manager D, MG1, indicated the model helped cohorts of students who might face additional challenges:

> Definitely, even in terms of confidence, you know, again, you have students who perhaps parents or family didn't go to higher education and there is nervousness, trepidation so, by undertaking these interventions you're increasing their confidence, which would hopefully stay with them for the rest of their career (Manager D, MG1).

Interviewees criticised aspects of the model. Manager C, MG1 felt it was quite aspirational in nature.

> So, it has all of the different ingredients, it can cope with the different types of people coming in, and I think that's -that's a really useful aspect of it. One thing that I think that if it falls down on, though, is that it's very aspirational and strategic in its nature (Manager C, MG1).

Lecturers perceived that many of the actions should happen in year 2:

> That's where your domestic trips and your international grips and all of that would be, in my opinion. Would be more useful because I find that in year two, what happens is that there is that motivation that was driving first-years tends to wane a little bit (Lecturer G, LG2).

Staff focus groups felt some students who passed the first-year would probably have been better off not doing so. Lecturer J, LG2 summarised LG2's perspective when he stated, "The proof for me would be, what has happened to second-year and third-year and fourth-year retention?" He described his experience in another faculty where "they decided to redesign the course to make the first-year easier" and consequently "that more students got through first-year and subsequently failed in second and third-year." His input provoked a response from Lecturer G, LG2:

> What we're doing here is we're not actually saying we're making first-year easier academically, so that it's just a walk in the park. Because I think that would be dismissive of the academic kind of quality that we put into first-year (Lecturer G, LG2).

Manager B, MG1 had similar concerns about the later years:

> We might have maybe made the first-year experience a little bit easier for students or maybe front loaded some of the more pleasurable and less onerous modules to try and make the first-year, especially the first semester, easier on the students. I'd be fearful that that might have a negative knock on impact on future semesters and years and the retention of students in those areas (Manager B, MG1).

Former students stated first-year assisted them preparing for second and subsequent years:

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In second-year, everyone thought it was a massive step up in terms of the study and the workload and everything. Because we were already well equipped in knowing how to study and knowing what to do, and like that, having your structure already in place, it did make it a lot easier, so it was it was a good stepping stone (Former Student A, SGG1).

6.3.1.3 Modelling issues

Responding to her own rhetorical question, "was that model implemented fully?" Lecturer C, LG1 concluded "I think it was yeah." All participants agreed the model reflected what happened, but Manager A, MG1 recognised "the model can't be static, you know, it will have to evolve."

Participants in the management group recommended changing the graphical design layout to inform a wider number of stakeholders.

> The other thing that I think is worth saying about it is that, and this is a critique of it from a layout perspective. To get better stakeholder buy in across the College, I think it would need some graphical design work and layout work to, I think, better explain to all of the different people involved across the college, so that it's not it's not a kind of an academic paper diagram which it is at the moment, but that it's a model that's understood and used on an operational basis by the different people across the college (Manager C, MG1).

Focus groups discussed the suitability of having a pillar entitled Student Esteem. MG1 didn't like the term. LG2 agreed with Lecturer J, that "The esteem of young people is an international issue. It's been around as long as man has been on the planet."

A clear appreciation of the role of the faculty administration team emerged in all the focus groups prompting Lecturer D, LG1 to suggest "perhaps the administrators need to be there somewhere as well."

There was a vast difference between the two lecturers' focus groups on the word "key" which formed part of the deployment of key staff. LG1 welcomed its inclusion as Lecturer B, LG1 offered, "I actually think first-year is a very important time for students to get introduced to the key staff." Lecturer A, LG1 admitted she had "a giggle" when she saw it and recalled that she "once had a colleague that once said to me, that they wouldn't stoop as low as to teach first-years!" Expanding on the role of first-year staff later, she explained:

> A lot of the habit-forming, apart from the study habits, just the behaviour habits in class and all of these things. Like lecturers who don't teach first-years, they don't realise how much has been done for them in first-year, by dealing with things (Lecturer A, LG1).

LG2 were more sceptical of "key staff." With Lecturer G, LG2 asserting that "some staff who are more interested in kind of the journey of the first-year students," Lecturer J, LG2 expressed reservations about the action.

> If I could just say, I think the lecturers are clearly an important part of it. I'm interested in that box that says deployment of key staff in first-year. I don't know how you decided on that or what kind of textbook or what sort of analysis you use on your staff to decide which ones were deployed in first-year? I'm being serious in the sense of that's your prerogative as a manager to assign staff based on in each year...you know you're putting staff in there for particular reasons, you know. But again, it's not like, to my mind at least that's not something that's just good management that's not a kind of a programme or retention (Lecturer J, LG2).

6.3.1.4 Participants' Perspectives on Foundation Blocks

6.3.1.5 Underlying Principle: It Takes Four Years to Bring a Student All the Way to Fully Becoming an Independent Learner

There was little consensus either within or between focus groups about what this meant or achieved. Former students such as Former Student C, SGG1 identified a sense of "throwing people into the deep end straightaway." Manager A told MG1 "it does take four years." Other managers disagreed with Manager C, MG1 stating "it's kind of at odds with what we do at AIT" before saying "I'm not quite sure that independent learning is always achieved by the end of fourth-year." Manager A, MG1 countered:

> Some students are certainly from a very, very low base, and you have to get them up to a much higher level than they're used to, and that doesn't happen overnight (Manager A, MG1).

LG1 believed it didn't underpin the model with Lecturer B, LG1 offering, "I do think the underlying principle is that a good first-year impacts quite a lot on developing an independent learner in second and subsequent years." Lecturer D, LG1 agreed "I thought this was more looking at first-year and getting them through first-year and then after that they're kind of released into the wild maybe!" Supporting the views of her colleagues, Lecturer C, LG1 argued "that principle of the four years doesn't underpin this model really you know this model is all throw it all in the basket in first-year and then let them off after that."

6.3.1.6 Management Led and Driven

Staff focus groups agreed that managers led this project. Identifying that "it falls on the head of department" to lead it, Manager A, MG1, summed up "it has to be driven by somebody so who can who can affect change or get things done."

Both LG1 and AG1 affirmed the model was management led. Administrator B, AG1 typified the sentiment, voicing that "it was certainly led by the management". Lecturer D, LG1 agreed and offered this rationale in response to Lecturer A, LG1's observation that without management, "it is likely to fall apart:"

> Yes, because everyone paddles their own canoe, we're all masters of our own little area as lecturers, and unless someone kind of brings us together from management and drives something, it just won't happen (Lecturer D, LG1).

No consensus emerged within LG2. Lecturer E, LG2 asserted that "from a management point of view, it has to be management led." Other members of the group disliked the terminology with Lecturer H, LG2 stating: "This management led and driven. It doesn't sit well with me personally. It sounds maybe a little bit dictatorial." Lecturer J, LG2 stated that "managers manage" but while Lecturer G, LG2 acknowledged "If management aren't supportive of what's happening, it doesn't work," she also conveyed a perspective that her group supported:

> I think those two boxes, the management led approach and the team-based approach. I would much rather to have seen a systems-based approach. Because I think it's not entirely true to say it is management led, because I think an awful lot of the…it's a system, it's almost like the reflection of what does it say it "takes a village to bring up a child" (Lecturer G, LG2).

Interviewees contended that senior management played no significant role, with change derived "within the faculty." Manager B, MG1 summed up the managers' perspective, "I got the sense that senior management supported the programme, to the extent that it would save money, but not support us financially in terms of driving it." Manager C, MG1 regretted this lack of support:

> At a senior management level, I'm not too sure it was as well understood or adopted and I think had it of been, it would have been of enormous benefit (Manager C, MG1).

6.3.1.7 Team-based Approach

Academic Manager A, MG1's assertion that "the team is important, I mean no one person can achieve all the aspects of this on their own" summarised the sentiments of all the focus groups. Lecturer H, LG2 expressed the benefits of effective teamwork:

> It's definitely a team-based approach for sure, and going back to retention again and communicating within the team and been able to you know, at the hit of a button, send an email and say we need to look at this or this student, is failing to turn up or whatever the case may be. I think we were very good at that (Lecturer H, LG2).

Evidence of teamwork was also apparent to the former students. Former Student B, SGG1 told "I think the collaboration between lecturers for us, anyway, was great". She said, "we knew that they were working with each other." Former Student A, SGG1 echoed this when she said where "the lecturers you could tell were communicating between each other" Former Student C, SGG1 showed how this affected, "We had one assignment, as opposed to two. But they're kind of combined, so that was good."

Despite acknowledging clear evidence of teamwork, staff focus groups felt more could be been achieved. MG1 supported Manager B's assertion that "Everybody has to be on message, everybody has to be in tune with what the team is trying to achieve." Manager C, MG1 posited "It has to be a team- based approach, and I think probably more could be done on developing that team and making sure that everybody understands that they're on the team."

A lack of knowledge of co-workers' activities supporting the model was clear in lecturer and administrative focus groups. Administrator A, AG1 contended that "it's the joining of all those dots that we all know what's going on is probably what was missing." Lecturer J, LG2 expressed "we wouldn't necessarily be familiar with all the elements on the model. A lot of that work has been done by management, administrators and those people so we wouldn't know about that."

6.3.1.8 Participants' Perspectives on Pillars

Commentary on the pillars was positive. When asked to comment, participants largely enforced earlier expressions. Nearly every pillar was described as either "important" or "key" by participants.

6.3.2 Particular Aspects of the Model That Key Participants and Architects Believed were Central to the Recorded Outcomes

Participants shared both what they considered the most important model elements and the least effective actions. Perceptions differed for each group, but some common interventions emerged as important.

6.3.2.1 Feedback to Students

Former students placed a very strong emphasis on receiving lecturers' feedback. Former Student D, SGG1 recalled how it helped his first-year class.

> I just wanted to mention about the feedback, because with a lot of our lecturers
> that was a core thing. We do like a first draft of an assignment and then they would
> give us feedback on that. That was a massive part of first-year. I felt that they were
> always willing to kind of go over something a few times to make sure that we

absolutely had it. And even there were a few times with the whole referencing side of things that several of us are a bit weak at that (Former Student D, SGG1).

Recalling her surprise at receiving a much lower mark than expected, Former Student C, SGG1 described the impact feedback had on her student journey:

> Especially as a first-year, because the first time you do something you think "Oh, this is great, I have my lovely assignment on a lovely word document, and then you go and submit it and get like 40% and then you're like: what!" And then you resubmit it and it really pushes you like, you'd be kind of annoyed, at first, like when you get your feedback initially. I remember getting it back and being like, how did I get so low? So, I actually went to one the lecturer's offices and was like "what happened here like?" And he was really good with feedback and stuff and I really just put my head down and for the week before the assignment and the grade went up significantly, so that was really good. And it's stuff he said, and I learned from there, apply it, stuck with me for other things in my final year and stuff (Former Student C, SGG1).

Noting the importance of feedback, Manager C, MG1 expressed concern that, in the model, it "seems to hinge on provision of feedback in a timely manner, as if efficiency is the only aspect that's important there." He highlighted "the importance of the quality of feedback, so that the student really understands where they went wrong and what they need to do next. It's not just getting it to them quickly, it's giving them really meaningful feedback."

Lecturers valued the role feedback played developing students which Lecturer G, LG2 articulated as: "there's a huge emphasis on feedback for students that can kind of, if you like, encourage a growth mindset from early, you know their early process, the early student process." Lecturer H, LG2 highlighted changes to how students received feedback as the model developed:

> Until that point, I would imagine they wouldn't have got very much feedback at the early stages of the semester and I think that the earlier the feedback, the better. Because it really paves the way for more successful assignment completion, for better grades down the line. And it helps with their confidence too, if they have a one-to-one with you or really essentially, you're dealing with the team, say it was a team project and giving feedback on that in a timely manner. You know, it gives them the opportunity to reflect on how they worked on the assignment. Do you think this grade is fair? And you know and just give them that bit of confidence in their own work, too. So, I think it's absolutely vital that we do continue to follow this idea of giving feedback in a timely manner to the students at that stage (Lecturer H, LG2).

6.3.2.2. Interviews with Students Who have Failed First-Year Modules

All focus groups identified this intervention as critical to the model. Managers spoke of fulfilment from helping students directly:

> I think that the one-to-one meetings were excellent. I think they had a huge impact, I always felt very good after those in that I felt a potentially made an impact on

individuals, I had coached individual students into having a sort of a reassessment of why they were doing an academic course in the first place, and for others, they just simply give them a kick up the bum that they needed to go ahead and complete the course (Manager C, MG1).

Lecturers and administrators showed the interviews had a high impact. Lecturer A, LG1 remembered "students who had to have that interview with the head of department and whatever and they turned over a new leaf." She categorised it as "paternalistic support" before saying "that's what they needed and that's what helped them to keep on track and keep going". Lecturer F, LG2 viewed them as "offering encouragement." Administrator A, AG1 noted the impact of the interviews on student performance, "We always have better results with semester two then, particularly for first-years."

Former Student E, SGG1 was positive about the intervention.

> I personally attended it. Definitely it puts you in the right direction. You were told, when the work you had to put in, if you wanted to perform, you were kind of told what you put into it is what you're going to get out of it. So, it was definitely an eye opener they could have just let it be, say nothing (Former Student E, SGG1).

Business graduate Former Student F, SGG1 also commented on the impact of the one-to-one meetings:

> I have had friends who have had those chats, and from my knowledge, they've always been positive. And they've kind of given them a guideline of how to, you know, get out of the cycle of failing the exams are not turning off for them, or something like that (Former Student F, SGG1).

Managers reported wider benefits:

> It provided me with valuable intelligence on how the system was working from the students' perspective, what obstacles the student was facing that I might not have been aware of, maybe organisationally, maybe staff wise, maybe certain elements of programmes that they were challenged with; information was coming back up the line as well, and I found that exceptionally valuable (Manager B, MG1).

Creating a sense of student accountability where "someone is watching", was important to Manager B, MG1, while Lecturer F, LG2 asserted that "it showed that someone was interested in them and was interested in their progress and their future development."

6.3.2.3 HOD Emeritus

Interviewees heavily endorsed the HOD Emeritus. A former student who "got so much support from Peter" was especially positive:

He always had a student's back and he always definitely looked for a solution, even in your personal circumstances, to kind of help you through. So, like someone like him is an absolute must I think for students and to know that someone like that is there to kind of guide you through. College is hard sometimes, and you know as a student you have things going on at home as well. Like to have someone there, an advocate to kind of help you manage your studies and what you need to do is always good. And coming from a lecturing background, so I found him fantastic (Former Student F, SGG1).

The staff groups spoke highly of his work with Lecturer B, LG1 describing it as "pastoral." Administrator A, AG1 emphasised the importance of the role as the most significant element of the model offering "you know really what the key was, Peter." Both lecturer groups identified his contribution with Lecturer C, LG1 summarising that he was "really important to kind of shepherding the lost sheep" and Lecturer J, LG2 summed up his impact:

The great Peter Melinn was involved a lot of initiatives, even after he retired whereby he was, I would say, minding students and getting them at least to make decisions about their future, so that all reflects sort of a caring ethos (Lecturer J, LG2).

Lecturer A, LG1 placed importance on the role and of the suitability of the individual:

I think that role was extremely important. And of course, I think Peter was the right person, and to do that. And I think you know students can feel anonymous and lost when they come into third level, a lot of them. But in our department, I think, they were not, and that's a big help. And so, having someone there, being known, was good (Lecturer A, LG1).

In LG2, Lecturer H, suggested the extent to which the lecturing community valued the role and impact:

I do remember attending many programme board meetings during that period of time and everyone agreed at them, that you know Peter's role had a huge a hugely positive effect on student retention and keeping the lines of communication open with those particular students, particularly the first-year students, those who were borderline cases (Lecturer H, LG2).

6.3.2.4 Parents' Evening

The parents' evening was identified as contributing significantly to the model. Former Student A, SGG1 fondly recalled "the presentation" coupled with the experience of attending with her parents "I remember going upstairs and showing my parents, showing them around and they were really impressed with the college." Her parents found a particular aspect very impactful as she recalled, "I remember coming out if it and mam and dad were like, look at all those different places, you could end up at the end. I remember that it was it was a nice evening."

Some lecturers such as Lecturer F, LG2 were very positive expressing "that parents really appreciate it" because "It gave them an understanding of what this journey, this four-year journey, was going to be like for their son or daughter." However, Lecturer C, LG1, while acknowledging some merits, pondered if the concept might "infantilize students." Lecturer D, LG1 also questioned the usefulness of the parents' evening.

> It's hard to know if it impacted, really. It may have an impact for some families. Because I know some parents were very interested when you met them, but you couldn't really talk about what was going on. But they were delighted if you knew their child's name (Lecturer D, LG1).

Despite having merits, participants from management felt it underachieved as Manager C, MG1 expressed "the parents' evening actually was quite good, I always wish it was better attended, you know, I think that really had the potential to be to be very impactful."

6.3.2.5 Early Intervention

Intervening at the earliest opportunity with struggling students was considered important. The first assignment was described both by Administrator B, AG1 and Lecturer H, LG2 as "getting them to hit the ground running." Manager B, MG1 contextualised why the first assignment was important.

> I know the rapid issuing of the first assignment has been an important factor, but I think more critical than that, has been the rapid feedback from that first assignment so students themselves realise after two, three weeks If what they're doing is up to scratch or not, and I think that couple of weeks is crucial in terms of setting up for success in first-year (Manager B, MG1).

Former Student B, SGG1 recalled her shock at getting the first assignment "I think we were only maybe ten or fifteen minutes into class and we got our first assignment, because I remember leaving the class going, what's that?" She considered the approach:

> I suppose it just gives the opportunity to get that feedback from the start, rather than kind of getting maybe three or four weeks down the line. You get your first assignment then, and then you don't know where you are like (Former Student B, SGG1).

Lecturer D, LG1 welcomed the Head of Department's involvement in the early intervention as "kind of scaring them maybe, or supporting them or talking to them, whatever they need, you know." Lecturer F, LG2 offered student life context for the early interventions:

> I think when a student starts college it's a time of a new environment, new experience and the new freedom. And I think having an assignment to do it's an opportunity to shape the pattern and to get into the habit of study and reach and deadlines. It can be too easy to enjoy the freedom! (Lecturer F, LG2).

6.3.2.6 No one Intervention Caused the Change

Staff consistently offered that no single intervention caused the improvement in progression rates. Instead, each action and intervention contributed, as Administrator A, AG1 summarised, "I think everything, no matter what you do, it helps." Participants explained the concept of a multifaceted approach at MG1:

> It wasn't just one or two initiatives; it addressed a number of pillars; you know from the student experience, all the various aspects of it and there was a tacit acknowledgement to this, a tacit acknowledgement of that fact that it's not just one thing. You can't just bring them in, certain students and talk to them that improves retention. It's the acknowledgement that it's a multi-faceted approach is needed (Manager D, MG1).

With Manager B, MG1 offering that the model "encompassed a broad range of factors, so therefore it caught a wide number of students at risk of dropping out" besides later explaining that was necessary because it needed to address "whatever eventuality might be threatening that student's progression." Manager A, MG1 reiterated that all aspects made some contribution to the model.

> What one single one was the biggest contributor? I don't think it's easy. You can say that I think it's a combination of all of the things that we've been doing, that were done, continue to do that contributed to it (Manager A, MG1).

Lecturers shared similar views. Lecturer J, LG2 acknowledged that for students "there's no treatment that suits everybody" while at LG1 Lecturer C and Lecturer A used the term "holistic" to describe the model's approaches. Lecturer E, LG2 articulated that "the vast majority of changes would have would have to impact on the retention figures." Lecturer C, LG1 concluded:

> It nonetheless would help students that were struggling for a variety of reasons overcome loads of different kinds of barriers, I think. Particularly that approach of kind of constant contact with the students and the interventions with the poor performing students, I think, will capture a lot of those issues anyway (Lecturer C, LG1).

6.3.3 Summary of Least Effective Actions

Participants hesitated identifying the model's least effective aspects. Manager C, MG1 reflected, "There's none that I would say, never have any relevance." Participants, however, identified model aspects that underachieved.

6.3.3.1 Team Building

MG1 identified the team building could have had a better impact. Although the administrators favoured the event, Administrator B, AG1 put forward that a one-day event was "too little."

Former Student F, SGG1 who enrolled before the team building event was introduced, commented that "an event like that would be really good." Former Student C, SGG1, who enrolled in 2017 spoke about the impact of meeting an older student from a different year at a Business Psychology coffee morning:

> But even meeting him that coffee morning, he helped me get my role now in a company. So, like them kind of connections are really, really important from a first-year kind of…and throughout the college degree meeting graduates and people have finished. It can be quite inspiring for someone just studying this stuff (Former Student C, SGG1).

6.3.3.2 PASS

Participants also expressed a view that the model had not fully utilised the PASS system. Manager C, MG1 flagged it was the one intervention "that hasn't been exploited anywhere near as much as it might be." SGG1 were not positively predisposed. Former Student B, SGG1 contended "most of our class didn't find it useful at all. I don't know it wasn't very engaging." In agreement, Former Student E, SGG1 reflected, "personally I didn't do it and it probably would have been better doing it, meeting people the year ahead of you."

6.3.3.3 Analytics

An area identified as part of the evolution of the model centred on the use of analytics.

> You know I think I think that's very important, in terms of going forward, the analytics is key, and I think the one of the biggest things is that you need, we need, is flags. This model is going to develop further. You need flags in terms of students that are not engaging and you need this across all the connection points in the college (Manager A, MG1).

6.4 Responses to Supplementary Questions

Arising from the quantitative analysis, presented in the last chapter, were several supplementary questions. These questions were identified in Chapter 4. Set out below are the responses to these questions.

6.4.1 Why Did the Official Non-progression Rates Vary So Much Both Between Programmes and Within Programmes in Certain Instances?

Participants articulated that the standard of students entering the programmes was the key indicator of student performance. Lecturer J, LG2 suggested "the entry points of the students who entered the programme would have a sizable effect." Manager D, MG1 typified a consensus held across the staff focus groups.

I think points profile plays out there, that those students are coming in with you know, a good level of points, you know versus other programmes, and I think that was reflected in their ability, plus obviously the work that went into the model in terms of keeping them (Manager D, MG1).

6.4.2 Why did Business Psychology Perform So Well and the Offerings in Social Media Marketing/ Digital Marketing Relatively Poorly by Comparison?

Both lecturers' focus groups felt the programme design contributed to increased retention on the Business Psychology Programme. Lecturer A, LG1 explained, "we decided what kind of modules to put in the first semester like was one major thing to try and grab their interest and so on." Lecturer G, LG2 echoed that by recalling:

I'd love to say there was a magic formula, but everything we've talked about, we really lived it with the business psychology students. And we kept a very, very close eye on retention and we really went for the preventative approach, as opposed to the curative (Lecturer G, LG2).

Business psychology graduate, Former Student D, SGG1 highlighted an individual experience.

I remember when I was in first-year one of the nights before one of my Christmas exams. I had got one of my lecturer's numbers beforehand and I rang her up because I was paranoid, I was going to fail the exam. And I wanted to ask like what the story was with the marking system of like the continuous assessment. This was a call at like nine o'clock at night, and she took it and she didn't mind it at all. So just I really felt that the level of support from the lecturers in first-year was something else that I could approach them about anything, regardless of whether it was about the course or not, they were always helpful (Former Student D, SGG1).

Describing an enjoyable student experience, Lecturer A, LG1 recollected a field trip to Arigna Mines:

They met the miners, because it's the miners themselves that give the tours. We had our lunch in a little café and we came back and I'm telling you it's just one of the best things that those students did, they loved it. And the college paid for us, or the department did. And they were just thrilled that they were getting this. They were getting this treat. It was a fabulous day (Lecturer A, LG1).

A student's perspective of the same trip was also shared:

We also went on a trip to Arigna mines, which was awesome. For me, I remember thinking this is mental, but actually it was amazing. It was a really good experience to kind of get to know everybody a bit better (Former Student D, SGG1).

Manager C, MG1's observation that "instinct would be the points, but also small class size" was reflected in other focus groups.

A consensus emerged from all four staff focus groups participants felt that students on the social media or digital marketing programmes had selected the wrong programme. Lecturer J, LG2

suggested the programme was "mis-sold." Students found the transition difficult because they expected to only study digital marketing subjects. They were not adequately prepared for the business subjects such as accounting and economics. The combined perspective is summarised by Lecturer D, LG1 who stated "I think they thought they were going to be the next google straightaway they didn't realise it was going to be business."

6.4.3 Were There Specific Interventions that Reduced the Non-progression Rate on the Business and Law programme?

There were two explanations offered by participants why non-progression rates for business and law reduced. Changes to the structure of the programme introduced as part of the programmatic review 2015 were put forward in both lecturers' focus groups. Lecturers identified the new legal skills modules are central to this as law Lecturer F, LG2 articulated:

> There was a legal skills module introduced into the business and law programme and I think that was a welcome addition to that programme given that it's a big transition from secondary school into higher education and students need that support (Lecturer F, LG2).

Describing the legal skills modules as "innovative", Lecturer C, LG1 commented that "they weren't in any of the traditional law degrees in the universities". She later conceded, "it took a while to iron the kinks out" before identifying that changing subjects from "big 10 credit modules to the short 5 credit modules" also positively contributed. She felt it took time to embed these changes offering, "I think kind of filtered down through the course years and it would have the most impact, probably in the 2017/2018."

Changes within subjects enhanced delivery as Lecturer E, LG2 reflected, "I think the other thing it began to do is, instead of it being all theory, that some of it became practical and became more alive for them."

Enhanced student experience was considered important. Administrator C, AG1 identified some of these as significant. "I think back around then they would have done the Law Society, the mini courts and that. I think the activities might have helped the retention." A Law lecturer described innovations:

> We have smaller numbers in the law programme. It is probably easier for us to do the team building, like some of these students went off and they organised law ball, which is a big thing for them and for the law students. We had days out in prisons, we've had days out to the four courts, we've had days out and to the local court. I think those type days, from a law student's point of view, have been very, very beneficial (Lecturer E, LG2).

Lecturer C, LG1 viewed the progress as incremental and deliberate, taking time to see the impact:

> There was a lot of discussion around improving student experience and funding was made available for lots of things like mooting and stuff like that. So, we would have been told about that in 2015/2016 and started implementation 2016/2017 and 2017/2018, it had really taken off (Lecturer C, LG1).

In relation to the mooting, she described how it enhanced the student experience:

> We deliberately built the mooting the extra-curricular moot problems around their subject matter during the day, so it was linked into their core study. And it created this kind of like, a social experience or a social learning experience for them. I think, had a huge impact on how much the students enjoy the course and how much they all bonded as a team as well in the course (Lecturer C, LG1).

6.4.4 Why was the Improvement in the Decline in the Rate of Withdrawal not Maintained?

Interviewees were sceptical about relevance of the withdrawal statistics, due to low numbers of students. Manager C, MG1 thought it "was within the margin of error." Lecturer J, LG2 expressed that "the numbers aren't huge, the numbers are nines and sixes and fours you know so even though percentage wise that sounds like a lot but it's not really there is a huge difference from year to year" while Administrator C, AG1 recommended the model should include "exit interviews" for all students withdrawing.

Lecturer B, LG1 identified the economic recession for lower withdrawals in the model's earlier years, with "not much there" for students in terms of part-time employment.

6.4.5 Why did the Rate at which Students Both Attempted and Succeeded in the Repeat Examination Sitting Improve Dramatically in the Last 3 Years Under Evaluation?

Participants offered that overall model efficacy was the driver for improved performance in the repeat exams. Concluding "that the model had a significant bearing on that," Manager B, MG1 declared "the overall repeats are lower and the pass rate of those repeating is higher so it's good." Participants speculated that the number of modules that unsuccessful students had was important. Lecturer D, LG1 contended "you might see that the number of students who had a high number of modules to repeat lessened as the years went on."

AG1 identified a specific intervention by the HOD Emeritus:

> I know one year, Peter rang all the students that had failed. So, it kind of felt like we were saying to them, you know we know you failed here and now, so you know don't forget there's a repeat on here and a lot of them and it kind of bears out what

he to us that yes, we are going to repeat. So, you know that intervention may have worked there too (Administrator A, AG1).

Manager C, MG1 signified the change in nature of delivery of the briefing for students with failed modules:

> The briefing for students with failed modules changed over the years from information dumps to more coaching-focused approaches, where we started using language in the failed modules briefing to being about how you can pass, not here is the form, you need to fill in to go into your repeat (Manager C, MG1).

6.5   Emerging Themes from Qualitative Data

6.5.1 Organisation Culture

A sense emerged in all the focus groups that a strong historical student centric culture of caring for students was not fully captured in the model. Former Student C, SGG1 was one of the 3 former students who described the college as "welcoming" with Former Student A, SGG1 reporting she "felt at home straight away."

LG1 placed a strong emphasis on culture as Lecturer C, LG1 set out "you rely a lot on goodwill and extra kind of work on the lecturer and staff and probably the head of department as well over and above the usual you know you would expect to be doing." Lecturer A, LG1 concurred, replying, "you wouldn't be able to superimpose that anywhere, just anywhere, and that it would work without that."

Lecturer G, LG2 pondered if the model included "the relational efforts that are made between faculty and student" while Lecturer J, LG2 felt a "caring" attitude existed with Manager A, MG1 reflecting "that informal aspect to it, you know, is probably not captured in the in the model." Concurring, Manager D, MG1 emphasised, "it's the personal touch, you know, that it goes beyond the academic and all the other experience."

6.5.2 Small Interventions Matter

Graduates discussed how impactful even the smallest intervention was.

> I did quite badly in a computer exam in first-year; I think I failed it. And the lecturer, like okay, you just have to step up your game for this next one to pass this part of the module. And then in that way she would not really intervene, but like put extra kind of attention on how I was getting on then ahead of the next exam because they had to do quite well to pass. So, wouldn't say it was a major intervention, but definitely kept an extra eye on me and that was good (Former Student C, SGG1).

Former Student F, SGG1, who "used to miss a certain morning class on Thursday morning" recalled the impact of a lecturer addressing it "I was so embarrassed, so I didn't miss many. So, you can call that an intervention."

6.5.3 Covid-19 pandemic

This evaluation pertains to the pre-pandemic timeframe. Staff felt frustrated by the pandemic. A sense of despondency encapsulated by Lecturer D, LG1 "first-year worked a lot better than it has since Covid," was clear across focus groups.

6.6 Disconfirming Evidence

This study sought to identify if there was another reason the non-progression rate reduced. An analysis of CAO points (Appendix F) showed that point's requirements had increased over the study's timeframe. Considering grade inflation in CAO points, the percentile of students entering first-year was also investigated. It showed the standard of students had largely stayed the same, with students being slightly weaker on the Bachelor of Business Level 8 (2% points) and slightly stronger (3% points) on the Higher Certificate in Business. Any hypothesis suggesting an intake of stronger students contributing to the reduced non-progression rate could not be supported on that basis.

The role that the Irish economy played impacting on student withdrawal levels and non-progression rates also needed to be considered in relation to this study.

Over the course of the timeframe, the Irish economy was recovering from a substantial recession which began in 2008, with the help of the IMF. This study's participants indicated that this had several possible implications.

Lecturer E, LG2 felt that the lack of job opportunities might have led to "people coming to college who probably should never have come to college" although he was unsure of the year and it might have pre-dated the timeframe. This would lead to a potential increase in the non-progression rate based on a lack of suitability of some student entering college.

Alternatively, it was also suggested by Lecturer B, LG1 that the reason withdrawal rates were lower in the earlier timeframe might have been the lack of part-time jobs for student as there was "wasn't much opportunities there".

Overall, the impact of the economic situation may have resulted in reasons more students might drop out as they were better suited to the workforce, but also why more students might remain

as there were less part-time employment opportunities. The extent, if any, of the impact of the economy affecting the non-progression rates is inconclusive.

6.7 Conclusion

Following the mixed methods explanatory sequential model (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2018) this chapter presented the qualitative findings gathered from 5 focus groups. The objective of the focus groups was to engage with and help explain the quantitative findings from this study's previous chapter.

This study's participants were positive about the model. All 4 groups of staff participants stated that the model was an accurate reflection of the work they undertook. They reported the model was of benefit to the students. Crucially, staff also asserted that the model worked to reduce non-progression. Former students recalled their time in college fondly. They did, however, have unique experiences depending on when they started and what programme they enrolled in.

Chapter 7, a discussion of the primary research follows. The summary and interpretation of the quantitative and qualitative data will be integrated. Additionally, the qualitative results will help explain the quantitative results following step four of the explanatory sequential model (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018) described in Chapter 4. The chapter will also seek to determine how the integrated results align with the extensive literature base that was reviewed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 7 Discussion on Findings

7.1 Introduction to Discussion on Findings

The opening chapters identified student non-progression as a key challenge both internationally (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017; Higher Education Standards Panel, 2017; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019) and in Ireland (Higher Education Authority, 2011; Department of Education and Skills, 2013; Department of Education and Skills, 2018; Higher Education Authority, 2018).

This dissertation evaluates an SSM designed to reduce student non-progression. The model is a graphical representation of a student retention project undertaken at faculty level. Specific focus is on the impact within AIT's DB&M over a duration of eight academic years.

From its inception, the retention project sought to reduce high rates of student non-progression from first-year to second-year. Initially, in February 2013, the project began with student interviews conducted by Heads of Department besides early intervention focused on habit-forming.

Described in detail in Chapter 2, the SSM developed over time. It is broad by nature to reflect that a student may leave a programme for a variety of reasons (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019) with a complexity of factors contributing to attrition (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2017).

When modelled in June 2019, the model comprised three foundation blocks. It was a team-based approach. The model was management led and driven. A key component was the underlying principle that it takes four years to bring a student all the way to becoming an independent learner.

There are six model pillars. These pillars are student experience, student esteem, habit-forming, programme design, role of academic staff and student supports. These pillars incorporate twenty-seven individual actions, interventions and measures.

The issue of non-progression is recognised as deeply challenging. Represented in Chapter 3, there is a very extensive and wide-ranging research base associated with it. Tinto's (2006) assertion that substantial gains in student retention have been recognised as hard to come by remains relevant.

Contextualising Tinto's assertion, this chapter will seek to further address the research question. The chapter endeavours to find out if the SSM's impact in the DB&M, over eight years can be

considered a substantial gain in student retention. This chapter will also consider if the SSM has translated elements of theory into effective practice (Tinto, 2006).

This chapter discusses the findings of this study's primary research. Research methodology was described in Chapter 4. This evaluation is a mixed methods study following an explanatory sequential approach. In the previous two chapters, findings from the quantitative and qualitative perspectives were presented separately. In relation to explanatory sequential design data analysis and interpretation, Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) outlined the steps:

> In the explanatory sequential design, data analysis and integration occur at more than one point in the study. In this design the researcher first collects and analyses the quantitative data connects from the quantitative results to the qualitative phase, collect and analyses the qualitative data, and then uses the qualitative results to understand the quantitative results (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018 p.234).

Some data analysis and integration took place in the previous two chapters. Specifically, data presented and analysed from the focus groups sought to connect to the statistical results associated with the model's timeframe. Further integration will now occur. The qualitative data collected from the focus groups will explain changes and trends within each set of quantitative findings.

Additionally, the explained findings will be contextualised in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter 3. Such consideration will include how findings complement, build on or challenge the body of literature. Integrating the findings will follow the explanatory sequential model, albeit with some deviation complementing Greene (2007), who identified complexity associated with the write up of mixed Methods studies:

> The different perspectives, voices, understandings, representational forms that are mixed in the writings are not layered or offered separately or sequentially; rather, they are mixed together, interwoven, interconnected (Greene 2007 p.188).

From the outset, this dissertation sought to conduct a mixed methods approach to evaluating the impact of the Faculty of Business & Hospitality's SSM within the DB&M, in Athlone Institute of Technology, over 8 academic years. In order to address this evaluation, this study sought to answer several research questions that were outlined in Chapter 1, namely from a quantitative perspective:

To what extent did first-year student performance change from a quantitative perspective?

A good deal of metrics, the results of which were presented in Chapter 5, were identified as being key to measuring model efficacy:

a. The change in the annual official student non-progression rate submitted to the HEA annually.

b. The change in the number of first-year formal student withdrawals.

c. The change in the nature of student performance.

d. The change in the pass rate from the autumn repeat exam sitting of students with failed modules.

And from a qualitative perspective that followed the quantitative data collection, presented in Chapter 6:

a. How did these quantitative changes occur and what is the perception of key participants of the SSM?

b. Which particular aspects of the model do key participants and architects believe were central to the recorded outcomes?

This chapter will initially summarise the high-level findings. Subsequently, the statistical results, measured through the four quantitative components identified above, will be integrated with focus group findings to provide a deeper understanding of the statistical results (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2018).

Both qualitative questions will be integrated into the evaluation in order to explain the model's efficacy and identify key considerations arising from the earlier literature review, in Chapter 3. Afterwards, this chapter will consider this study's key emerging themes, to assist positioning the research, to be considered in the final chapter.

7.2 Summary of Findings

Statistically, the quantitative findings, presented in Chapter 5, showed significant reduction in the student non-progression rate over the review's timeframe. During that period, a considerable improvement in student performance, measured in the % of aggregate modules passed, was also recorded. A reduction in the number of early withdrawals took place initially. That early reduction was not maintained. Both student participation and success rates in the autumn repeat examinations improved, with associated performance metrics rising steeply in the final years.

Focus group participants acknowledged that the SSM was the biggest contributor to this reduced non-progression rate in the DB&M in Athlone Institute of Technology over the timeframe. They believed the model worked. They articulated their perspectives on why it worked. They also identified what they considered the key components of the model.

The most significant impact of the SSM was that during the latter years of the timeframe when the model had significantly developed, a higher proportion of students who enrolled in first-year on every programme in the DB&M got into second-year. There were less first-year college drop outs from the department.

Implications relating to the high-level findings will be discussed fully in this chapter. Identifying how the SSM impacts on the challenges identified globally as set out in key reports will be undertaken. Commentary on how the model interfaces with the body of literature will take place throughout the chapter, seeking to identify if elements of theory have been translated into effective practice (Tinto, 2006). Specific comparisons with the models of Astin, Tinto and Kift will be outlined before considering if the results from the model constitute a substantial gain in student retention (Tinto, 2006).

7.3 Explaining and Interpreting Quantitative Results with the Qualitative Results

This next section seeks to both explain and interpret the statistics with qualitative data gathered from the focus groups. Explanations offered by participants why the improvements took place will be augmented with interpretations as to what the implications are and why they are relevant.

7.3.1 The Change in the Annual Official Student Non-progression Rate Submitted to the HEA Annually.

Departmental non-progression rates were presented in Chapter 1 before they were supplemented with three-year averages in Chapter 5. Of the metrics considered in this study, the official departmental non-progression rate is the most important.

There are many reasons for this importance. It is the official measure. This metric feeds into the overall institutional figure, which is formally returned to the Higher Education Authority (HEA). The rationale for developing the SSM was to reduce this rate. Calculation of the rate was consistent both between years and across institutions for the selected timeframe, facilitating a legitimate basis for comparison.

Certain departmental statistics can support a view that the non-progression rates reduced, coinciding with the introduction and, notably, the evolution of the SSM. These statistics are set out:

- Over the course of the study, the non-progression rate declined by 24%.
- The weighted three-year average rate of non-progression declined by 10%.
- The lowest non-progression rates occurred in the final years of the evaluation.

Over the evaluation's timeframe, the overall non-progression declined from 36% to 12%. That reduction reinforces the perspective that a substantial gain in student retention was recorded, supporting the SSM's efficacy. Participants credited the model's utility in providing the conduit to the recorded reduction.

Based on the annual changes of the official non-progression rate, within the department, the rate rose in only one of the seven years and declined in five of those years under consideration. That would indicate that there was steady, incremental and cumulative improvement, complementing the management groups' perspective of an evolving model.

The final two years recorded yearly reductions of 7% and 5%. These reductions show the level of improvement became more pronounced as the model embedded the initial measures into regular practice, supplemented with newer measures. The final three years tellingly formed a pattern of consecutive years which recorded annual improvements.

Taking the three-year averages, calculated to reduce the impact of outliers, the attrition rate dropped by 9% and 10% respectively, in simple and weighted average terms. These measures negate the worse recorded attrition rate at 36%, in the first-year of the evaluation, besides the best recorded rate of 12%, in the final year.

Not seeking to disregard the first or final year rates, a case could be made that the 10% decline in weighted average might be a more accurate reflection of the impact of the SSM rather than the 24% reduction in headline non-progression rates.

A reduction of 10% in a project that set out to reduce non-progression constitutes a considerable improvement. Double digit improvement of this magnitude supports the perspective that the SSM was an exemplar of a substantial gain in student retention.

Over the timeframe, the non-progression rate at the departmental level declined at a faster rate than that of the overall institute. Clearly, there is an inter-relationship between the two rates, as the departmental rate is a subset of the institutional rate. Both rates were similar for most of the period. The gap, however, between the rates for the final two years showed better rates at departmental level (2% and 7%).

Statistically, this would suggest that the factors that were introduced at local level had a greater impact on retention in the department, than institutional measures through college wide supports had on the overall college. Such a perspective is complementary of views offered by the focus groups, which felt most change had occurred "within the faculty".

Offered consistently throughout the focus groups was the concept that no individual measure, within the model, emerged or could be termed as a "silver bullet". Interviewees suggested it was the cumulative effect of all the model's parts that resulted in the non-progression rate reduction.

Managers' perspectives that student attrition is a multifactorial problem requiring a multifactorial response, complements a large portion of the body of literature. Former students acknowledged the received level of support. They positively described their totality of student experience, which is a further endorsement of multiple interventions contributing to the overall improvement.

Detailed analysis of non-progression rates at programme level will be presented below. Non-progression rates recorded in the three Level 8 programmes are also worth noting at this point. In the final year of the evaluation, the combined non-progression level for departmental Level 8 programmes was 2%. Acknowledgement is given that this figure was only achieved once, in the final year. Such a non-progression rate compares favourably in comparison with rates from any set of programmes in either the Institute of Technology or university sector, in Ireland, further details of which are included below.

Some consideration needed to be afforded to class size of the first-year intake, which was identified as a key factor during the focus groups. It is worth noting that the year with the highest intake of students into the first-year coincided with the highest non-progression rate. This supports a case that smaller class sizes are better for retention. Student numbers remained relatively static, however, for the final five years, suggesting that improvements were not based on a class size variable.

Student entry requirements are measured through a combination of CAO points besides how those points reflect on the overall cohort of students completing the senior cycle. The standard of students entering the DB&M saw no real change over the duration.

Relative to different departments in both Athlone IT and other institutions, the DB&M has low entry requirements. Most of the Level 8s offered by the department during the period had an entry requirement near 300 CAO points. The entry requirement for the Higher Certificate in Business was steady at around 200 points, making it an especially low programme entry level. Students as low as the 81st percentile when measured by CAO points could still gain first-year entry in the final year of the evaluation (Appendix F).

7.3.1.1 Implications of Falling Non-Progression Rates in the Context of International and National Reports

At a human level, the most important implication arising from the reduction in the non-progression rates was that more students progressed into second-year. These students therefore had a greater completion opportunity, given that international research has shown that if a student progresses to second-year, then he or she is more likely to complete their programme (Higher Education Authority, 2018, p.5).

Every student is more than just a statistic. From an individual human perspective, many more individual students got the chance to continue with their studies fulfilling their ambition and helping them achieve social status (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017).

Another element to the evaluation lies in benchmarking the departmental performance in the context of Higher Education in Ireland. Chapter 3 introduced some of the headline findings from the series entitled "A Study of progression". This series is compiled annually by the HEA. An overview of levels of non-progression was presented in Table 3.5.

A full direct comparison with other institutes is not possible from the published data. Any comparison with other HEIs is based on the category entitled "Business, Administration and Law" in the HEA's progression statistics.

Any comparison therefore is not fully comparing like with like. It is still however, the only form of comparison or benchmark possible. The comparison is between departmental rates identified in this study with published statistics from other HEIs based on the appropriate HEA category. On that basis, departmental non-progression rates in the final year compare favourably with other Irish HEIs.

The department's non-progression rate of 12% is 9% lower than the Institutes of Technology (IOTs) total of 21%. At Level 6, the Higher Certificate in Business at 24% is better than the IOT's average of 27%. Level 7 is 10% better at the departmental level, with a recorded total of 15%. Even allowing for final year outliers, the final three-year weighted average is lower at Levels 6 and 7 by 7% and 1% respectively.

Level 8 non-progression rates for the department recorded a much lower non-progression rate in the final year. When combined the non-progression rates from the three programmes in Business Psychology (0%), Business and Law (0%) and Bachelor of Business (4%) combine to an overall departmental non-progression rate at Level 8 measuring 2%. That 2% figure is 13% lower than for Level 8s in Institutes of Technology.

Interestingly, it is 8% lower than the Level 8 programmes offered by the universities. three-year weighted averages also compare favourably for both Business Psychology and the Bachelor of Business, when compared to IOT and University Level 8s in table 3.5. Business and law rates, however, compare unfavourably on a three-year weighted average basis.

Developing further the data presented in Table 3.4, a benchmarking exercise on Level 8 progression is quite revealing. Presented below is a table again depicting the same three institutions. The data, though not a complete like for like comparison, compares the points total for the generic business programme, the leaving certificate percentile in terms of points cut off and the non-progression rate for the HEA's Business, Administration and Law category.

Institution	Programme	Minimum Points	Percentile reached for entry	Non-progression rate
University College Dublin	Commerce	499	14.2	3%
Maynooth University	Business	405	36.2	9%
Waterford Institute of Technology	Business Studies	278	68.8	17%
Athlone Institute of Technology	Business	296	64.1	4%
Athlone Institute of Technology	Business and Law	300	61.7	0%
Athlone Institute of Technology	Business Psychology	291	64.1	0%
Athlone Institute of Technology	DB&M	291	64.1	2%

Table 7.1 Comparison with Other HEIs Offering Level 8 Provision in Ireland in Year 8 of Timeframe.

A striking aspect of these statistics is how linear three of the institutions are. UCD attracts from a pool coming from the top 14.2% of leaving certificate students. They had an excellent non-progression rate of 3%. Maynooth university and Waterford Institute of Technology both draw from a pool of lower achieving students from the top 36.2% and 68.8% respectively. Their non-

progression rates of 9% and 17% are in line with the perspective that leaving certificate achievement is a good indicator of third-level success (Higher Education Authority, 2018).

In this instance, the departmental statistics from the DB&M compare very favourably. The overall departmental rate of 2% is better than University College Dublin despite the fact that the students were drawn from the top 64.1% of students completing the Leaving Certificate in that year.

The non-progression rate is 7% better that Maynooth University who attract stronger students, and 15% better than Waterford Institute of Technology, who draw from a more comparable but slightly weaker pool from the top 68.8% of leaving certificate students.

In the final year of the timeframe, departmental non-progression rates performed better than institutional rates (Table 5.3). They also outperformed the IOT sector (Levels 6, 7 and 8) and the university sector (Level 8 only) in all categories.

Contextualising the student intake and progression in Institutes of Technology was considered in Chapter 3. It is accepted that the diverse student profile and academic preparedness of new entrants to the IOTs negatively impact on progression rates but that the student rates of progression within them is a good performance (Higher Education Authority, 2018, p.5).

Students who enrolled in the department had to meet a lower entry requirement than those at universities, as outlined in tables 3.3, 3.4 and above in 7.1. Despite the lower entry requirements, the non-progression rates on the Level 8 programmes were much lower than similar offerings in the university sector.

In this instance, the results somewhat contradict the HEA's finding that "those with higher educational attainment are more likely to progress to the second-year of study than those with lower educational attainment" (Higher Education Authority, 2018, p.5). Comparison within the department, however, supports the same finding, as the progression rates were better on the Level 8 programmes than either the Level 6 or 7 offerings.

Performance and non-progression statistics both pointed to the model working better for stronger students, categorised based on entry requirements within the department. Focus group participants found this unsurprising but refuted any suggestion that the model was less useful to weaker students.

The evidence suggests that students enrolling in the DB&M were weaker than those who enrolled in other institutions. Yet the progression rates were higher. This points to the model helping students who were weaker relative to their peers nationally to progress. Students on programmes

requiring higher educational achievement within the department became even more likely to progress.

The lower entry requirements for the DB&M was a key measure in keeping with broadening participation rates in higher education in keeping with national objectives identified in the literature review, set out in the *Higher Education System Performance Framework 2018-2020*. Through the model, registered students were given a better chance to succeed, one element identified as crucial in an international context, in Australia (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2017).

7.3.2   The Change in the Number of First-year Formal Student Withdrawals

Chapter 1 described how the official non-progression rate is measured. Making positive conclusions about the efficacy on the model might be slightly premature if the rate at which students who withdraw from first-year between September and March 1st is not considered.

Notwithstanding staff participants indicating that the statistical changes for early withdrawals were negligible, the u-shaped trend shows that the lowest rate of student withdrawal coincided with the timeframe that placed priority on what was then termed the habit-forming initiative. Managerial priorities subsequently widened to focus on developing additional aspects of the model.

New measures, especially in the Students Supports Pillar, were introduced. Existing measures were considered for enhancement. The aim of these actions sought to create a positive impact in the full academic year, including the autumn repeats. Rather than building on the success in reducing the withdrawal rate, the rate of withdrawals increased, suggesting that the measures introduced under the habit-forming pillar were not sufficiently embedded in the model.

The evidence suggests that the impact of the habit-forming pillar on the withdrawal rate produced exemplars of good performance when the priority of focus was on the early weeks of the first-year.

Just over 37% of students who formally withdrew did not offer a reason. This is a cause for concern. No evidence was gathered as to why these students withdrew. Any potential further development of the model will require evidence-based decisions. Incorporating the suggestion made by Administrator C, AG1 that exit interviews be conducted would have provided this evaluation with more evidence. In the future, there appears to be a strong case for conducting these interviews.

Of the students who provided reasons for their withdrawal, it is disappointing that the reason most often offered (44%) was "*Not suited to programme/ programme not what I expected it to be*." This would indicate that what the student believed they were going to experience was different to the reality. This led them to withdraw. Such a finding complements an earlier study (Van, Rooij, Jansen and Van De Grift, 2018) that linked student satisfaction with the degree programme with academic adjustment and intention to persist.

Some reasons students withdrew are outside the scope of what the SSM could achieve. Some 17% of students withdrew because of their financial situation. This complements findings that finance effects student attrition that was put forward by many researchers (Fontana *et al.*, 1986; Thomas, Adams and Birchenough, 1996; Harrington *et al.*, 2001) and in particular in the early stages (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998).

Similarly, 6% of students withdrew for health reasons similar to research already conducted (Szulecka, Springett and De Pauw, 1987; Tooth, Tonge and McManus, 1989; Hughes, 2005; Porter and Swing, 2006; Beiter *et al.*, 2015).

7.3.2.1 Reliability of Combining Early Withdrawals and Non-Progression Rates

Seeking the maximum level of potential student attrition is achieved by adding the number of student withdrawals to the non-progression rates. This statistical set (Figure 5.5) was included in this study to show the potential by which the total actual drop-out rate could be under-recorded.

When considering these figures, it is worth noting how unreliable this measure is to extract information from. A student who changes from one first-year programme to another in a different college can be categorised as a withdrawal. In reality, they have not dropped out. Not all withdrawals are likely to be in that type of category. It is reasonable to assume that at least some early withdrawals are college drop outs finding the adjustment too much or the course too difficult.

The researcher purposely did not combine the data into a single percentage, given the potential for unreliability. It is, however, worth noting that of the starting cohort, the worse year recorded an attrition rate 36% coupled with a withdrawal rate of 5% for the same year. The best year was when the non-progression rate was 12% with the withdrawal rate of 5.6% in the final year of the evaluation.

In the event all the withdrawals were for student dropping out of college with no plan to take a place on an alternative programme, then the non-progression rate for the DB&M was under-reported by an average of approximately 5% over the period in question.

This withdrawal level compares favourably with the overall national figure estimated at 9% (Fleming and Finnegan, 2010). With a lower level of early withdrawals than the national average, the evidence supports the perspective of the model providing a substantial gain in student retention.

Official non-progression rates do not distinguish between traditional dropouts and students who choose to opt out, despite having the opportunity to progress. Presented in table 5.16, the 3%-4% of students who exercise the choice to leave are potentially making a positive decision rather than a forced choice. This positive attrition in the view of focus group participants was that normally students who withdraw after successfully completing first-year do so due to exercising an option to take up employment.

7.3.3   The Change in the Nature of Student Performance

As a measure, the overall aggregate percentage of modules passed offers further additional insights to other metrics, such as the non-progression rate. There are many causes, voluntary and otherwise, why students drop out of college. A measure such as the aggregate performance deals purely with the impact that the SSM had on first-year academic performance. Over the period under evaluation, the total departmental performance improved from 65% of modules passed to 88% of modules passed. The three-year weighted average improved by 14%.

Both of the three-year averages showed a steady improvement for the first four entries before improving more significantly for the final two entries. These averages reflect a substantial improvement in the yearly metric for the evaluation's final three years when totals of 80%, 85% and 88% were recorded. This improvement began in 2015/16. A question emerges to why the most significant improvement occurred between the 5th and 6th years and how that improvement was both sustained and improved upon in the final two years.

The law lecturers identified improvements that were introduced during the programmatic review in 2015 and implemented in 2015/16 as contributing to the improvement in student performance for that programme.

The faculty did not limit programmatic review to Business and Law. It encompassed all programmes. Despite not being overtly identified within the focus groups as a catalyst for changes in performance in other programmes, they referenced many of the changes identified as being introduced during that programmatic review.

A revisit of the statistical data on student performance, to consider the potential impact of the programmatic review on the final three years, is presented in the table below. The three-year

weighted average for the year 4th year (the last three years before the programmatic review) was compared to the three-year average for the 7th year (only available year that encompassed all three post-programmatic review years).

	Pre-Programmatic review	Post-Programmatic Review	Change
All Programmes	73%	84%	+11%
Business Level 8	81%	91%	+10%
Business and Law Level 8	70%	82%	+12%
Business Psychology	N/A	97%	
Business Level 6	73%	85%	+12%
Social Media Marketing Level 6/ Digital Marketing Level 7	65%	75%	+10%

Table7.2 Student Performance Comparison of Three-year weighed averages Before and After Programmatic Review 2015.

Substantial improvements occurred after the programmatic review based on revisiting the statistics in this manner. The largest improvement was in Business and Law and the Higher Certificate in Business, but there were substantial upturns on all the programmes. This data would support the perspective that changes to programme structure and delivery, introduced during programmatic review 2015, played a significant role in improving the student population's academic performance. Such a perspective supports the role that academics can step up and leverage the curriculum and its delivery to influence the experience of all students (Kift, 2015).

Other actions and interventions were also either introduced or refined at that juncture, coinciding with the aftermath of the programmatic review. This makes measuring the efficacy of the programmatic review changes a very challenging task. Both lecturer focus groups commented that the changes brought into the department during programmatic review and the encouragement they received to introduce their innovations, was a key component to the student experience.

7.4 *Changes in the Non-progression Rate and Student Performance at Programme Level*

Non-progression rates and student performance levels for each programme are combined to offer further explanation of the departmental statistics. Changes to both rates at programme level are discussed here.

7.4.1 Bachelor of Business Level 8

If the only basis of evaluation on this programme was the non-progression rate, then the reduction from 39% to 4% over the timeframe would indicate that the model really worked in reducing attrition. A similar comparison between the first and final year of aggregate % of total modules passed is equally impressive. It increased from 66% to 95%. Even the more prudent measures of weighted three-year averages showed non-progression reducing by 23% and modules passed increasing by 17%, over this study's duration.

An interesting point to consider is the consistency of this programme as it relates to the evaluation. The programme ran in every year of the timeframe. The number of students and the entry requirements, measured by CAO points, did not significantly differ between years. Unlike Business Psychology, which was developed prioritising retention or Business and Law which was identified for specific changes in the programmatic review, this programme did not receive additional attention and therefore can be considered a useful barometer for the wider department. Class size was also relatively consistent for the 8 years.

Programme graduates who contributed to this study reported that first-year was "a good stepping stone" (Former Student A, SGG1) for the rest of their studies. They also accessed some services, such as the one-to-one interview and recalled that lecturers worked as a team and allowing them to "feel at home straight away" (Former Student A, SGG1).

7.4.2 Bachelor of Business and Law Level 8

Non-progression rates reduced and student performance rates increased, on all the individual and three-year averages for Business and Law, during the time-span. All indicators showed accelerated improvement in the final three years under evaluation. There was a divergence between student performance and non-progression. Student performance recorded year-on-year improvements in each of the last three years, with a significantly higher total of 92%, recorded in the final year. Non-progression rates recorded a decrease of 4% between years six and seven before reducing to 0% in the final year.

With the student performance rate at 79% of modules passed, 29% attrition in the penultimate year appears to be an outlier in terms of being disproportionally high. In that year, there was only a 4% decrease in non-progression despite a 6% rise in performance. Taking that into account, a strong argument could be made that the improvement in Business and Law occurred incrementally over the last 3 years rather than the dramatic 29% improvement in the final year that the non-progression rate change suggests when taken as a stand-alone measure suggests.

Every five years, each Institute of Technology is required to conduct a self-evaluation and a review of all course offerings in a process known as a programmatic review. The changes introduced after the programmatic review in 2015 were incorporated into the curriculum in 2015/2016. Law lecturers in the focus groups identified changes made to the Business and Law programme as significant.

Programmatic review changes made were focused on what the programme team considered enhancements to the student experience. Changes were made to the structure of the programme. Besides retaining "Learning and Development for Higher Education", further transition modules described as "innovative" were introduced, including a new module "Legal Skills" developed for first-year. Additionally, restructuring "big ten credit modules to short five credit modules" (Lecturer C, LG1) in order to make these subjects more manageable for students was incorporated. A greater orientation towards a more practical focus allowing the material "to be more alive" (Lecturer E, LG2) reflected changes to existing modules. Resulting student engagement builds on previous research (Williams, 1992; Sander et al., 2000).

Structural and content changes introduced during the programmatic review generated many enhancements to the student experience. "Funding was made available" (Lecturer C, LG1) for students to take part in several field trips to the District Courts, the Four Courts and to a prison. The students established a law society incorporating an annual law ball. Introducing mooting which "students enjoyed" was linked to the core study. That facilitated a degree of "social learning" and "bonded them as a team as well as, in the course" (Lecturer C, LG1).

Considering the non-progression rate alone in this instance led to a premature conclusion of a final year dramatic improvement. Other statistical indicators, however, show a more gradual upward trajectory during the final three years. Focus groups participants contended improvements occurred because of changes in programmatic review besides additional measures introduced to enhance the student experience. This appears to explain the statistical improvement in this programme.

7.4.3   Bachelor of Arts in Business Psychology Level 8

Consistently, the best performing programme in relation to student retention was Business Psychology. Business Psychology differed from other departmental offerings. At the programme development stage, the traditional programme development team was augmented by members of the institute's Learning and Teaching unit. They developed the programme with the perspective of optimising the first-year student experience.

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With twenty-five of the thirty credits offered in semester one associated with psychology, this programme introduced the concept of front-loading material that would excite students. Any potential gap between how the programme was marketed to potential students and the manner of their subsequent first-year student experience was therefore narrowed.

Several additional indicators emerged from the focus groups that explained why the programme was so successful. Former students recalled high levels of interaction with the academic staff. One student's recollection of how accessible their lecturer was on the eve of the first semester exams was an encouraging indicator of the level of support available. A separate student recalled how meeting another student at a coffee morning became important, on graduating from college, when that other former student helped her gain employment.

Members of the lecturing delivery team insisted there was no "magic formula" (Lecturer G, LG2), and that they worked hard implementing all aspects of the SSM to enhance the student experience. Such enhancement seemed to work. Former students clearly enjoyed both their overall experience, besides providing exemplars of their student journey, such as the field trip to Arigna Mines.

7.4.4   Higher Certificate in Business Level 6

Of the first-year programmes under review, the Higher Certificate consistently had the lowest entry requirements measured by CAO points. Staff participants echoed official report findings (Higher Education Authority, 2018) that this was a significant factor that influenced students' ability to succeed. It was notable in SGG1, that the former student who spoke most of the challenges and accessing supports, first registered on the Higher Certificate in Business.

Low entry requirements for entrants created an expectation that there would be a greater non-progression rate on the Higher Certificate than other programmes in the department. Annual Non-progression rates fluctuated considerably, as did the weighted average, although the attrition rate improved. The 10% non-progression rate in the penultimate year is especially good. This rate showed the potential at which some of Ireland's weakest students could progress. The 39% non-progression rate recorded two years earlier, however, provides a disappointing reminder of how difficult it can be for students entering higher education with low points to succeed.

Interestingly, the final year non-progression rate of 24% seems exceptionally high in the context of the 85% of aggregate modules passed. An explanation for this might be where students either opt out of college or transfer to another programme or college. Once again, the metric of modules passed indicates a sizable upturn in student performance in the years directly after the

programmatic review besides coinciding with further development of the other model and its components.

7.4.5   *Higher Certificate in Social Media Marketing Level 6 / Bachelor of Business in Digital Marketing Level 7*

Programmes in social media and digital marketing had consistently both the highest non-progression rates and the lowest rates of student performance of the departmental programmes. Notwithstanding the programme's relatively poor performance, there was a considerable improvement recorded over the duration under review, supporting the model's efficacy. A key question emerges from the statistical data regarding the pair of offerings. That question is, why did it perform so poorly relative to other departmental programmes?

Consistently, the explanation offered by the focus groups was that there was a gap between what incoming students believed the course would entail, which subsequently contrasted with the programme's content. Both programmes are classified as academic awards are in business. They offered specialisations in social media and digital marketing. The suggestion arising from the focus groups is that prospective students believed the content would only include digital marketing material. They believed they would "be the next google straight away and didn't realise it was going to be business" (Lecturer D, LG1).

Interviewees offered that the department did not provide adequate information about the nature of the programme to prospective students. Staff participants suggested AIT has "mis-sold" (Lecturer J, LG2) the programme." Such an explanation would match findings made by Rickinson and Rutherford (1995) and Rickinson (1998) who identified the majority of students who drop put do so due to wrong course selection besides Van, Rooij, Jansen and Van De Grift (2018) who determined that only satisfaction with the degree programme predicted the success of academic adjustment and intention to persist.

In circumstances similar to the Business and Law programme, a statistical upturn was recorded after the programmatic review where lecturers indicated "some improvements were made" (Lecturer D, LG1) to the programme's structure and content. Again, there appears to be a mismatch in the final year as the 85% progression rate looks high compared to the 72% of modules passed. The three-year weighted averages, however, show a steady incremental improvement which supports that the model's efficacy was optimised in the time-span's final years.

7.5 The Change in the Pass Rate from the Autumn Repeat Exam Sitting of Students with Failed Modules

In an Athlone IT context, students traditionally receive far more support during teaching weeks than they do during the Autumn when repeat examinations are conducted. The primary purpose of investigating Autumn repeat participation and performance levels was to measure if there were any improvements coinciding aspects of the model's development which targeted an improvement in this area.

Statistically, the largest uptake that students attempted their repeats examinations was in the last two years of the study (Figure 5.7). Both years recording rates in the early 80s, well above those recorded in the preceding years.

Success rates among the student cohort who actually undertook their exams peaked in the last 3 years (Figure 5.8). Each of these years recorded over 80% of those who sat exams progress to second-year. In contrast, none of the previous five years saw this rate above 80%.

Combing the two rates together meant both more students attempted and succeeded in the final two years that at any other time under evaluation (Figure 5.9). A significant upturn occurred in year 6, but the best return was 71% in the final year. This figure is an improvement of 18% when compared with year one.

Improved student performance in repeat exams contributed to other statistical improvements over the period. Autumn success rates impacted the key departmental non-progression rate. The 18% combined participation and success rate improvement in the final year contributed 7% of the overall departmental non-progression rate reduction, compared to the first-year.

Focus groups identified several actions that were introduced or modified to improve performance in autumn exams. The first of these was the briefing for student with failed modules. Introduced in 2013 at departmental level before becoming an institutional event from 2016 onwards, MG1 reported the event evolved "from information dumps to more coaching-focused approaches" (Manager C, MG1). This briefing looked to inform and inspire the students towards better performance in repeat examinations.

An additional change of approach was made by the HOD Emeritus who phoned all the students that had failed. That was year seven of the evaluation, a year in which there was a considerable year-on-year upturn in student participation (+12%) in the repeat exams.

Increased success rates in the Autumn repeats also gave rise to speculation, particularly among lecturers in LG1. They suggested perhaps students had "fewer modules to repeat than in previous years" (Lecturer D, LG1). With overall student performance in passing modules improving linearly over the timeframe, the evidence supports the lecturers' claim.

Improvements by students repeating coincided with the extra impetus introduced to the model in 2017. A considerable challenge presented itself here in relation to what information alone the data gave regarding student performance in the Autumn Examination sittings and how much importance to assign to it.

From the perspective of allocating some importance to the repeat exam statistics, it is possible to identify why there might have been a better performance. Improved rates coincided with the extra impetus that was introduced in 2017. New interventions, such as phone calls from the HOD Emeritus and the changing nature of the student briefing, were all introduced when these improvements were recorded.

Assigning too much importance to those measures also should be considered. From the trends in the quantitative data alone, student performance across all programmes was improving at that time. At a departmental level, more students were passing more modules as the model kept developing.

Because of the enhanced performance of aggregate modules passed, students were better placed to pass the autumn sitting based on their first sitting performance. On that basis, although the measures introduced to improve student performance in the Autumn contributed to the overall reduction, it might be incorrect to single out this performance as the key driver over all the reduction in the non-progression rate. This is supported by the remark MG1 on the repeat exam performance as being "that the model had a significant bearing on that" (Manager B, MG1).

7.6 Perspectives Outlining why the SSM Worked

Priority of focus in the explanatory sequential model is given to the quantitative research. Quantitative findings have been explained by the qualitative data. In this study, a feature of the qualitative research set out to determine what were the model participants' perspectives of the model. Data was gathered through focus groups which were reported on in Chapter 6.

Primarily, the qualitative research questions sought to find out distinct perspectives from each of the focus groups. The first of these perspectives was whether the participants believed the model worked in reducing departmental attrition. Overall, a consensus emerged among the participants in the focus groups that the development of the SSM brought many advantages to students. The

model was the primary driver reducing the attrition within the department. Most participants indicated that the model either caused, or assisted, increasing departmental retention.

Additionally, the qualitative research sought opinions as to why the model had the impact that it did. A key component here was based on what participants believed were the model's key components. Detailed discussion on key components will be covered in next section. This section serves as an overview of participants' perspectives of the model.

Staff focus groups endorsed the model's attempt to "overcome student obstacles" (Lecturer A, LG1). They praised the model for its emphasis on student centred learning that gave students confidence in the early stages of their college life. Complementing the work of (Meyers *et al.*, 2019) the word empathy was used regularly to describe the model. Based on the evidence, the model attempted to mitigate the factors associated with student attrition identified by Yorke (1999). Without compromising quality standards, the comprehensive nature of the model offered considerable support to students. Former students echoed staff sentiments when recalling their student experience.

According to staff participants, the constant reflection and development of model components meant it was in a constant state of evolution. At the very beginning, the evolutionary path that the model took in its development begun with a very high rate of non-progression. It was primarily focused on providing weaker students with the opportunity to progress from first- to second-year in college. While performance was better for the Level 8 degrees, which had a higher entry requirement, participants indicated that weaker students benefitted more from the model.

A majority of interviewees acknowledged that participation in higher education, as a student, is not necessarily achievable to everyone who enrols. This perspective extended to the belief that a certain level of drop-out is acceptable and possibly even necessary. The managers and lecturers expressed concern that the emphasis on student retention and the success of the model and its properties might contribute to students who might not have the aptitude for third-level succeeding in first-year. Despite first-year success, they speculated students might encounter difficulties later on in their studies as the material becomes more demanding. While this was contested by the former students, who perceived first-year as "a good stepping stone" (Former Student A, SGG1) for their later studies.

Good levels of teamwork were identified as being very important by staff interviewees. Nobody described the level of teamwork as perfect, but all acknowledged its importance. Significantly, the

role leadership plays featured both directly and indirectly among the focus groups, a theme that will be developed further later in this chapter.

7.7   Aspects of the SSM that were Central to its Success

Based on the quantitative results alone, a strong case presents that the SSM reduced the rates of student non-progression. Participants from the focus groups indicated it was the model's efficacy that contributed to the uplift in student performance and progression. An important research question component sought to identify which of the model's components contributed the most to this uplift.

There were multiple reasons for this rationale. Establishing if specific actions were responsible for the recorded improvements would obviously meet the evaluative elements of this thesis. For the future model development or considering its transferability to other settings, it could establish a blueprint for prioritisation of actions, required to optimise its impact.

7.7.1   Non-progression Rates did not Reduce Because of any One of the Model's Measures

Earlier in this dissertation, the purpose and context of this research were established. A qualitative question posed centred on identification of possible model "key components" that facilitated the DB&M in reducing student attrition. Other terms such as "silver bullets" or "game changers" could also have been used. By seeking to identify the most relevant actions and interventions associated with the model, there was an underlying suggestion that such key components existed. Posing the question, in that manner, perhaps implied that some aspects might be more important than the totality of the model itself.

In revisiting the implication of game changers, focus groups offered the perspective that no one intervention caused the registered improvement. The management focus group stated that the model efficacy was a combination of all the things that the team were doing. Both lecturer focus groups indicated that no single element of the model accounted for the difference in attrition, but that the vast majority of changes would have impacted on the retention figures.

Conceptualising an effective model based on many working parts complements the body of literature reviewed in Chapter 3, which specified a variety of reasons why student drop out and the multitude of remedies needed to stem that flow (Schedvin, 1985; Nora *et al.*, 1996; Adamson and McAleavy, 2000; Flowers *et al.*, 2001; Murray, 2014; Higher Education Standards Panel, 2017; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019; Hearn *et al.*, 2021).

The former student group was keen to acknowledge that the institution was very supportive of them in their effort to succeed. They never realised the model existed, but found the college to be welcoming. Their recollection of a positive student experience included praise for both the model and its components.

Augmenting the perspective that no one measure was decisive in reducing attrition lies with the fact that participants found it easy to articulate the actions they found most useful. They were less inclined and found difficulty in identifying the model's least effective actions, often indicating none of the actions had no relevance.

Contextualising the most effective actions or interventions became important. No single intervention caused the improvement. Therefore, none of the actions can be categorised as a "silver bullet" or "game changer". Without "game changers" discussion of actions will focus on the role an intervention made both in its own right but also in the context of other complementing model components and its totality.

Subsequent paragraphs identify the model's actions considered by participants to be the most impactful. Such identification does not necessarily undermine the concept that the model did not reduce non-progression because of its entirety of impact. Introducing any one of these interventions on their own would not have achieved the reduction in student attrition, recorded over the timeframe.

7.7.2 Interviews with Students who have Failed First-Year Modules

In February 2013, the model's inception began with a series of one-to-one meetings between the Head of Department and first-year students who failed at least one semester one module. The interviews' intent was very much a big stick approach seeking to act as a deterrent for students who had failed. For the rest of the model's development, these one-to-one meetings were constantly conducted. The meetings continued in much the same manner for a further three years before considerable reflection about their utility was undertaken, as described in Chapter 2.

Many reasons were offered by focus groups highlighting this intervention's importance. Former students who either attended the interview or knew of friends who attended were positive that it put them in the right direction assisting their success. Managers and lecturers felt it created a sense of student accountability, which encouraged students to perform. It was encouraging that a former student who attended the meeting identified it as an eye opener and recognised that accountability element when he acknowledged "they could have just let it be, say nothing (Former Student E, SGG1)".

Managers indicated it made an impact at multiple levels. They coached students during these meetings, which students benefitted from, supporting similar findings from an earlier study (Lancer and Eatough, 2018). They encouraged students to re-assess why they were doing an academic course. They found out what aspects of programmes they found most challenging. By placing focus on their next assignment, students had the opportunity to gain some momentum building on an earlier study by Van Overwalle (1989) who identified that midterm performance of students related to self-esteem, expectations and study strategies.

The structure, atmosphere and intent of the meetings evolved over the duration. Two significant changes were implemented in 2017. Changes to the interview were introduced based on recommendations by three lecturers, teaching Business Psychology. The Head of Department enacted their suggestions, incorporating the use of empathy, motivation and mini exercises. This change in emphasis was attempted for the first time in February 2017. In June 2017, an additional set of meetings was conducted for the first time. These meetings were for first-year students who had passed all the modules in Semester one but failed modules for the first time in Semester two. These changes were central to this intervention's evolution.

The change of approach coincided with the year that recorded the most significant improvement in reducing the non-progression rate to below 20% for the first time. The following year, the new format remained when the attrition rate reduced further to 12%.

Developed to create a sense of accountability, the interviews evolved, offering "more encouragement" (Lecturer F, LG2) which some staff viewed as "paternalistic support" (Lecturer A, LG1). How the interviews influenced the rest of the model is also worth considering. Managers reported gathering "valuable intelligence" (Manager B, MG1) when they conducted the interviews. This intelligence identified obstacles students were facing. Information relating to elements of programmes or staff related issues facilitated the HODs when evaluating how provision was working for students. Further actions, often incorporating other model components, were subsequently initiated based on information gathered.

7.7.3 *Provision of Feedback*

Feedback was captured in the model as "Provision of feedback on first assignment in a timely manner". This description sought to capture both the overall concept of feedback and specifically, the reduced timeframe within which students received feedback from their first assignment.

Managers identified this as problematic. They suggested quality of feedback was more important than that feedback's timeliness. Subsequently, they de-coupled the provision of feedback from

the timeliness of the first assignment's feedback. Without overtly stating it, other focus groups also separated these two facets.

From a modelling perspective, the original description appears poorly assigned. The model would have been better served by the de-coupling of the action into quality of feedback provision besides timeliness of provision, from the first assignment.

Graduates who enrolled over the duration identified feedback as the model action that contributed most to their success. Therefore, these immediate paragraphs will deal with the concept of quality and the nature of feedback. A subsequent section will discuss feedback in a timely manner after the first assessment.

Former students identified feedback as "a massive part of first-year" (Former Student D, SGG1). They described that lecturers were "always willing to go over something a few times" (Former Student D, SGG1) and that feedback in the form of lower than expected assignment marks pushed them to improve their performance. This level of willingness by the students reinforces the concept that they frame their learning around assessment tasks (Thomas, 2018).

Carless (2015) identified that assessment may provide satisfaction or discouragement. He further indicated assessment as a major factor in attrition. The testimony offered by Former Student C, SGG1 who was dissatisfied with her mark and improved it based on feedback she received, is a case of a student experiencing discouragement initially with a low mark and later satisfaction with an improvement. In her case, the nature of the feedback was the bridge between the two that facilitated her journey. Her story was not an exception. Other former students made similar contributions. According to lecturers, such feedback encouraged "a growth mindset" (Lecturer G, LG2) for the first-year students and developed a necessary skillset enabling them to succeed in subsequent years.

7.7.4   Habit-forming and Early Interventions

The habit-forming initiative occurred in the early years of the model's development. This initiative was largely focused on changing the timing and nature of assessments in the first semester of the first-year. An action, described by staff focus groups as "getting them to hit the ground running" (Lecturer H, LG2), saw students get their first assignment often on their first day but certainly during their first week, in the department.

The rationale behind giving the first assignment so early was that it sought to force the students to begin their studies immediately. It was also the action or activity that created the momentum

for students and gave the majority an early success that Wong and Chiu (2019) attested can help enhance their esteem, as students.

Staff interviewees identified that the marks received instilled confidence in the students in their work, subsequently, paving the way for further success. Lecturers identified that students can find it too easy to enjoy a high level of freedom for the first time. Allowing this freedom to coexist with the habit of studying, besides meeting submission deadlines, was enabled through the first assignment.

Former students recalled their shock at receiving that first assignment. They identified the importance of receiving feedback on that assessment, offering further support to that importance put forward by Espinoza and Genna (2021). Similar sentiments were expressed by other participants. Both managers and lecturers described the habit-forming element, as important but they associated the feedback element as critical to enabling first-year success.

Interviewees also identified that results from the first assignment also brought struggling students to the attention of the HOD. Some of the student entering college had performed poorly at senior cycle stage and entered their studies with low self-esteem (Mendes et al., 2021) Subsequently the HOD could identify or provide supports as necessary. Similarly, they could offer what they considered to be the most appropriate advice to those students experiencing early difficulties.

Overall, the habit-forming and early intervention contributed to the efficacy of the model. In their own right, these interventions succeeded in establishing good habits that enabled more students to thrive. Indirectly, these interventions interfaced with other key elements of the model enabling more students to benefit from these further elements at the earliest possible juncture.

7.7.5   *HOD Emeritus*

According to the lecturing focus groups, one of the model's most important measures was the redeployment of a retired Head of Department to a retention officer role. Two separate points were articulated. First, there was a requirement for that role to be performed within the faculty. Second, the individual selected for the role was exceptionally good at executing it. The contribution of the HOD Emeritus was stated at focus groups, as a very significant contributing factor in reducing the non-progression rate.

The timing of his appointment and changes in the non-progression rates are worth considering. Faculty management appointed him in June 2017. His initial priority was to phone students who failed exams and offer customised advice regarding study, tutorial support, administrative issues and motivational techniques. As reported earlier, the repeat exam progression rate increased

from 60% to 65% in 2017. Overall, that year recorded a departmental non-progression rate of 17% - then a record departmental low.

Subsequently, in this evaluation's final year, "he was involved in a lot of initiatives" (Lecturer J, LG2). Lecturers reported that he helped students to not feel "anonymous and lost" (Lecturer A, LG1). This concept supports the view of Suhlmann et al. (2018) of students having a greater level of well-being with reduced drop out intentions because of feeling a greater sense of belonging. The HOD Emeritus helped provide that sense of belonging. Lecturers also reported that there was a change in their sentiment towards programme boards. They indicated that there was an opportunity to assist borderline cases through the follow-up actions of the HOD Emeritus. The final year recorded the lowest non-progression rate of 12%.

Sadly, the role ended prematurely when the HOD Emeritus suffered a tragic accident which left him incapacitated. His appointment coincided with the years when the department recorded its best progression rates. Besides the direct performance of his role, he became a conduit to introducing students to other elements of the model. He acted on team decisions arrived at programme board level. He provided a communication channel between students and staff, including managers, lecturers, administrators, and the wider institute. In the summer, he guided students towards tutors or student services, as required. Given the extent to which academic staff matter to the student experience (Meehan and Howells, 2018), the HOD Emeritus played a significant role.

7.8 Interventions with Unrealised Potential

This study's participants said that all actions made at least some level of positive contribution to retention. Not all the interventions, however, reached their potential in terms of impact. Such interventions, therefore, can be categorised as having unrealised potential. Identifying such interventions is important for the future development or transferability of the model.

7.8.1 *The Parents' Evening*

The parents' evening is possibly the intervention that is most difficult to evaluate regarding its level of utility. On the one hand, staff participants were positively pre-disposed to the event. Some focus groups put it forward as one of the model's most important components.

Managers lamented that poor participation rates (often <10%) among parents and families that undermined the event's efficacy. Their level of frustration is collaborated by a former student's account to her focus group. She spoke favourably about the pride her parents had when they attended the event. Significantly, she was, however, the only participant from that focus group

who had any family members attend. The vast majority of parents never attended and therefore gained no benefit.

Lecturers held mixed views about the parents' evening. They articulated the event had some merit. They found it hard, however, to determine just how useful it was and questioned if the concept of bringing in parents "infantilized students" (Lecturer C, LG1). Significantly, they observed parents "responded well if a lecturer knew their son or daughter" (Lecturer D, LG1). This accords with the perspective of Tinto (1993) who identified the importance of students having a sense of belonging.

7.8.2   *The Team Building Event*

Former students reported difficulties in assimilating into their new class groups. Those who enrolled before the introduction of a team building event lamented the fact that they didn't experience it. A positive experience was reported back from the graduates who attended. It helped them integrate with their peer group (Tinto, 1993). Both the administrative and management focus groups offered that the event could have been better. There was a suggestion made by Administrator B, AG1 that the single event should be replaced with three smaller events in the future. Although the event went some way to helping students to become part of their group, it potentially underachieved, because of its one-off nature.

7.8.3   PASS

One unanticipated finding was the limited extent to which participants found the PASS system to have contributed to the model. A lack of utility for the PASS system contradicts previous studies (Webb, 1990; Mabrito, 1991; Topping *et al.*, 1996; Hodgson, Chan, and Liu, 2014; Andreanoff, 2016).

This rather contradictory result may be because of a variety of reasons. PASS is not managed by the faculty but is housed within the institute's student services department. PASS leaders were recruited by the Student Services Department. The faculty never identified staff to take ownership of the pass programme and no consideration of integrating PASS with the wider model was ever considered. For the future development of the model, these reasons would have considered, as there wasn't enough evidence in this study to fully dismiss the contribution of PASS.

7.9   **Contextualising the SSM with Models of Departure and Holistic Approaches**

For decades, models have been put forward regarding student departure and retention. Models and approaches, developed by Astin, Tinto and Kift, were described in the review of literature. This section seeks to compare these models or approaches to the SSM.

7.9.1 Astin's IEO Model and Student Involvement Theory

There are many identifiable features of the SSM that build on both of Astin's approaches. The IEO Model is based on the interrelationship between a student's input, their college environment, and their desired outcomes. The SSM sought to assist students to reach their desired outcomes from the first-year, which was to progress to second-year. Reaching this desired outcome required changes to the student environment facilitated by model interventions such as habit-forming or the one-to-one interviews. These interventions provoked a response in the students' inputs and efforts.

Astin's student involvement theory identified the greater the level of involvement, the greater the amount of student learning and personal development (Astin, 1999). Former students were keen to describe the level of feedback they got and how it contributed to their development as students. Incorporating that feedback into later drafts of their work increased their level of involvement, learning, and development.

One of the most encouraging findings in this study was the impact that the front loading of the most interesting material associated with the programme had in relation to student performance. Business Psychology, a programme designed to maximise retention, was by far the best performing programme. Not only was the content heavily weighted to the core subjects in the first semester but the content within those modules was both interesting and provocative, relating to everyday important issues in the lives of the students. All the other actions to enhance the student experience were implemented on this programme, enhancing the student experience and recording a consistently low level of student attrition. These results complement Astin's Student Involvement Theory.

7.9.2 Vincent Tinto's Departure Model

Perhaps the reason Tinto's work has been extensively cited lies in its relevance to every student's situation regarding their choice to continue and depart.

Positioning the student cohort regarding the pre-entry characteristics in the longitudinal model of institutional departure (Tinto, 1993) is not a simple task. Each student is different. No two students will have the same skills, ability, family background, and prior schooling experience. Several comments on the student cohort can, however, be made.

In the Irish context, higher levels of non-progression are expected within the Institute of Technology sector because student have achieved lower points in their leaving certificate (Higher Education Authority, 2018) than the cohort who enter traditional universities. This is because of these institutions contributing to the national priority of widening participation in education (Department of Education and Skills, 2016).

The disconfirming evidence (Appendix F) demonstrated that the minimum entry requirement into first-year the DB&M aligned to the 81st percentile in terms of Leaving Certificate performance. This implies that student who entered the department were not high-achieving students, when compared to the wider student body who completed the senior cycle.

According to the former students who contributed to this study, the efforts made by the institute to integrate them successfully were important. Those graduates described the college as welcoming and they recalled that their overall description of first-year was positive. Highlights included field trips, mooting, and team building events all which helped towards successful integration within their class groups. Lecturers worked as a team. They were accessible to students. Provision of feedback helped them integrate with the academic community. The early assessment expedited their integration with the course material and, if it took the form of a group assignment, integrated them with their peers as well. Overall, the SSM incorporated the sense of belonging that positively influenced students not to make individual departure decisions, aligned to the Tinto's theories. All of those individual decisions subsequently combined to reduce the overall non-progression rate.

7.9.3 Comparison of the SSM to Sally Kift's Whole of Institution Approach

Primarily, the evidence supports the SSM's efficacy. This section compares and contrasts how the SSM differs from Kift's (2009a) Whole of Institution approach. Differentiating between an institutional orientated approach to a faculty based one will be discussed. Further differentiation will be set out between the concept of "everybody's business" to that of the model's "team-based approach". Finally, the strong correlation on curriculum importance will be outlined.

7.9.3.1 Whole of Institution or Whole of Faculty Approach

Departmental improvements did not result from a whole of institution approach. Focus group participants identified that improvements occurred within the faculty. Institutional senior management did not meaningfully contribute or materially support the model's development. While the work of support services was acknowledged as a very important contributing factor,

interviewees made no case that changes to the nature of support services drove improvements in retention.

Given that a "whole of Institution approach" was not responsible for changes, focus is drawn to how these changes were achieved. In particular, determining how the foundation blocks of "Management led and driven" and the "Team-based approach" impacted model efficacy needs to be set out. Key questions emerge here. One question is whether a whole of institution approach is optimal or, if the necessary change needs to originate from within individual academic units such as faculties or departments. A related question is who should lead the roll out of projects seeking to reduce retention?

As described in Chapter 3, teaching pedagogy (TP) was introduced in the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) as a top-down initiative emanating from a strategic priority in 2002 (Kift, 2004). Despite some terminology related reservations, staff focus groups believed faculty managers, particularly HODs, led the model.

Besides this being stated overtly, there were further indirect affirmations from this perspective. In the context of enhancing the Business and Law programme, law lecturers indicated that a focus was put on "enhancing the student experience" and that "funding was made available" (Lecturer C, LG1). Faculty managers initiated both focus and support. Similarly, the student experience, recalled by the former students about the field trip to Arigna Mines, was described positively by a lecturer, who placed importance on the fact that the department had paid for it. Again, this funding was approved at HOD level.

Faculty managers regretted the lack of senior management support for the model. This supports that the optimum approach involves all the institution. Yet there are not obvious examples from the literature base where the full organisational approach has reduced attrition to the extent of what has been recorded in the DB&M.

By seeking to apply the language of Kift, perhaps the SSM was a "whole of faculty" approach. Such terminology implies the DOF and HODs provided leadership in the context of AIT's structure. The leadership implication associated with Kift's "whole of Institution approach" is that senior management leads it. Given the improvement associated with the SSM, it is worth considering the management and leadership associated with it.

In the Athlone IT context, academic managers such as Deans and HODs exert significant influence on programme delivery and priorities within their units. The Dean allocates resources, drives the strategic agenda and can lead out on certain priorities. In the case of the SSM, the dean always

placed it towards the top of the agenda. He managed the parents' evening, the LDHE community of practise besides most of the team building events. He also supported other actions.

HODs decided what staff to roster in first-year. They were responsible, along with lecturers, for curriculum development and assessment strategies, especially during the 2015 programmatic review. They allocated funds from the departmental budget for guest speakers and field trips. Specific to the SSM, they conducted student interviews, led out on the student briefings, always used an open-door policy and managed all aspects of the habit-forming pillar. Lecturers in particular were keen to acknowledge the involvement of HODs in many other aspects of the model's implementation, over the time-span.

This model could be held as an example of how a whole of institute of approach might not be mandatory in achieving improved student progression. However, the concept of senior management support is important to consider. Faculty managers decided to prioritise student success themselves. They did, however, regret the lack of resources made available to continue the model's development. An unwelcome potential challenge that emerges aligns with an issue identified by Kift (2008) is that the model is based on the actions of individual champions and might not end up as being sustainable in the future.

7.9.3.2 *Team-based Approach or Everybody's Business*

Sharing responsibilities between both academic and professional staff in order to create a shared vision of the first-year experience is central to the concept of "Everybody's Business" (Kift, 2008). Introducing the team-based approach was greatly influenced by this concept. As outlined above, the concept of "everybody's business" was not achieved by the SSM at the institutional level, but rather within the individual faculty. A question therefore arises reflecting on the similarities and differences between "everybody's business" and a "team-based approach".

Based on focus group feedback, the team-based approach created a shared vision within the team. All staff participants articulated that all of the model's actions sought to enhance the student experience and reduce retention. This shared vision wholly complements the concept of "everybody's business", as described in Chapter 3.

An additional aspect brought by the team-based approach was that faculty staff knew their role in achieving the vision. Individual staff focus groups were all extremely clear on their own roles and expected contributions. They recalled events from their own role's perspective. Managers recalled their direct efforts in student-facing interventions. They also talked about their role supplementing wider measures.

Lecturers were keen to focus on delivery, programme structure, assessments, feedback and many other elements for which they contributed to the faculty effort. Administrators offered insights into the model's ingredients where they supported management and lecturers, besides their student-facing role, where they regularly provided students with the first point of contact with the department.

Evidence suggests that the SSM achieved that shared vision among the staff. Interviewees in all the staff focus groups acknowledged a retention focused team-based approach was very evident and effective. Participants were keen to acknowledge the work of others, albeit not always fully aware of the extent of their colleagues' work. Not including the role played by the administrative team was viewed as a modelling weakness by participants.

Depicting the responsibility of retention as "everybody's business", Kift successfully placed an emphasis away from individual champions. By providing clarity of their roles to model participants, the model's team-based approach has potentially built on the concept of "everybody's business." While each individual staff participant held their own perspective and attitude towards the model, they had no ambiguity about the role that they themselves performed in its operation.

Having that clear role understanding potentially surpasses the concept of the shared vision. Each staff member executed their role. Individual staff member's work within the model contributes towards the total model output. It operationalises it from theoretical aspiration where the individual knows the issue is important, towards operational implementation where individuals execute their tasks, to achieve a clearly defined set of aims.

What was not achieved was a potential third step of the team-based approach. All team members largely understood the model fully and how their particular role contributed to its efficacy. Awareness of the input of others was lacking. While all participants were aware everyone from the faculty was involved, details of activities were only understood, to a large degree, by faculty managers. In the timeframe under evaluation, this difference might be negligible, but from a longer-term perspective, the danger identified by Kift (2008) that the academic managers were effectively champions without whose input the model would become unsustainable if the champions moved on.

7.9.3.3 The Role of Curriculum

Central to the teaching Pedagogy (TP) approach described by Kift (2015) is the importance of the curriculum to the first-year experience. Structural and content changes to programmes,

introduced in the DB&M during programmatic review 2015, sought to improve the first-year experience. Lecturers were keen to stress the importance of the changes to programmes and how they enhanced student retention. As outlined above, this was particularly evident in the Business & Law programme.

Innovations in teaching and learning by lecturers were very prominent, especially in the two lecturer focus groups, but also from the perspectives of the management, administrators, and student participants.

Kift (2015) asserts that the curriculum is what all students have in common and is within institutional control. It is worth examining specifically how curriculum is developed or controlled. During the timeframe under consideration, curriculum within the DB&M was effectively controlled by individual programme boards, constituted for each programme residing within the department. Oversight primarily came from the DOF. The college wide academic council and its sub-committees exercised institutional oversight.

Curriculum control resided within the department. As evidenced by qualitative data, enhancements came from within the department. Again, the question about the level within a higher education institution, where a project that can successfully increase student retention should be housed, led and driven from.

7.10   MODEL SHORTCOMINGS

7.10.1   Issues Arising from Modelling

In essence, the SSM attempted to assign a graphical representation to a faculty wide student retention project. Participants agreed the model was a genuine and legitimate attempt to accurately reflect that project. Interviewees raised several issues concerning the model's graphical depiction, separated from their perception of the retention project, it represented.

Modelling reservations arose in several areas. The foundation blocks held different meanings for different participants. Staff members did not fully endorse them. The role of organisational culture and roles performed by individuals or groups did not generate a consensus among participants.

The underlying principle meant different things to participants. Only one of sixteen staff participants shared the researcher's perspective on the underlying principle. A common understanding never emerged. From the staff's perspective, the contribution of the model's underlying principle is questionable.

Any consideration given to the model's future will need to address this point. It is possible to hypothesise that including an underlying principle is an imperative given the high level of students entering third level, who have been subjected and encouraged towards rote learning (Department of Education and Skills, 2013; Economic and Social Research Institute, 2019) to the extent they are ill-equipped for Higher Education (Hyland, 2011). Acceptance of the challenge arising from students' focus on rote learning requires an underlying principle to be included. With another recommendation made as to what the underlying principle might be, there is a strong case to revisit it from both a modelling and understanding perspective.

The other 2 foundation blocks were "management led & driven" and a "team-based approach". Modelling issues somewhat de-coupled from substantive issues emerged here as well. Staff participants didn't dispute that the model succeeded through the focus that faculty management placed on student retention, coupled with how the model was rolled out to and by the wider faculty team. Constructive suggestions about re-labelling these blocks emerged, such as using a "systems-based approach" (Lecturer G, LG2) label. Such a suggestion aligns with other views expressed by staff that the culture within the faculty and specifically the important role played by the administrators were not adequately modelled. Future evolution of the model may need to consider its graphical presentation in order to create a greater understanding of its workings.

7.10.2 Opportunities Regarding Gathering Business Intelligence on Students were Missed

An aspect of the SSM's evolution was that there were continuous efforts to enhance it at various intervals. Actions or interventions that were introduced through the model, such as students getting their first assignment on their first LDHE class, became embedded with a view of building a sustainable model. Creating a sustainable model would mean that issues such as a change in personnel managing the faculty or change in focus would not result in an increase in student attrition.

An identifiable shortcoming with the SSM was that there was no priority placed trying to identify students who were more likely not to progress. Many approaches could have been implemented to maximise the efficacy of the model and potentially help to further avoid student attrition. An obvious example would have been to identify students with no prior knowledge of their subjects, given the advantage that such prior knowledge brings (Hagedorn *et al.*, 1999; De Clercq, Pearson and Rolfe, 2001; Meyer and Shanahan, 2001; Madigan, 2006; Buskes and Belski, 2017). During the model's evolution, the team never considered the demographic or socioeconomic profile of the student body, particularly in relation to the students who dropped out.

In terms of prioritising aspects during the development phase of the model, the team implemented mechanisms in a manner similar to how Kift described students as having the curriculum in common. This concept could justify ignoring the profiling of students or putting in place a mechanism to identify students who are more at risk, either in advance or during the early stages of their studies. Such a claim, however convenient, is inappropriate because targeted interventions based on profiling might be more effective in identifying students most at risk. Once identified, resources could be then reallocated towards these students.

What limited information there is comes from the data collected in the student withdrawal forms. Yet within this category alone, of the 54 withdrawals over the lifetime of the evaluation, 20 students (37%) either did not complete the withdrawal form or left the explanation for leaving blank. The institute literally does not know why quite a significant minority of students withdrew. The largest response which was "did not like the course/ not suited" is very vague. It does not offer much through data to inform further improvements in student retention.

7.11   SSM's Enabling Factors

7.11.1   Organisation Culture

One of the emerging themes from the qualitative data gathered was how the established culture in the DB&M contributed to the model's efficacy. Such a culture can be contextualised in relation to the role of Institutional habitus (Thomas, 2002). She identified recurring themes for assisting students. These themes, outlined in Chapter 3, are worth considering again in order to find out if the pre-existing institutional habitus was overlooked in terms of its contribution to the model.

Indications from the former students who took part in this study strongly endorse the notion of a strong Institutional habitus in the department. Staff attitudes incorporating inclusive teaching and learning strategies were identified through examples of former students. Student Experiences mooting or on field trips speak to collaborative or socially oriented teaching and learning in a diverse array of social settings. Support for re-assessment and feedback from lecturers all align with the recurring themes that Thomas (2002) identified in addition to a later study (Meehan and Howells, 2018) citing how academic staff really matter to enhancing the student experience.

Divergence of opinion occurred between focus groups regarding the extent to which the SSM might be transferable to other settings. Lecturers indicated organisational culture sufficiently enabled the model to succeed, suggesting it could not be superimposed elsewhere. Other groups, who indicated that the model was proven to work and was easily transferable did not support this

view. If the model is to be transferred to other disciplines or institutions, then the extent to which organisational culture influences the model's utility is important.

7.11.2 Leadership

Emerging from this evaluation is the important theme of who exactly should lead a retention initiative, in order for such an initiative to be successful. Within the model, this issue was addressed in the foundation block entitled management led and driven. What the model did not consider specifically was which managers needed to lead and why. Participant consensus in the focus groups confirmed the model by necessity had to be led by HODs. The lack of support or leadership from senior management that participants identified suggests consideration be given to the concept that a retention project requires local level leadership to be successful.

While faculty managers drove the SSM, leadership in the initiative was evident from all the faculty staff. The management led & driven foundation block recognised the role managers played. Lecturers were recognised by the pillar on the role of academic staff. The HOD Emeritus and the students' services department are also model components. The Faculty administrators played a significant role in the development and implementation of the model and their contribution was not uniquely identified by the model. Participants contended that the organisation culture was not properly reflected in the model.

7.12   Conclusion to Discussion Chapter

All contributing findings related to the research questions associated with this study, have been considered. As outlined in the review of literature, student attrition is a challenging and complex issue. In all years of this evaluation, even when the non-progression rate was at its lowest, students still dropped out from their first-year in college. Each student who left college has their own individual circumstances that culminated with their departure.

One of the key questions, based on Tinto's (2006) assertion, posed throughout this evaluation and reiterated earlier in this chapter, is whether the SSM could be considered a substantial gain in student retention?

A considerable body of evidence presents itself to support the suggestion that the model's impact constituted a substantial gain in student retention. The model achieved its primary purpose of reducing attrition substantially within the DB&M. Statistically, there were sizable reductions in non-progression combined with high levels of improvement in academic performance. Statistical improvements were also recorded in the student body's performance during the autumn repeats.

Focus groups participants offered further evidence of a substantial gain in student retention. All focus groups were pre-disposed to the model. Regarding its impact on retention, all participants indicated that the model, at the very least, contributed to the reducing attrition, with significant participant numbers indicating the model drove the improvement.

The SSM largely builds on previous models or approaches. High levels of complementarity with the approaches of Astin, Tinto, and Kift have been established. As described earlier in the literature review, the topic of student retention is very broad.

Most of the actions and interventions introduced in this model were tried previously in other settings, and the model primarily complemented the majority of retention related discourse. While some actions, such as the one-to-one meetings and the deployment of the HOD Emeritus, were unique, it was not the uniqueness of these actions that made the model effective. Instead, the evidence suggests that a combination of tried and test mechanisms coupled with the introduction of some unique interventions caused attrition to fall.

Based on the explanatory sequential nature of this dissertation, a strong case emerges from the evidence that the impact of the SSM can be considered, having resulted in a substantial gain in student retention.

Assessing the role leadership played in the development of the model, it was commented on in both the management focus group and the administrative forces focus group that the leadership of the model resided largely within the faculty, primarily through both the former dean and especially the researcher. Participants indicated that the senior management within the organisation, though passively supportive, did not adequately drive or support the model. The participants also felt that there was an opportunity lost by senior management's decision not to build on the role out of the model and deliver it on an Institute wide basis.

One of the most striking elements of this chapter is the extent to which the model or its component elements complemented the literature base. Certainly, many components within the model, was built or developed upon previous theories or findings. Contesting previous findings was surprisingly sparse in this chapter.

Within the body of literature, there is more consensus than division regarding student attrition. This evaluation aligns with that. Positioning the SSM, in this context, raises the possibility that its formation has translated elements of theory into effective practice (Tinto, 2006). Potentially, its inception could be considered is a step towards a capstone of research published over many decades. Declaring a full capstone might be premature, given some of the shortcomings or

omissions identified in the preceding paragraphs. Positionality will be developed further in the final chapter.

The final chapter that follows will conclude this evaluation. It will show how the aims and objectives of this evaluation were met. Defining both the research's position and the implications of the study will be set out. Those implications will form the basis of several conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter 8 Conclusion and Recommendations

8.1 Introduction to Concluding Chapter

This dissertation's opening chapter clearly established the importance and context of student non-progression in Higher Education. It is a global problem that has been the subject of an array of reports, particularly in OECD countries. In the policy context of higher education, Ireland has identified measures it wants to see universities, colleges and institutes achieve in relation to both student success and non-progression (Department of Education and Skills, 2018).

There is a strong consensus that the causes of non-progression are wide ranging. Individual students drop out because of their particular set of circumstances. This dissertation's Chapter 3 reviewed a very wide base of literature, reflecting the broad nature of the topic.

Numerous publications focus on why students drop out of college. Many initiatives and mechanisms seeking to prevent or reduce attrition have been researched. Despite decades of research, however, there is little evidence to contest Tinto's (2006, p.2) assertion that "substantial gains in student retention have been hard to come by."

Within the broad sphere of student non-progression, this study sought to evaluate the impact that the SSM had in the AIT's Department of Business & Management.

In response to high rates on non-progression, managers from AIT's Faculty of Business & Hospitality sought to introduce measures to increase student retention from the first- to the second-year. Starting with conduct of one-to-one interviews with first-year student who had failed modules, the number of interventions increased to form a wider retention project.

The retention project developed over the timeframe. Further changes sought to enhance the first-year student experience. An SSM was devised to graphically represent the retention project. At this dissertation's outset, the model comprised 3 foundation blocks. It was a team-based approach. The model was management led and driven. A key component was the underlying principle that it takes four years to bring a student all the way to becoming an independent learner.

The three foundation blocks supported six pillars. These pillars were entitled student experience, student esteem, habit-forming, programme design, role of academic staff and student supports. These pillars comprised twenty-seven actions, interventions and measures.

Evaluating this SSM gave the opportunity to answer the research question of whether the SSM's impact in the Department of Business & Management over eight years can be considered a substantial gain in student retention.

To answer this research question, a mixed method explanatory sequential approach (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018, p.79) described in Chapter 4, was followed. This approach was used so model efficacy could be measured quantitatively with statistical trends, followed by the opportunity to explain those trends. That explanation was sought through qualitative data collection by conducting focus groups.

Presented in Chapter 5, the quantitative findings showed extensive improvement in most statistical sets. The impact that the SSM had, from the perspective of staff and former student participants, was set out in Chapter 6. Participants agreed the model increased retention. They offered their perspectives on both how and why that increase occurred. Chapter 7 subsequently integrated both data sets, offering explanations for the statistical trends.

This final chapter summarises what this study had revealed about the SSM. A main conclusion from the evaluation is presented below, besides several supporting supplementary conclusions.

A series of recommendations arising from this dissertation's conclusions will also issue. These recommendations offer advice to policymakers, individual institutions, faculties and departments that are seeking to reduce first-year non-progression.

This Chapter will describe this study's positionality in relation to the broad literature base, besides the models and approaches identified in Chapter 3. The potential significance of the research and the SSM will be set out.

In this chapter, limitations associated with the study will be identified, besides opportunities for further research. Both the chapter and the overall study will culminate with a final reflection and concluding remarks.

8.2 Evaluation Conclusion

8.2.1 Main Conclusion: The SSM Resulted in a Substantial Gain in Student Retention in the Department of Business & Management, over the Study's Duration

Based on the evidence, the SSM was extremely effective in accomplishing its goal of lowering student non-progression in the Department of Business & Management. Regarding metrics, non-

progression rates reduced substantially across the department, besides all of its programmes, over the selected timeframe.

In order to substantiate this main conclusion within this mixed method explanatory sequential evaluation, considerable evidence in drawn from both the quantitative and qualitative data. The SSM provided a catalyst for changes in student performance and rates of student non-progression. To measure those changes, four statistical indicators were identified and are now summarised.

8.2.1.1 The Change in the Official Student Non-Progression Rate Submitted to the HEA Annually

SSM efficacy is evidenced primarily through the 24% reduction in the departmental non-progression rate. This reduction is a substantial improvement. A 10% reduction in the three-year weighted average of non-progression also constitutes a substantial improvement.

At the programme level, all programmes improved their non-progression rates over the study's lifetime, in terms of three-year weighted averages. The largest improvement for a programme was recorded in the Level 8 Bachelor of Business, which saw a reduction of 35% in the non-progression rate, coupled with a reduction of 23% in terms of the three-year weighted average. Of the five programmes evaluated in this evaluation's final year, two programmes did not lose a single student and one programme lost only one student.

A particularly strong indicator regarding model efficacy was that the departmental non-progression rates fell by a significantly larger degree than institute rates over the same timeframe. This measurement shows that the department outperformed the institute.

A compelling case for the SSM, constituting a substantial gain in retention, in the evaluation's final year, is through comparison with the university sector. Universities do not offer Level 6 or 7 programmes. The only basis for comparison is the Level 8 provision.

None of the universities could reach the 2% non-progression rate achieved by the Department of Business and Management's Level 8 programmes.

Even on a once off, for the Department of Business & Management to have a lower non-progression rate in business Level 8 provision than the best performing university, University College Dublin (UCD) is hugely significant. Only students from the top 14.2% got into first-year commerce in UCD compared with students from the top 64.1% gaining entry to the Department

of Business & Management. Students entering the department of Business & Management were much weaker than their UCD counterparts.

Evidence of much weaker students having higher progression rates in the Department of Business and Management than leading universities completely confounds official reports (Higher Education Authority, 2018) and emphatically supports the finding that there was a substantial gain in student retention.

8.2.1.2 The Change in the Number of First-year Formal Student Withdrawals

Coinciding with what managers termed the habit-forming initiative employed at the start of the model's evolution, the early withdrawal rates fell. The department recorded the best results in the middle years of the timeframe when the rates were consistently under 4%. That level was not sustained with the worse year of 9.6% being recorded in year seven.

Focus groups noted that the numbers, as opposed to percentages, were low and therefore that it might not be statistically relevant. The more likely conclusion, however, is that as the model evolved beyond the habit-forming initiative, a dilution of focus on the habit-forming occurred.

What the data showed was the potential for reducing the withdrawal rate. The model did not sustain that level of reduction. A significant source of data regarding reasons for student withdrawal was lost. This loss was because of the large volume of withdrawing students not completing the withdrawal form.

Of students who withdrew, quite a large proportion did so because of issues outside the control of the model. Students cited reasons such as finance or health as grounds for withdrawal. External factors, such as the recovering economy and the availability of part-time jobs, may also have been significant in terms of increased levels in early withdrawals in the latter years.

8.2.1.3 The Change in the Nature of Student Performance

Measuring non-progression rates was obviously critical in this study. Perhaps a truer reflection of model efficacy was determined by measuring student performance. This study measured performance through the rate at which the student body passed the total number of modules offered.

At the departmental level, the rate at which student passed modules increased substantially by 23% over the lifetime of the study, with the three-year weighted average showing an improvement of 14%. As the model evolved, the level of student performance increased, further emphasising that the model utility was ascending.

Some trends recorded at the programme level depicted spectacular improvements. The 95% rate in the final year for the Level 8 Bachelor of Business represented a 29% improvement. All programmes offered across the department improved. Significantly, the Level 6 Higher Certificate in Business, which would have a low entry requirement in terms of CAO points, recorded a 20% and a 14% for the annual and three- year weighted rates, respectively.

8.2.1.4 The Change in the Pass Rate from the Autumn Repeat Exam Sitting of Students with Failed Modules

One of the most telling statistical trends related to student performance in the autumn repeat examinations. Both the rate at which students opted to take the second sitting, besides the pass rate of those who did, substantially improved. This improvement was more pronounced in this evaluation's final years.

Participation rates increased by 11%. Success rates of those who attempted the exams increased by 13%. Overall, the rate at which students who had failed exams over the first sitting and who later became eligible to progress improved by 18% over the lifetime of the study.

8.2.1.5 Qualitative Results Supporting Main Conclusion

Quantitative Findings allowed for a preliminary conclusion that a substantial gain in student retention had occurred over the timeframe. This improvement coincided with the introduction, development, and evolution of the SSM.

Augmenting the preliminary conclusion, the efficacy of the model and particularly why it was successful, was established by the qualitative data. The efficacy of the model, reducing the non-progression rates, emerged strongly from the focus groups.

Regarding their perceptions of the model and the first-year experience, participants responded favourably to the model's design. They said it positively impacted on student performance and non-progression. Not all the commentary was favourable. Participants identified aspects of provision that could be improved upon.

Participants indicated that there was no one single measure within the model that reduced attrition. It was a combination of some or all of the model's components that resulted in the favourable changes, outlined above.

Further details regarding the full evaluation of the model are set out below, forming the supplementary conclusions of the study.

8.2.2 Supplementary Conclusion 1: The SSM Reduced Departmental Non-progression because of the Totality of Measures

Causes of Student Non-Progression are varied and multiple. Reducing non-progression, therefore, requires solutions to be varied and multifaceted. Every decision, either of a voluntary or an involuntary nature, is based on each individual student's circumstances. Because there is no single reason all students leave, there is no single solution to act as a remedy.

A theme that strongly emerged from the qualitative data was that different students responded well to the different measures that were incorporated into the model. For some students, it was one individual measure, while for others, it took more than one measure to ensure their progression.

Participants were reluctant to identify real game changers that in their own right resulted in reducing the non-progression rate. Interviewees were also reluctant to dismiss the impact of any single model action.

The final two years of the model were the most successful in quantitative terms. Those years coincided with the timeframe in which the maximum number of measures and interventions were in place. Additionally, some of those measures had been refined or reimagined to make them more effective than when they were first introduced.

In reality, a percentage of students will always leave their chosen course in college. It is highly unlikely that there will ever be full progression to second-year in Higher Education. The opportunity for higher education institutions arises in mitigating some of the most common causes of attrition.

Central to this dissertation is an SSM, the aim of which is to minimise attrition and maximise student success. No participant claimed the model was perfect. The model evolved to three foundation blocks, six pillars, and twenty-seven actions. All component parts either deal with a specific issue supporting student retention or mitigate a circumstance contributing to departmental non-progression.

In the beginning, the goal of the faculty management was to reduce the level of attrition through a collection of interventions and actions that subsequently became the SSM. As the number of component parts increased, so too did the downward trend in the numbers dropping out of college. With momentum came more knowledge but also an understanding of just how complex and individual each reason behind a student "dropping out" represents.

8.2.3 Supplementary Conclusion 2: Some Interventions were Crucial to the Success of the Model

Model efficacy resulted from the cumulative impact of all the model's components. Notwithstanding this conclusion, some actions and interventions made a greater contribution to model efficacy than others did. This study identifies the interviews, the HOD Emeritus, feedback, and habit-forming as interventions that made a crucial impact.

Arguably the single most important intervention contributing to the model's success was the Interviews with students who failed first-year modules. Heads of Department conducted these interviews. The interviews were the first intervention aimed at increasing progression and these were conducted when faculty management learned how high the non-progression rates were.

Conducting these interviews sent a message out to the students that the college cared about their performance. Heads of Department would hold students to account for failing subjects but also look at what supports could be provided. Students reflected on their efforts and were often coached. Many students subsequently studied harder to avoid being called to attend such an interview. Heads of Department reported a feel-good factor after hosting the interviews. They reported they gathered information about their departments, which resulted in further interventions.

As the model developed, the managerial desire to further reduce non-progression increased. An evaluation of the interview was conducted. The big stick approach employed by the Heads of Department was replaced with a more nuanced, empathetic approach. Lecturers from the Business Psychology programme devised the new approach (appendix E). This new approach resulted in a better response from the students. Combined with other interventions, the progression rate improved further after the new approach was enacted.

Heads of Department noted that these interviews were extremely time-consuming for them. They did, however, regard them as extremely important. Not just in relation to information gathered about departmental provision, but also in fulfilling an unstated moral obligation to help students succeed.

Former students who took part in this study were keen to speak of how important the intervention was. It helped them to succeed. They described the intervention as "positive" and that it put them "in the right direction."

Both the concept of habit-forming and the associated early intervention were devised after information was gathered from students, during the first set interviews. These actions also made

a more significant contribution than other model measures. The early assignment placed an emphasis on creating good student habits from the outset.

Separate focus groups positively described the first assignment and associated interventions as getting students "to hit the ground running." Lecturers indicated that the Head of Department's early interventions with struggling students was a positive step. Despite recalling their shock at how early they got the assignment, former students were pleased that they knew where they stood at such an early juncture of their studies.

The researcher, in collaboration with other model's architects, presented a paper on what was then called the faculty's "habit-forming initiative" in 2015. Shortly after introducing that particular action, the rate of early student withdrawals reduced considerably. This reduction was not maintained, however, as the model evolved to include new actions and interventions.

During the development of the model, a senior lecturer, who had spent over 15 years as a Head of Department, was retiring on age grounds. Because of that individual's student centricity, the faculty employed him on a part-time basis, supporting student retention. His title was the HOD Emeritus. His active years coincided with the most significant level of improvement associated with the model.

The role the HOD Emeritus played was critical in improving the participation rates among the student population who had repeat exams to undertake, as well as the increased level of success of students who took these exams. In particular, he phoned every first-year student who failed and encouraged them to sit the exams. He explained how they should go about it, besides guiding individual students to support services or tutors, as required.

Evidence from the qualitative data supports the impact of the HOD Emeritus. One former student described him as fantastic. Lecturers referred to him as "the great Peter Melinn" who was "shepherding the lost sheep." They also recognised the role he played in keeping all the model's communication lines open.

All of this study's participants thought that feedback was important. The reason that feedback is one of the most critical interventions is based primarily on how valuable former students described it.

Graduates used terms such as feedback being a "core thing." They considered that an opportunity to re-submit after receiving feedback really pushed them to strive for a better result. Students learned about referencing from first-year feedback. Most significant was that knowledge learned

in first-year from receiving feedback, adequately equipped students for their subsequent years of study.

Lecturers also attributed importance to giving students feedback. They felt it encouraged a growth mindset amongst students and that feedback paved the way for students to subsequently submit better assignments and thus receiving higher marks. This facilitated students to approach their studies with a higher degree of confidence.

Feedback, as an action in its own right, should have been included in the SSM. This will be considered later in this chapter, as an element of the recommendation regarding re-modelling.

8.2.4 Supplementary Conclusion 3: The Model was very Student-Centric

A topic to emerge during the qualitative research was that of organisational culture. It did not feature prominently enough in the model, and a pro-student caring culture pre-dated the model's inception.

Based on the evidence, the most appropriate label for the organisation culture would be that it was student-centric. This underlying culture, besides the actions and interventions introduced, made the model very student-centric.

In the first instance, the measure of student-centricity can be assessed from this evaluation's former students' observations. Overall, they enjoyed their first-year experience and described the college as welcoming. Underpinning that level of welcome from the students' perspective was the informal nature of the college and the approachability of staff. They liked that everyone called each other by their first names, in addition to the ease with which they reported the availability of information about student support services.

Graduates recalled the college staff as everyone "making an effort". They believed the level of support offered to them in Athlone IT would not have been as strong in other colleges. Lecturers believed that they and Heads of Department were going "above and beyond" for the students.

Former students also provided the study with anecdotes supporting a strong level of student-centricity within the department. The graduate who recalled the high level of support he received, from a lecturer who he phoned at 9 o'clock the night before his first-year semester 1 exams, provides a compelling example of a very strong student-centric culture.

Recognising that staff were willing to go the extra mile was continuously put forward by former students. After recalling his attendance at an interview with the Head of Department, it was

interesting that the participant concluded that "they could have left it be, say nothing". Graduates gave acknowledgement to lecturers "keeping an eye" on a student who was struggling.

As providers, lecturers also believed it was very student-centric. They described the model with terminology such as belonging, connection, empathy, student-centered learning and many similar terms. They also viewed that the model was something around which students could gather.

Student-centricity in its own right would never have reduced non-progression. The contribution it gave to the underlying culture however, enabled the model to flourish, through the efforts of staff. That contribution was considerable.

8.2.5 Supplementary Conclusion 4: Retention Models Should be Led and Driven at Faculty Rather than Institutional Level

Given the volume of literature about retention published over decades, two key questions emerge. Why have substantial gains in student retention been so rare? Why are there not individual institutions long associated with reducing attrition? This study's evidence supports a hypothesis that increasing progression should be attempted at faculty and departmental level, as opposed to being driven by the institution.

This evaluation determined that the Faculty SSM resulted in a substantial gain in retention in an academic unit. All of this study's staff participants were clear that the leadership came not from institutional senior management, but from within the faculty.

The whole-of-institution approach (Kift, 2009a) and this model's team-based approach share many similarities. Use of this terminology would lead observers to conclude that senior management "buy in" is an essential ingredient if retention is to increase. This model, however, succeeded with no real support from senior management, to the frustration of some participants.

Not acknowledging the contribution of co-workers outside the faculty or to claim that improvements were achieved solely by faculty personnel would be disingenuous. Staff participants recognised and welcomed the enormous contribution of colleagues from the wider institution. Such colleagues included personnel from the student services department and the learning and teaching unit.

Over the timeframe, departmental non-progression rates fell to a greater extent than the institutional non-progression rates. The model required both actions and interventions at the central (institute level) and the local academic (faculty and department) level to succeed. Students benefitted from the fact the measures from both levels were integrated. It was,

however, changes to the approach within the faculty that caused the greatest level of improvement.

During this evaluation, it became clear why faculty, not senior managers, needed to be the architects and drivers of any retention initiative. Faculty managers are responsible for curricula management, engaging with students and can provide a link to support services.

MG1 was clear that "it has to be driven by someone who can affect change or get things done". In the SSM context, they offered that "it falls on the Head of Department". Lecturers also clearly supported the role of faculty managers "unless someone kind of brings us together from management and drives something, it just won't happen".

Managers allocate workload and priorities to both the administrative and academic staff. In this model, they deployed key staff to first-year. This identifies just some of their responsibilities. A Dean and Heads of Department exercise considerable influence over the extent to which faculty projects are prioritised.

Identifying faculty managers as the key leaders in driving student progression does not mean that there is no role for institutional senior management. Retention projects can be led out by a combination of senior managers and faculty leaders.

This study's participants offered that support from senior management would have enhanced the model. Senior managers can identify the strategic priorities for an organisation. They set targets for faculty managers. Senior management can allocate more funding to embed models. They also can incorporate incentives for managers reducing non-progression rates.

The requirement for senior management and the wider institution to play a role fully aligns with a whole- of-institution approach (Kift, 2009a). Reducing non-progression, however, won't necessarily result from institutional measures. This study offers that reducing attrition must be driven by academic units such as faculties and departments.

8.2.6 Supplementary Conclusion 5: A Team-based Approach Enabled the Model to Succeed

Teamwork was very important to this model's efficacy. The importance placed on teamwork is evidenced widely in the model. Two of the model's foundation blocks relate to staff roles. The first of these is the team-based approach. The model reflected the role that faculty managers played with the management led and driven foundation block.

An entire model pillar identified the role of the academic staff. The action "deployment of key staff" emphasised the important role lecturers undertook in delivering the first-year experience.

Incorporated into the student support pillars were actions highlighting the work of a wider team. These included the student services department, the HOD Emeritus and the tutors. Participant perspective held that the model did not adequately reflect the contribution of faculty administrators.

Sentiments offered by the management focus group endorsed the concept of teamwork. "That no one person can achieve all the aspects on their own" reflected an overall staff perspective. Lecturers not only acknowledged the role of teamwork, they judged it to be effective and recalled that the department was "very good at that."

Staff participants were keen to praise the role of other staff members. Lecturers, administrators, and managers involved in this study praised the impact of colleagues in different roles. Interviewees offered praise for co-workers from the student services department and other individuals involved in the model.

Students who enrolled in the department did not know the model even existed. They were never told about it. Graduate participants in this study expressed surprise at the level of planning associated with their first-year. It was really encouraging that so many of them recognised the extent of collaboration between lecturers. That such teamwork had so many positive benefits for these former students, was also really encouraging.

What the model perhaps underestimated was the nature of the team-based approach being the cumulative effect of many individual champions. The role of each individual champion in its own right is worthy of consideration in the final evaluation of the model.

Managers who drove change, lecturers who improved their delivery, every administrator acting as point of contact with first-year students, including the manner in which the HOD Emeritus conducted his role: All these team members were individual champions.

The constant low levels of non-progression in Business Psychology did not result from programme design alone, but also from how the lecturing team applied themselves to delivering it. The vast improvement in the last year of the Business and Law programme is also attributable to the work of individual champions. These particular champions introduced new modules in the programmatic review and enhanced the students' experience through introducing activities supporting the curriculum.

Teamwork enabled the model to reduce non-progression to the extent that it did. Without team members, the model could not have reduced non-progression. Acknowledgment of their role is central to understanding why there was a substantial gain in student retention.

8.2.7 Supplementary Conclusion 6: Enhanced Programme Provision Yielded Significant Results

The Bachelor of Arts in Business Psychology prioritised student retention during the programme development phase. Representatives from the institute's learning and teaching unit augmented the programme development team.

A combination of programme related factors enabled Business Psychology to consistently have the lowest non-progression rates. Front loading of material, most engaging for students to "grab their interest early on" had a big impact on retaining students.

The desire of the academic team to be programme champions was also evidenced in this dissertation. Several of the most compelling examples from this study's former students were about the work of the business psychology programme team. Trips to Arigna mines and networking coffee mornings were all organised by programme lecturers. In this study, the business psychology lecturers clearly articulated that they strived to deliver the model's components.

Business Psychology was an exception. The programme team designed it to engage students at the course development stage. Other programmes enhanced the experience for students, as this model was evolving. Emphasis on student retention, as part of the 2015 programmatic review, facilitated curriculum changes to the first-year of all the departmental programmes.

The course that non-progression improved, to the greatest extent, in any year was the Bachelor of Arts in Business and Law. During this evaluation's final year, the improvement was most pronounced. Structural changes introduced to this programme during the programmatic review sought to provide a better student experience.

Law lecturers introduced several measures to support the curriculum. Initiatives introduced included mooting, field trips to the courts, high-profile guest speakers such as the national public broadcaster's legal correspondent and the establishment of a FLAC (Free Legal Aid Clinic). These initiatives were all brought in to maximise a positive student experience. The lecturing team wanted to instil a love and desire of law among the students. Critically, all introduced measures complemented the curriculum.

Similar changes occurred in both business programmes and in digital marketing during the programmatic review. It reflected departmental learning, gleamed from developing Business Psychology, in these programmes. The revisit of the student performance, conducted in the

previous chapter, showed the large extent that student performance improved after the programmatic review.

Programmatic review also facilitates changes within individual modules. Innovations introduced by teaching staff in the delivery of first-year modules were critical in enhancing the student experience and lowering non-progression.

8.2.8 Supplementary Conclusion 7: Improved Student Performance in the Autumn Exams Contributed Significantly to Reducing the Departmental Non-Progression Rate

Student performance in the autumn exams really improved in the latter years of the model. This improvement was most pronounced in the final year. A higher proportion of students attempted this set of exams. Of those students who sat the exams, a higher proportion became eligible to progress than earlier in the timeframe.

Had the level of autumn exam student performance, remained at similar levels to the first three years of this evaluation, then the overall departmental non-progression rate would have been 19% as opposed to 12% in the final year. The contribution of the repeat exam performance, therefore, is very significant.

Included in the statistics presented earlier, in table 5.22, was the number of students who needed to repeat for each of this study's years. This number reduced over this study's duration because of the model's efficiency. Based on the statistical data gathered from the aggregate% of total modules passed (table 5.14), student performance had improved considerably by year eight.

The implication here, put forward during the focus groups, is that students had a reduced number of modules to repeat. Fewer students repeating, with fewer subjects to repeat, was a platform to successfully improve repeat sitting performance.

Building on this platform was a combination of traditional and new supports for repeating students. Traditional support services included tutors and the availability of notes on Moodle. New measures included enhancements to existing actions or the introduction of new interventions.

The students' briefing, despite being well established by that time, was enhanced with the aim of increasing motivation. Changing the nature of the student interviews to being more empathetic and supportive helped students. Deploying the HOD Emeritus who phoned, mentored, and offered tuition, significantly contributed to both the increased participation and better passing rates in the autumn exams.

There was no single measure which increased the autumn exam success rates, mirroring the overall model. Nevertheless, the impact of the student performance in the repeat examinations contributed significantly to lowering the non-progression rate.

8.2.9 Supplementary Conclusion 8: Reduction in Student Non-Progression Occurred Because of the Continuous Evolution of the SSM

As articulated during the focus groups, the model was constantly evolving. It was never static. Faculty management first intervened in February 2013 when Heads of Department interviewed students with failed modules. Consequently, measures supporting habit-forming were introduced.

Throughout this evaluation's timeframe, faculty managers introduced various new measures as the retention project gained momentum. Other actions were reflected upon and changed to enhance the student experience, to a greater degree. Participants felt this was necessary as "the model can't be static, it has to evolve."

Statistical data gathered in this study supports that incremental improvement occurred over several years. The departmental non-progression rate declined annually on five occasions, over the years under consideration. An annual increase in this rate was recorded only once. Using three-year weighted averages, a steady downward trend emerged supporting the idea of ongoing reductions in non-progression. In essence, the model was improving and student performance improved with it. Because of the nature of student attrition, many of the trends were not perfectly linear but moved in a positive direction over time.

Further evidence was found in accounts offered by staff participants that there was constant reflection and development of model components. One of the law lecturers recalled, the focus was placed on the student experience in 2015/2016. She subsequently offered that it was 2017/2018 before "it had really taken off."

8.2.10 Supplementary Conclusion 9: The SSM Needs to Evolve Further

Notwithstanding the successful nature the model had in reducing departmental non-progression, it is neither complete nor finished. Work must continue if improvements in student performance are to be maintained or enhanced. Because of variables such as increased participation in higher education and technological advances, the student body will continue to change. Incoming first-year students will need new measures to maximise their opportunity to persist in college.

Focus group participants never described as perfect any action or intervention in this study. The model can improve on all measures. Actions that underachieved, such as the parents' evening,

the team-building exercise and the PASS system, would need to be prioritised for evaluation and subsequent overhaul.

Much of this evaluation centred on presenting arguments from statistical trends in several student performance measures. Many of the data sets presented in Chapter 5, such as the autumn sitting statistical set, were viewed for the first time after the period under evaluation. It would have been most valuable to managers to have had these statistics at a much earlier juncture.

Interventions could have been introduced earlier in the timeframe, potentially with greater impact. The measures to enhance autumn performance were introduced because managers suspected there was a problem. Their suspicions were well-founded. Had the data been available during the period, they would have known it for certain. For the SSM to improve, key statistical sets will have to be made available to all staff participants in a timely fashion.

Enhanced accuracy of data is also required for the model to improve. The department lost considerable data from students not filling out the withdrawal forms. Such information could enable the identification of key information about student departure choices. Potentially, new measures at the programme or departmental level could be constructed based on this data and information.

Further data from student behavioural analytics in real time can also be incorporated into the model. Interviewees made such a point in the management focus group relating to the theme of model evolution. Analytics related to student access to the library and Moodle VLE analytics are examples of what can to be included, as part of an analytics umbrella, in future iterations of the model.

Further aspects which could identify students who might need support earlier in their studies did not form part of the model. The secondary school they came from, whether they were first generation participants, their socio-economic groupings or geographical consideration, are just some indicators that could identify students most at risk. If individual students could be profiled as having a greater risk of dropping out, the department could introduce an earlier tailored intervention for such particular cohorts, to maximise their chances of completing college.

An aspect of the habit-forming initiative was the allocation of the first assignment. The department utilised results from this assessment as an early warning mechanism to identify students who had not formed the habits that the faculty hoped they would. Only students who failed to submit or failed the assignment experienced the associated early intervention.

There was never an attempt to establish a correlation between an individual student's result in that first assessment with their entire set of first-year results. This represents another future opportunity to enhance the model. Developing indicators on pre-existing model elements could facilitate further development of the model's early interventions.

Graphically, the SSM did not fully capture the essence of the faculty's wider retention project. The underlying principle was not understood and added little value to the project itself. There was little understanding of the model outside the faculty.

Lack of senior management support was lamented and identified as a key weakness. Graphically, the model also failed to capture the departmental culture or the role of the administrators. The extent to which the SSM needs to be re-modelled will be addressed subsequently as part of the recommendations.

The department must take responsibility for programme information offered to potential students before commencing their studies. A strong sense emerged from this study that incoming students did not understand the social media and digital marketing programmes. Participants attributed higher levels of non-progression to that misunderstanding. Improving the model should incorporate this, ensuring that incoming students have all the accurate information they need about the programme they are going to study.

8.2.11 Supplementary Conclusion 10: The Manner in which the HEA Measures Non-Progression is Justifiable

The method by which Ireland's Higher Education Authority (HEA) measure non-progression rates was described in Chapter 1. That Chapter offered a focus on the limitations and anomalies associated with the statistical data. Table 1.1 offered a comparison between two notional departments in order to further explore the potential for statistical anomalies.

Consistently flagged throughout this dissertation is that the non-progression rate might somewhat understate overall student drop off rates from first-year programmes. The understated nature arises as non-progression rates don't include the numbers of student withdrawals occurring annually before March 1st.

Offsetting the potential understatement of "drop-out" rates outlined above is the impact of positive attrition. Measured in the Department of Business & Management, at an average of 3% over this study's timeframe, positive attrition goes somewhat towards counteracting the impact on the total number of dropouts resulting from early withdrawals.

Evidence from this study's primary research support that the method employed by the HEA is indeed a good indicator of the real drop-out rate. Most formal withdrawals occur in September and October. During these months, students can sometimes take up places on other programmes, either within the same institution or at another college. Categorised as withdrawals, this cohort are not dropouts.

Determining the extent to which the overall level of early withdrawals is offset by the combination of students' changing programmes and positive attrition, is nearly an impossible task without introducing a national tracking system. The likelihood is there is not full offset and that the total levels of students leaving first-year are somewhat understated.

Most important to consider is that the HEA's measure has remained consistent since the inception of the "Study of Progression" series. Such a consistent approach makes it possible to evaluate trends in student non-progression. Measuring progress within and between higher education providers, is enabled, as well as allowing for trends within disciplinary fields to be presented.

The method provided the initial data that was the catalyst for the retention project in the business discipline in Athlone IT. From that retention project, the SSM resulted. The non-progression rate remained the primary basis that the academic managers used to record progress throughout the project.

8.3 Positionality of the Study and Implications

This research has several implications. The SSM provides an example of a substantial gain in student retention in the context relating to Tinto (2006).

In the same article which Tinto evaluated progress in student retention over a forty-year period, he identified that "there is much we have not yet done to translate our research and theory into effective practice" (Tinto, 2006 p.2).

Research findings supports that the SSM successfully translated theory into effective practice. It provides a good example of a project of non-progression reduction and student performance improvement. Many model implementations were similar to aspects found in the mainstream literature.

A unifying theme within the literature was the understanding that each student is different. As a result, both causes and remedies regarding student attrition are necessarily multifaceted and varied. That multifactorial nature was very clear in the breadth of literature reviewed. As

identified in Chapter 3, many of the actions and interventions incorporated into the SSM were similar to measures, identified in the literature.

The model draws on previous models and approaches put forward by Astin, Tinto, and Kift. Complementing Astin's IEO model and Student Involvement theory, the model introduced new measures to change students' environment and increase their involvement.

Describing the college as welcoming, former students confirmed the model assisted towards their successful integration into first-year. Model components such as team building, feedback and the academic staff influenced students to continue their studies. This evidence aligns with Tinto's longitudinal model of institutional departure (Tinto, 1993).

This study gave careful consideration to comparing the model's approach at the faculty level with the "whole-of-Institution" approach (Kift, 2009a). This research has shown that reducing non-progression came from a project, at faculty rather than institutional level. Faculty managers drove the successful model. Such an approach has not previously been identified in the literature.

A case can be put forward that the team-based approach built on the foundation of what (Kift, 2008, pp19-20) described as "everybody's business". Such a case arises from the fact that team members knew the role they played, but also knew their endeavours were contributing to a larger project.

Central to both the SSM and the TP approach advocated by Kift (2015) is the importance of curriculum. The revisiting of the quantitative data showed considerable improvement in student performance after the programmatic review. Curricula changes introduced in all programmes were focused on the student experience and retention. This study therefore aligns with Kift's call that "academics must step up and leverage the curriculum and its delivery to influence the experience of all students and to make equitably explicit the implicit rules and expectations of disciplinary engagement and success" (Kift, 2015, p.69).

Aspiring to contribute uniquely to theory and knowledge was one of this evaluation's goals. Based on its efficacy, the model serves a blueprint for others seeking to implement retention strategies, to follow. It complements the body of literature, having successfully unified and incorporated much of that literature into a single model.

Many unique interventions were introduced as the model developed, some interventions were evidence-based, others initiated by managerial intuition. This research has established the importance of some of those unique interventions which will contribute further to the body of literature.

A significant differentiating feature of the model was the level of enhanced provision derived from the totality of measures. The SSM facilitated the complementarity of those measures, their inter-relationship, and subsequent impact.

No evidence of a model with so many components, or with a high-level of efficacy was found in the literature. This study's most significant contribution to theory and knowledge, as identified in Chapter 3, is achieved through the provision of the same.

8.4 Recommendations

8.4.1 Recommendation 1: Every Higher Education Faculty and Department Should Develop an SSM

In Ireland, the National Strategy for Higher Education requires institutions to have a student success plan (Department of Education and Skills, 2018). Based on this study's findings, student success strategies need to be developed at local academic levels.

This study's substantial gain in student retention was at a departmental level. The model helped more students progress into second-year within the Department of Business & Management. On an individual student level, this is a potential life changing opportunity.

There is also a considerable moral argument that all HEIs should have an SSM. Any institution which enrols students surely has a societal obligation to make sure they leave no stone unturned to ensure those students succeed.

Faculty managers must lead an SSM. Similar to this study, they need to deliberately prioritise increasing student progression. Determining the priorities often is at a Dean's or a Head of Department's discretion. Establishing and maintaining progression as a priority in any academic unit will always have its challenges, especially with competing priorities such as research funding.

Faculty managers lead their staff. They can create the environment for a team-based approach similar to that which enabled this model's success. An optimal environment where staff listen and debate is the perfect setting to empower all team members to embrace on delivering any potential model.

One of this dissertation's disappointing results was that gains in reducing early withdrawals were not maintained. Faculty management incorrectly assumed the actions introduced were embedded, enabling a shift in managerial focus to prioritise introducing new model actions.

Without either managerial priority or a suitable process or resource in place to support the action, the early win was not sustained. For future models, resources must be put in place where required to embed any model.

This evaluation proved that non-progression can be achieved without support from senior management. Such support, however, would make the establishment or development of future models more likely to succeed. Critical is the role senior managers play in recruiting academic managers.

When senior management recruit and select Deans of Faculty or Heads of Department they have to consider the criteria for selection reflects both the wide range of competencies required (Mohamed Jais, Yahaya and Ghani, 2021), and the wide-ranging responsibilities associated with the role (Arntzen, 2016). In order to prioritise student retention, part of the selection process and mechanical marking scheme should focus on candidates' experience of retention strategies. Once appointed, senior management should incentivise selected personnel to ensure retention continuously remains prioritised.

Policy makers should provide a funding reward for faculties which can show improvement arising from an SSM in a manner similar to what has been demonstrated in this study.

8.4.2 Recommendation 2: A Statistical Data Hub Should Inform Management Decisions

This entire study constituted a historical evaluation of the SSM. The quantitative statistics, presented in Chapter 5, sought to measure model efficacy. At its very inception, the genesis of the model was a reaction by faculty management to poor non-progression rates. At that time, non-progression rates were an evidence-based indicator of a problem. Faculty management's response to the evidence presented culminated in the model.

Some statistics, such as departmental and programme non-progression rates, were published internally at regular intervals, as the model was developed. Such statistics continued to inform how the model progressed. Other statistical sets, however, were sought by the researcher at various stages. Some sets were sought almost three years after this study's final first-year student cohort was registered.

The data measuring student participation and performance in the autumn examinations sitting was presented in Chapter 5. This is an example of a statistical set that was gathered for the first time retrospectively. The researcher specifically sought those statistics to determine the efficacy of specific actions introduced to increase student pass rates in the autumn.

When analysing those statistics for the first time, the researcher was very surprised that the success rate in the repeats was only in the low 50s, for the first four years. The increase to over 70% in the final year also came as a surprise.

Had statistical evidence such as the success levels in the repeat examinations been available to the model's architects from the beginning, measures incorporated into the final three years might have been introduced earlier. The statistics posed a question as to the adequacy of the support concerning the repeat examination sitting.

Creating a student success data hub that informs decision makers of key statistical trends in a timely manner can really help lower non-progression. Programme co-ordinators, Heads of Departments and Deans of Faculty can all respond to shortcomings identified through data sources.

Primarily, the data hub should include performance analytics. Such a data hub would generate similar statistical sets to the contents of Chapter 5. Data could be extracted directly from the banner system. Academic managers could see at what point students are leaving their programmes. They might pose and answer questions about what they could do about it.

Other types of data could be added incrementally to any data hub, enabling more evidence-based decisions. Student experience and attitude analytics gathered from the Irish Study of Student engagement (ISSE), referred to earlier in this dissertation, should also be included in any data hub.

To mitigate the opportunities lost in this study from not having a greater focus on data, any data hub should include two further data categories. Learning analytics, including data from a broad range of sources, such as library usage, canteen usage, and especially Moodle VLE usage, need to be included.

Finally, a student data hub should aspire to including some student profiling analytics. This seeks to establish a profile of the students most at risk. Examples of profile analytics include socio-economic indicators, schools attended, geographic considerations, etc.

This recommendation strongly complements a recommendation included in the report entitled Understanding and Enabling Student Success in Higher Education. Included in the theme of evidence-based decision making was the following recommendation:

> Develop institutional data strategies that maximise the value of institutional and learner data as a strategic and learner-centred resource (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2019, p.20).

Not all relevant information comes from statistical data. The value of soft qualitative data gathered informally should not be de-valued by creating a data hub. The habit-forming initiative developed early in the model's development came from Heads of Department listening to students during the interviews. No statistical data hub could impart information of that nature.

8.4.3 Recommendation 3: Emphasis Must Be Placed on Curriculum Design to Maximise the Student Experience and Minimise Attrition

One of this study's most interesting findings is that the programme, designed at the outset to maximise student progression, the Bachelor of Arts in Business Psychology, was by far the best performing programme in terms of student retention.

Front loading the most relevant and interesting subjects, the provision of excellent guest speakers, an assessment strategy to support transition, were just some of the programme components introduced during the development phase. These components contributed to the performance.

Evidence of an increased level of student performance in the aftermath of the programmatic review adds to the importance of the curriculum. The programmatic review prioritised retention and the student experience and subsequently delivered on that priority.

The locus of a successful and sustaining first-year experience must be the curriculum and its framing of student learning and engagement (Kift, 2015, p.68). Every new programme should be designed to maximise student retention without compromising on the quality of provision or the subsequent standard of graduates.

Many programmes have been constructed in higher education establishments across the world. Programme design tends to follow a formula. The extent to which academics, in the business education context, would accept that the first-year of a business programme would not have to include accounting 101 or economics 101, is very questionable.

Even considering that modules such as these, where students consistently struggle, could be delivered later in the programme when students are more established, might be too considerable a change for academics to accept.

8.4.4 Recommendation 4: The SSM Needs to be Re-modelled

A theme that has emerged during this study, relates to how the retention project is graphically represented by the SSM. The model itself needs to be reconsidered.

To accurately reflect the project, there must be some reference to organisational culture. The underlying culture or institutional habitus (Thomas, 2002) was favourable to students. Given the importance of culture and staff effort identified in this study, it is imperative that any future model iteration reflects this.

Of all of the model's elements, the underlying principle was the least understood or relevant from the participant's perspective. The sentiment of the principle that it takes time for students to develop is still important. Re-wording or changing the underlying principle so that it is easily understood must be a priority of a future re-modelling.

Minor graphical adjustments, such as the inclusion of feedback as an action in its own right, must also be undertaken. This would de-couple feedback from the timely fashion of feedback from early assignments. Such a de-coupling would facilitate focus on the quality and nature of feedback provision. A further adjustment to reflect the role of the administrative team is also required.

8.4.5 Recommendation 5: Institutions Need to Consider and Improve Student Performance in Repeat Examinations

Every Higher Education Institution can measure participation and success rates in autumn sittings. They should do so. First-year is recognised globally as the most difficult for retaining students. Despite the wide array of supports that colleges have, the weakest first-year students fail. Failing has consequences for first-year students in terms of esteem, confidence and belief.

In this study, students benefitted from small interventions such as a phone call or an interview with a Head of Department. They received reminders of what support services were in place. Students participated and passed at higher rates.

Replicating the interventions of years seven and eight of the model would be a difficult task for any institution. Most departments could not resource a HOD Emeritus who brought a unique individual approach and expertise that others, in a similar role, might fail to bring. Similarly, as presented in Chapter 6, student interviews were very time-consuming for the Head of Department.

Modern technology offers much in this regard. A text or series of texts to repeat students is easy to establish and implement. A phone call from anyone in the institute can make all the difference to an individual student. It is imperative institutions take some measures given the importance of autumn exam performance established in this study.

8.5 Study Limitations

Contextualising changes in students' wider external environment did not form part of this study. Participants referenced some environmental changes during the focus groups. Considerable change took place in an Irish economic context. Over this study's timeframe, the economy was experiencing recovery from a deep recession. Any potential impact of that economic recovery has been briefly but was not fully considered as part of the disconfirming evidence. It was also outside the scope of what the model set out to achieve.

From this study's quantitative perspective, only first-year student performance was considered. The SSM achieved its immediate aim in reducing first-year non-progression. It is, however, important to recognise that student performance in later years was not included in this study.

The longitudinal impact of increased participation in the second-year could yield several potential outcomes. One outcome is that more students completed their studies through to graduation. Alternatively, the impact could yield an unwelcome outcome, recording higher attrition rates in the subsequent degree years. During these years, students are required to demonstrate critical thinking through independent learning.

This study evaluated first-year performance on a pass/fail basis only. The research did not measure if more students achieved higher grades, such as first-class honours.

From a qualitative perspective, a key study limitation was that students who dropped out during the timeframe's final years were not interviewed as part of this dissertation. Consequently, establishing if there were measures excluded from the model that could have prevented their individual non-progression was not established.

A key consideration at every point of this study was researcher bias. Describing a success story was in his interest. It might reflect well on him as the chief architect of the model's development. The quantitative data, which was largely gathered independently of the researcher, initially mitigated this bias. Further measures mitigating potential bias, described in Chapter 4, were taken during the qualitative phase that ensued.

8.6 Further Research Opportunities

Fundamentally, this research project has established that the SSM was fit for purpose. It reduced the non-progression rate in the Department of Business & Management from 36% to 12%. A complex challenge such as student attrition required a multifaceted approach.

The model's efficacy lay in its multifaceted nature. Further research opportunities arise from further evaluations of some of the model's individual components. Unique actions or interventions such as the interviews with first-year students offer further research opportunity.

The hypothesis that retention models are best driven at the local level rather than the institutional level, supported by this study's evidence, needs further research. Research establishing if so many institutions have not succeeded in reducing attrition rates, due to projects being led at the institutional level, could be ground-breaking.

From the perspective of model transferability, there is potential for further research. The most compelling would be to transfer this model to an academic unit that provides business education in a different institution. A separate opportunity would be to evaluate the model's impact if adopted in another academic unit, with an entirely different disciplinary focus.

An additional smaller scale institutional level research project presents itself by introducing and evaluating the impact of actions to improve participation and performance in the repeat examinations.

8.7 Reflection

From a learning perspective, the researcher gained significantly both from his involvement with the SSM and, subsequently, undertaking this evaluation. For an altruistic educator, leading the development of a model that reduced student non-progression from first- to second-year is extremely rewarding. This is especially relevant in the context that institutes of technology widened higher education participation in non-traditional sections of Irish society.

Model efficacy and undertaking this dissertation, enabled the researcher to change roles. He was appointed as Head of Transitions and Student Success as AIT, was becoming a component part of the Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest.

A PhD journey is very similar to the first-year experience featured in this thesis. Different students face different challenges. For this researcher, the most difficult element was the juggling of work, life and PhD balance.

There was an unlikely saving grace: The unwelcome Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns resulted in an increase of time available to the researcher, to dedicate to this study. Commuting time, over ten hours per week, became available while working from home. Parental duties associated with music and sport were involuntarily suspended or delegated online.

The learning journey was both enjoyable and excruciating. Fear of failure, a constant companion. It often felt like walking with a heavy backpack, curtailing the everyday freedom of stride.

Much of the data gathered surprised the researcher. He underestimated the model's level of impact. So too the associated implications. Gaining a greater understanding of the model's efficacy and utility was probably the most uplifting aspect of the study.

8.8 Concluding Remarks

The SSM is one of the best examples of how student non-progression can be reduced in a Higher Education setting. It is likely that many academic and support staff in Higher Education institutions will be interested in this dissertation's findings.

By way of dissemination, the researcher presented on how the model was evolving at the European First-year Experience Conference (EYFE) in Cork, in June 2019. It was well received and offered three major advantages.

Presentation of the model assisted the completion of the narrative account in Chapter 2. It offered the audience an opportunity to comment on, as well as challenge aspects of the model, developing the researcher's perspective. Finally, it initially gave the researcher further invitations to present at international conferences.

These invitations were not availed of, primarily because of the Covid-19 restrictions. In all likelihood, these invitations remain open and will be accepted to disseminate this study's findings. Peer-reviewed publications formulated from this study will be prioritised.

The SSM constituted a substantial gain in student retention. It was developed within a faculty rather than at an institutional level. Led by faculty management, its success is owed to a team-based approach, enabled by a student-centric culture. The broad nature and model totality improved non-progression. Key interventions augmented this totality within the model, maximising its efficacy. Most importantly, the human context: The SSM facilitated the progression of so many students to second-year of their studies with potential life changing consequences.

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Student Success Model / AIT – Faculty of Business and Hospitality

- Deployment of key staff in first year
- Teaching and learning qualifications
- Provision of feedback on first assessment in a timely manner
- LDHE community of practice
- Teaching Innovation
- Teamwork at programme board level
- Role of academic staff
- Moodle VLE analytics
- Developing graduate attributes
- Assessment strategy and calendar of assessments
- Programme design
- First assessment: time-consuming and easy to achieve high marks
- Assessments at regular intervals during early phase of programme
- Early intervention for poor performing students
- Habit forming
- Student induction
- Briefing for students with failed modules
- Student esteem
- Management Led & Driven
- Team Based Approach
- Underlying principle: it takes four years to bring a student all the way to fully becoming an independent learner
- Use of motivational techniques
- Interviews with students who have failed first year modules
- HOD emeritus
- PASS
- Open door policy
- Tutors
- Student Supports
- AIT Connect
- Student experience
- Lunch for high performers
- Team building event
- Guest speakers
- International/ Domestic Field Trips
- Student services
- Parents' evening

Appendix B: AIT Withdrawal Form

Student Withdrawal Form, Academic Year_____

It is recommended that you discuss your decision to Withdraw with your Head of Department/ Lecturers/Student Resource Centre/Careers Officer/Course Tutor before you complete form.

Student Name:

_____

Student Number: _____ Mobile No: _____

Course Title & Year: _____

I am withdrawing from the above programme on (last date attended) ____ / ____ /_____

This is your official withdrawal date and will be referenced in all official correspondence.

Reason for Withdrawal (Please tick where appropriate)

Employment (01)		Apprenticeship (02)	
Financial Reason (06)		PLC Course, Other IT/ Third Level College (03)	
Medical (10)		Did not Like Course/Not Suited to Course (11)	
Other Reason (09) Please State:			

Full Time Students

Have you paid the Student Contribution of € 3,000   Yes [ ]   No [ ]

On a Student Grant (SUSI/VEC)   Yes [ ]   No [ ]

You are responsible for informing the awarding body of your withdrawal

You are responsible for informing the awarding body of your withdrawal

- *Students who return this form before 31st October are entitled to a refund of the Student Contribution fee.*
- *If you withdraw after 31st October and return to full time third level education in the future you may be liable for additional fees.*
- *A Student can formally withdraw up to the 30th of April.*

STUDENT CARD MUST BE RETURNED WITH THIS FORM

Student signature: _____   Date: _____

Head of Department: _____   Date: _____

This form should be returned to: Registration Dept., AIT, Dublin Road, Athlone

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FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

Entered by: _____   Date: _____

Letter Issued [ ]   Bank A/C Details Submitted [ ]   ID Card Returned [ ]

Athlone Institute of Technology
Internal Audit Student Retention Review

2017/OP01
May 2017

Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT)

Internal Audit Student Retention Review

Date: 03 Apr 2017

Ref: 2017/OP01 Internal Audit Student Retention Review

Report Distribution
Audit Committee

Report Owner
Niall Seery (Vice President
Academic Affairs & Registrar)

Executive Summary

The objective of the internal audit was to provide assurance to the Audit Committee that management have effective mechanisms to identify, monitor and address retention issues.

There are many areas in which the Institute is performing well when compared against the sector, such as but not limited to:

- The remodelling of induction to better support the student transition to third level;
- The availability of a tutoring service in certain subjects during the academic year and also over the summer months;
- The recent establishment of an Academic Writing Centre;
- The monitoring of attendance and enforcement of a 75% attendance policy in certain departments;
- A host of faculty and department led retention initiatives including but not limited to team building days, parent information evenings, field trips and industrial visits, meetings with students who are poor attenders or who fail a module in Semester 1, the "habit-forming" initiative, etc.
- PASS (Peer Assisted Student Sessions), a peer-to-peer mentoring initiative which ran across 17 programmes in AY 2015/16;
- Implementation of the Irish Survey of Student Engagement achieving the highest response across the sector in 2015/16; and
- A strong focus on staff development with a Learning and Teaching Unit supporting a range of initiatives.

At the request of the Audit Committee, PwC conducted a student focus group to gain some insights into the student experience of initiatives to support student transition, engagement, retention, progression, etc. The themes that emerged from this focus group are summarised in Appendix J.

Our review identified 6 findings ranging from substantial to minor as outlined in the table overleaf:

Rating	Significance	No. of findings
Grade 2	Substantial	3
Grade 3	Moderate	2
Observation	Minor	1

The Grade 2 findings are summarised overleaf:

- **Institute Student Engagement, Retention and Progression Strategy.** Whilst student retention has admittedly been the source of considerable attention throughout the Institute in recent years, the Institute does not currently have a formal Student Engagement, Retention and Progression Strategy. The adoption of a formal strategy would help to ensure ongoing consideration, monitoring and review of retention in a coordinated and coherent manner across the Institute.
- **Student Engagement, Retention and Progression Data.** There would appear to be a number of opportunities for the Institute to improve with respect to the measurement, analysis and reporting of non-progression within the Institute. The analysis of non-progression should be expanded to include all years, as well as a more comprehensive measure of non-progression and analysis of module performance trends. The Institute should review and agree a timeframe for the preparation of the Institute non-progression report, and presentation of same to the relevant stakeholders. The level of attendance monitoring across the Institute can vary depending on the department / stage to which the student belongs with some departments enforcing strict attendance policies and others not monitoring attendance at all. As such, there would appear to be an opportunity for the Institute to better capture the engagement of students during the first few weeks of the Academic Year.
- **Evidence based analysis and evaluation of student engagement, retention and progression initiatives.** There would appear to be an opportunity for the Institute to improve the existing evidence base by adopting a structured and robust approach to the evaluation of engagement, retention and progression initiatives. The Institute should consider evaluating the induction process on an ongoing basis, the first year Learning and Development in Higher Education module, as well as the Institute tutoring system.

Use of this Report

This report is intended for the information and use of AIT and is not intended to be relied upon by anyone other than AIT. We accept no duty of care and deny all liability to any third party that places reliance on our report.

We have provided no opinion, attestation or other forms of assurance with respect to our services or the information upon which our services are based. We did not audit or otherwise verify the information supplied to us in connection with this engagement, from whatever source, except as specified in our Terms of Reference (Appendix A).

Our work was performed in accordance with PwC's Internal Audit Methodology which is consistent with the Chartered Institute of Internal Auditors International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing. As agreed, the review did not constitute an examination in accordance with full scope generally accepted auditing standards.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank all personnel who assisted and facilitated us in carrying out this review.

PricewaterhouseCoopers
03 Apr 2017

Audit Overview

Background

The successful retention and progression of students in higher education is at the forefront of national and international attention and policy. The focus on improving student retention is driven by the large number of negative consequences associated with low retention rates, which include:

- The negative consequences for students and their families including loss of confidence, significant financial impact, etc.
- Reputational damage for institutions
- Staff morale
- Morale of class groups
- From a national perspective, inefficient use of resources and a loss of future skills.

It is worth noting that there can also be a number of positive consequences associated with non-completion and instances where non-completion is in the best interest of the student.

As acknowledged in the literature, the factors influencing student retention are varied and complex. They can include individual factors (such as age, gender, family background, living arrangements, personality, preparedness for college, pre-college achievement and finances), institutional factors (such as type of institution, size and institution selectivity), social integration and academic preparedness (Eivers et al., 2002).

Qualitative research conducted by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education in 2015 identified five core themes which are most significant in terms of student non-completion. These include course, personal, financial, medical/health and family. Of the five, course was the strongest factor influencing student non-completion. Within the theme "Course", a number of sub-themes were evident including wrong course choice, transferring to another course, issues relating to course interest and expectation, course difficulties and mistakes with the CAO, or the student did not get their preferred CAO choice.

Research shows that drop-out rates peak in first year, while the withdrawal risks decline steadily as students progress through their courses.

Objective

The objective of the internal audit was to provide assurance to the Audit Committee that management have effective mechanisms to identify, monitor and address student retention issues.

Approach

We worked with AIT to gain an understanding of the non-progression rates for each Faculty / Department and conducted detailed testing in specific areas to establish student retention programmes / processes in place.

We reviewed the following against good practice guidelines:
- AIT policies on student retention
- Systems and processes in place to identify and monitoring progression issues, and
- The facilities in place to improve non-progression rates of students within the Institute.

In scoping our review, we agreed with AIT a sample of schools / departments to focus on for detailed testing of the student retention programmes / processes in place. These included:

- Faculty of Science and Health
  - Dept. of Life & Physical Sciences

- Faculty of Engineering and Informatics
  - Dept. of Civil, Construction & Mineral Engineering

- Faculty of Business and Hospitality
  - Dept. of Accounting & Business Computing
  - Dept. of Hospitality, Tourism & Leisure Studies

Our approach to this review involved the following:

Desk top documentation review: Review of AIT student retention policies, procedures and initiatives, evaluations of initiatives to date, current and historic progression rates for each faculty / department and the HEA Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education.

Interviews and Walkthroughs: Including interviews with Registrar, Access Officer, Student Services Manager, MIS Business Intelligence & Development Manager, Learning and Teaching Coordinator, PASS Coordinator, a focus group of students, a sample of Heads of Faculty / Departments and the Student Union's President.

The detailed Terms of Reference, including scope and approach, for the review are included in Appendix A.

AIT Progression / Non Progression Data

The Institute prepares an annual report with analysis of first year non-progression rates at the School, Department, NFQ and programme level, using the HEA 1st March census date as its basis. Below we present the first year non-progression for the Institute by department for the past five academic years. In Appendix D, we present this in graphical format. The data suggests that retention should and is rightly a key priority for the Institute.

Non-progression	2010/11 to 2011/12 (%)	2011/12 to 2012/13 (%)	2012/13 to 2013/14 (%)	2013/2014 to 2014/15 (%)	2014/15 to 2015/16 (%)
Institute wide	26	25	22	21	23
Department					
Business & Management Studies	36	24	22	22	27
Accounting & Business Computing	34	32	23	27	33
Design	11	19	12	5	NA
Hospitality, Tourism & Leisure	28	24	26	27	32
Life & Physical Science	17	23	19	20	19
Civil Engineering & Construction	38	30	22	44	40
Mechanical Engineering	34	44	33	36	28
Electronics Computer & Software Eng.	49	34	34	26	53
Social Studies	12	16	10	11	8
Nursing & Health Studies	8	13	19	9	6

In Appendix E we present non-progression data from the HEA's Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education 2013/14 to 2014/15, published in April 2017, for the 14 institutes of technology included within the analysis. In general terms, the Study shows that AIT retention rates are ahead of the IOT average for NFQ Levels 6, and in line with the IOT average for Level 7 and Level 8. However, it should be noted that the data, whilst only published in April of this year, is dated.

Non-progression 2013/14 to 2014/15	Level 6 (%)	Level 7 (%)	Level 8 (%)
AIT	21	27	16
All IOTs	26	27	16

Summary of Findings

	Finding	Rating
1.	Institute Student Engagement, Retention and Progression Strategy	Grade 2
2.	Student Engagement, Retention and Progression Data, and Evidence Based Analysis	Grade 2
3.	Evidence based analysis and evaluation of student engagement, retention and progression initiatives	Grade 2
4.	Withdrawal Process	Grade 3
5.	Strategic importance of timetabling from a Student Retention perspective	Grade 3
6.	Induction Process	Observation

Detailed Findings & Recommendations

1. Institute Student Engagement, Retention and Progression Strategy

Background

A Working Group (WG) was established by the President of AIT in October 2014 to consider non-progression within the institution and especially in relation to attrition from first year programmes. The WG produced a report with a number of recommendations to the Executive Management Team (EMT). In Appendix G, we present an update, from two of the members of the WG, on the implementation of the recommendations of the WG.

Finding	Rating & Implication	Recommendation	Management Response and Action Plan
Student Engagement, Retention and Progression has to be an institution wide commitment, not confined to individual departments, academics or projects. Addressing retention requires a coherent strategy which recognises the holistic nature of the issue, and the contribution of all sections of the Institute in an integrated way. Student retention has admittedly been the source of considerable attention throughout the Institute in recent years, however the Institute does not currently have a formal Student Engagement, Retention and Progression Strategy. Whilst a number of the WG's recommendations have been implemented, there appears to have been a level of inaction following the production of the WG report to the extent that: - A formal decision with respect to the recommendations to be adopted by the Institute does not appear to have been made;	**Grade 2** Risk of failure to ensure a comprehensive and systematic approach to student retention across the Institute. Risk of failure to oversee, monitor and track the progress of retention initiatives. Risk of failure to maximise the potential benefits of student retention initiatives due to lack of integration and alignment between academic units and student support services. Risk of failure to build upon the success of retention initiatives in some departments by extending them into other departments (as	Develop a formal 'Student Engagement, Retention and Progression Strategy' for the Institute outlining for example the overall aims of the Institute, the key areas of focus, the implementation strategies, etc. In the development of the Strategy, the Institute should: • Seek to identify opportunities to better integrate academic units and student support services. • Review existing initiatives undertaken across the Institute and consider whether some should be embedded as part of the institutional retention strategy. • Review external good practice. This exercise was undertaken by the Working Group on Non-Progression for the production of their report. However, this process should be built into the development and periodic review of the Institute's Engagement, Retention and Progression Strategy. • Ensure there is a clearly articulated	Management accept the recommendation and will develop a formal 'Student Engagement, Retention and Progression Strategy' **Target Date** January 2018 **Responsible Party** Dr Niall Seery VP Academic Affairs & Registrar

Finding	Rating & Implication	Recommendation	Management Response and Action Plan
- A resource plan was not put in place to support the implementation of recommendations; - There was no assignment of responsibility and accountability for the implementation of the recommendations; - A follow up review of the implementation of the recommendations was not conducted. There would appear to be a level of disconnect between academic units and student support services. During our review we observed: - A potential disconnect between PASS and the programmes on which it operates. For example, the results of the questionnaire issued to staff for the 2015/16 AY showed that some respondents were not aware that PASS was being offered on programmes on which they lectured. - A lack of awareness of the Academic Writing Centre by some students in the student focus group. - A lack of awareness by Academic Units of the Attrition Survey conducted annually and a missed opportunity to use the insights emerging from same to inform academic unit strategy. There are a number of good practices operating in faculties, departments and functions throughout the Institute, some of which could be embedded as part of an institutional retention strategy e.g. the parent evening currently operating in the Faculties of Engineering and Informatics, and Business and Hospitality.	appropriate).	process in place to govern the ongoing monitoring, measurement and tracking of progress / success against the Institute's Student Engagement, Retention and Progression strategy. **Note** – in other Institutes, we have recommended that the reporting of progress against the Institute's Student Engagement, Retention and Progression Strategy should be incorporated into the existing Annual Reports prepared by Faculties / Programme Boards. However our understanding is that neither Faculties nor Programme Boards are required to prepare annual reports.	

V2 22.6.2017

2. Student Engagement, Retention and Progression Data

Background

The Institute prepares an annual report with analysis of first year non-progression rates at the School, Department, NFQ and programme level, using the HEA 1st March census date as its basis. The report is presented to EMT annually however there is no agreed timeframe for the preparation of the report. A number of departments conduct ad hoc analysis on the relationship between non-progression and CAO bands, LC results, etc. however there is no Institute wide data and analysis of same.

Finding	*Rating & Implication*	*Recommendation*	*Management Response and Action Plan*
High-quality institutional data is central to identifying departments, programmes and modules with higher rates of non-retention and students with a higher risk of withdrawal. *Systems need to be in place to monitor student behaviour, particularly participation and performance, to identify students at risk of withdrawing. Absenteeism is one of the first signs that a student is dissatisfied with college, is under stress, or is having difficulties with coursework.* There would appear to be a number of opportunities to improve with respect to the measurement, analysis and reporting of non-progression within the Institute, including: - The inclusion of non-progression for all years and not just year 1 within the Institute's annual report. - A more comprehensive measure of non-progression. The existing measure, albeit in line with the HEA definition of non-progression, does not capture non-progression prior to 1st March. In Appendix G, we have set out examples of methodologies observed in other Institutes which use the 1st November as starting point. - An agreed timeframe for the preparation	**Grade 2** Risk of failure to use the data available to capture and address non-progression issues in a timely manner. Risk of failure to identify non-progressions issues in years subsequent to first year. Risk of failure to identify at risk student cohorts to enable targeted interventions. Risk of failure to identify and address trends in module performance across the Institute. Risk of failure to identify students in need of support and students who have left the Institute but failed to formally withdraw.	1. Review the existing levels of data analysis within the Institute to ensure the best use of available data in the management of retention. Consider in particular: • The measurement of non-progression for all years and not just year 1. • A more comprehensive measure of non-progression. The existing measure, albeit in line with the HEA definition of non-progression, does not capture non-progression prior to 1st March. In Appendix G, we have set out examples of methodologies observed in other Institutes which use the 1st November as starting point. • An agreed timeframe for the preparation of the Institute's non-progression report and its presentation to EMT and any other relevant parties. • Institute wide analysis of the relationship (if any) between non-progression and Admission Types, CAO bands, LC results, etc. • Introducing a formal analysis of module performance trends. This	Management accept the recommendation and can confirm that we have already commenced reviewing existing levels of data analysis and will continue to review and evaluate in order to ensure the best use of available data in the management of retention. Management are currently in informal communication with stakeholders and will review the mechanisms currently in place in order to further strengthen student participation and performance. **Target Date** End November 2017 **Responsible Party** Ms Dympna Fitzgerald MIS Business Intelligence & Development Unit Manager Dr Niall Seery VP Academic Affairs & Registrar

Finding	Rating & Implication	Recommendation	Management Response and Action Plan
of the report and its presentation to EMT and any other relevant parties. - Institute wide data and analysis of the relationship (if any) between non-progression and Admission Types, CAO bands, LC results, etc. - The Institute does not currently report on module performance trends. Such a report could be used to identify and introduce targeted interventions for modules with above average failure rates in certain departments. The period between 1st September and 1st November is seen as a critical period from a student retention perspective. The report of the WG on non-progression looked at formal withdrawals over a three year period and found that the highest number of withdrawals took place in this period when compared with the withdrawals between Nov and Mar; and Mar and Semester 2 exams. The level of attendance monitoring across the Institute can vary depending on the department / stage to which the student belongs with some departments enforcing strict attendance policies and others not monitoring attendance at all. As such, there would appear to be an opportunity to better capture the engagement of students during the first few weeks of the Academic Year. During our review, we were made aware of a proposal a number of years ago to introduce a "Student Verification" process. The proposal sought to introduce the monitoring of student attendance by academic staff and reporting back of same once in each semester. A copy of		should be emphasised within the institutional retention strategy as a key area of focus and included within the annual monitoring and review process. 2. Review the mechanisms currently in place to monitor student attendance, participation and performance across the Institute, and explore opportunities to strengthen further. Reconsider in particular, the Student Verification process proposed a number of years ago as similar practices are operating effectively elsewhere across the sector.	

Finding	Rating & Implication	Recommendation	Management Response and Action Plan
the Student Verification form to be completed by staff can be found in Appendix H. The purpose and proposed benefits of such a process were to: - Identify students in need of support; - Identify students who are not attending and need to be contacted; and - Improve the accuracy of Banner records particularly ensuring that all students are registered for exams. <u>Our understanding is that the proposal was not implemented</u>. Across the sector, we have observed similar practices in operation in a number of other Institutes. Below we provide descriptions of the processes currently in operation in two Institutes: *"The Institute Registration Audit is a retention measure aimed at First Year students with data collected at two points in the academic year, once per semester. It is a data collection instrument aimed at: confirming actual student numbers; identifying students at risk of non-completion or falling behind in their studies and providing more robust data for examinations reports."* *"Academically all first year learners are assessed in their modules within six-eight weeks of commencement of their studies and a review and feedback of their performance takes place subsequently. This takes the form of a formal single item programme board or stream meeting where each student is considered in terms of attendance, engagement and academic performance."*			

3. Evidence based analysis and evaluation of student engagement, retention and progression initiatives

Finding	Rating & Implication	Recommendation	Management Response and Action Plan
It is essential to understand which approaches and activities have the greatest impact, and why. An improved evidence base, and a robust approach to evaluation, are critical in helping the sector and partners to understand which of their activities are most effective and have the greatest impact on access, student success and progression, so enabling effort to be focused on these areas. We observed evidence of analysis and evaluation of some of the student engagement, retention and progression initiatives employed including but not limited to: • Academic Writing Centre; • The PASS initiative; • An analysis of the impact of Science tutorials on student retention (Feb-17). However, there appears to be an opportunity to improve the analysis and evaluation for other engagement initiatives. For example: • The Institute's Induction process; • The Learning and Development in Higher Education module; • The wider Institute tutoring system. With regards to the Institute's tutoring system, discussions with Heads of Departments suggest that they do not receive any reports on the level of engagement with tutor services by students in their department. Nor do they receive any insight into the demand on	**Grade 2** Misdirected effort and resources. Risk of failure to identify initiatives in need of further development and improvement. Risk of failure to use the data available to inform the Institute's student engagement, retention and progression initiatives.	1. Improve the existing evidence base by adopting a structured and robust approach to the evaluation of engagement, retention and progression initiatives. For example, we have observed a number of other Institutes evaluating induction programmes via staff and student surveys. 2. Consider in particular a comprehensive review of the Institute's tutoring system e.g. is it having an impact on student retention / progression? Is there a gap between hours allocated and the demand on same? Is there a gap with respect to the subjects offered? 3. Use the data available (withdrawal forms, the results of the attrition survey, etc.) to identify programmes where there is a mismatch in student expectations of a programme versus the reality encountered. For such programmes, Departments and Programme Boards should review the programme name and/or the programme marketing material and approach and amend as appropriate. Introduce mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of such changes e.g. student induction survey, student focus groups, etc.	Management accept the recommendations and will continue with our commitment to evaluation of engagement, retention and progression initiatives. 1. The evaluation of engagement, retention and progression initiatives is the remit of the Student Resource Centre who will feedback to Registrar and MIS/BI Analysis Unit. 2. Tutoring system currently in place is responsive to student need. Evaluation of this role will be directed at Faculty level. 3. Review of our Internal Transfer Policy and Student withdrawal Form will feedback to EMT in order to flag programmes for attention. **Target Date** End of Semester 1 31st December 2017

Finding	Rating & Implication	Recommendation	Management Response and Action Plan
tutoring services versus the hours available. During the student focus group, some students highlighted difficulties in securing appointments with tutors. Students also highlighted gaps in the tutoring services available to them e.g. students in the Faculty of Engineering and Informatics do not have access to a Physics tutor. This can be contrasted with the Faculty of Science which does provide tutoring services in Physics. During the student focus group, some students also highlighted a mismatch between their expectations of their programmes on entry and the reality encountered. Coupled with this, the results of the Institute's 2015/16 suggest that wrong course choice was the main reason cited by withdrawing students. There would appear to be an opportunity for the Institute to use the data emerging from sources such as withdrawal forms, the attrition survey etc. to develop targeted interventions e.g. a review of the programme name and / or the marketing material and approach for a programme; student surveys / focus groups to assess whether student perceptions of courses are changing in response to same. The evaluation of engagement, retention and progression initiatives will help to inform strategy development throughout the Institute.			**Responsible Party** 1. Ms Sarah L Cumbre, Student Services Manager 2. Deans of Faculty 3. Ms Mary Goode, Academic Admin.' & Student Affairs Manager

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4. Withdrawal process

Finding	Rating & Implication	Recommendation	Management Response and Action Plan

The current withdrawal procedure requires the student to complete a deregistration form attached in Appendix I.
 	
Withdrawal form
The information collected in the form appears limited. It is currently supplemented by the Institute's Attrition Survey explained in greater detail below.
 	
There does not appear to be any formal analysis of the information collected via withdrawal forms.
 	
Attrition Survey
The Institute has undertaken a Student Attrition Survey for the past two academic years whereby it surveys students who have formally withdrawn from the Institute. Responses to the survey are gathered via Survey Monkey and phone. For example, in 2014/15, 26 respondents completed the online survey and a further 84 completed it verbally over the phone.
 	
The results of the Attrition Survey contain valuable insights such as e.g. who the student spoke with in advance of withdrawing (if anyone); when the student starting considering leaving college etc. However, there appeared to be a lack of awareness by Heads of Department of the Attrition Survey conducted annually and a missed opportunity to use the insights emerging from same to inform departmental strategies.
	Grade 3
	
	Risk of failure to understand the reasons for withdrawal.
	
	Risk of failure to identify whether there are consistent themes which the Institute can address.
	
	Risk of failure to identify areas where the Institute could better support students.
	
	Risk of failure to fully analyse and utilise the quantitative and qualitative data collected.
	
	Risk of withdrawing a student who subsequently returns looking to attend / complete exams.
	
	Risk of loss of students due to a lack of flexibility in the Institute's internal transfer process.
		1. Review the existing withdrawal form and attrition survey; including the questions posed and the process for analysing and circulating the data collected.
		2. Consider whether the withdrawal form could be made available to students online as this would present an opportunity for students to engage with the online survey at the time of withdrawal. We have observed this practice working well in another Institute. Students are required to complete the withdrawal form and survey online and then print the form for their Head of Department to sign in advance of submission to the Admission's Office.
		3. Consider formalising the process around the conducting of exit interviews with departing students as data collected during an exit interview, coupled with data collected from withdrawal forms and surveys, might help to:
		  - better capture the concerns and thoughts of students at the time of withdrawal;
		  - identify the root cause for the student's withdrawal;
		  - identify opportunities for internal transfers;
		  - assist the student with any remaining administrative issues;
		  - identify areas where the Institute could better support its
			1. Management accept the recommendations with regard to withdrawal form and attrition survey and will review the process currently in place.
			2. Management accept the recommendation and consideration will be given to online completion of survey. The Institute request that PWC provide example of best practice they have observed across the sector.
			3. Currently there is a formal process in place, whereby students complete a student withdrawal form which is signed by the Head of Department, at a meeting with the student. However, management will review the instrument and process in place in order to establish a more robust process to better capture data and assist the student.
			4. Management accept the recommendation to review the Institute's Internal Transfer Policy giving particular

Finding	Rating & Implication	Recommendation	Management Response and Action Plan
Analysis of withdrawal data The report of the Working Group on Non-Progression contained some valuable analysis on the timing of student withdrawals i.e. First year undergraduate students who withdrew before the end of October, first year undergraduate students who withdrew between November and March; and students who withdrew between March and S2 exams. The timing of withdrawals is critical as it highlights opportunities for targeted interventions. There would appear to be an opportunity to conduct and share this analysis annually. **Exit Interviews** There is an ad hoc practice of staff seeking to meet with withdrawing students however there is no formal requirement, process or training support for the conducting of exit interviews with the departing students. **Review of Institute Withdrawal Process** The Institute is currently reviewing its withdrawal process. Under the existing process, the onus is on the student to formally withdraw. Administrative staff cannot change the status of a student to Withdrawn on the Student Record System unless the student completes a withdrawal form. This can cause issues where students fail to formally withdraw and / or when students notify staff of withdrawal lieu of completing the form and this is not communicated to the Admissions office. There is a proposal to amend the existing		students; and - ensure the student leaves with a positive experience. We recommend that as part of the review of its withdrawal process, the Institute considers best practice across the sector. 4. Review the Institute's Internal Transfer Policy, it's application and the level of awareness amongst students e.g. some Institutes have a question in the Institute's withdrawal form / survey asking if student's were aware of the Institute's Internal Transfer policy.	attention to student awareness of the policy. Particular consideration will be given to provision of an option on the student withdrawal form, and review of the Student Handbook to promote awareness of the Internal Transfer Policy. **Target Date** **31st December 2017** **Responsible Party** 1-3 Ms Mary Goode, Academic Admin.' & Student Affairs Manager 4. Dr Niall Seery, VP Academic Affairs & Registrar

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Finding	Rating & Implication	Recommendation	Management Response and Action Plan
process to enable the Admissions office to notify students (who have been identified as not attending and / or left the Institute but failed to withdraw) to write to students advising them to confirm their status to the Institute within a certain time period; failing which the Institute will officially withdraw them. **Internal Transfers** Discussions with some staff suggest that the Institute's Internal Transfer Policy can be quite rigid with some students having historically been denied transfers due to inability to demonstrate a prior interest in the programme in which they were looking to transfer e.g. the programme was not listed in the student's CAO preferences. Across the sector, we have observed increasing efforts by a number of Institute's to facilitate transfers and to raise the awareness amongst students of the option to avail of internal transfers.			

5. Strategic importance of timetabling from a Student Retention perspective

Finding	Rating & Implication	Recommendation	Management Response and Action Plan
An effective timetable that supports optimal student engagement and learning can have an impact on student satisfaction, attendance and ultimately retention. Discussions with both staff and students suggest that there are delays and weaknesses in the existing timetabling process which can result in: • Unstable timetables for the first few weeks of the academic year; and • A requirement for students to check their online timetable for changes on a continuous basis. We have observed internally in some AIT departments, and externally in other Institutes, efforts to strategically timetable students (in particular first year students) with a view to improving attendance and retention rates. For example, block timetabling first year students and avoiding large gaps where possible. It is acknowledged that the Institute timetabling process is constrained by a number of issues, including but not limited to, space limitations, recruitment processes and the uncertainty regarding CAO entry numbers.	**Grade 3** Delays in finalising student timetable and lack of student focus in the design of the timetable may have a negative impact on student satisfaction, student attendance and ultimately declining retention rates.	1. Review the existing timetabling process with a view to ensuring the earlier finalisation of timetables, in particular for first years, for whom the transition period is considered critical from a retention perspective. Where timetable changes are made, consider the introduction of a mechanism to communicate changes to students e.g. via text or email. 2. As part of the review, consider, subject to the acknowledged limitations, opportunities to develop a more student centred timetable, in particular for first years. This could be achieved through the identification and adoption of student centred timetabling principles such as avoiding large gaps in first year timetables where possible; timetabling tutorials directly after lectures / labs, etc.	Management accept the recommendations as outlined. We can confirm that timetables are finalised in June, however are subject to a degree of variability in September due to student numbers. We will review the process to accommodate modifications. We will continue to use text and/or email to communicate with students. **Target Date** 31st December 2017 **Responsible Party** Ms Mary Goode, Academic Admin.' & Student Affairs Manager

6. Induction process

Background

Induction has been a key area of focus for the Institute in recent years.

- First year students are invited to attend induction before the students in subsequent years return.
- In AY 2015/16, the Institute remodelled its approach to induction. There was a shift in focus from 'information overload' to a more welcoming and congratulatory approach. A former student was invited to address students. Where historically, students would have received a presentation from the Student Resource Centre (SRC) on Day 1; this was replaced by an "Induction Roadshow" whereby a member of the SRC addressed students in a class setting in weeks 2/3.
- The induction process is tailored for each Faculty. Faculty led initiatives include an activity / team building day and a Parent's Information Evening in the Faculties of Business and Hospitality, and Engineering and Informatics.
- Department led initiatives include in class ice breaker activities, field trips and industrial visits, etc.
- The Institute supports a "Just Ask" culture with staff and students wearing "Ask Me" T-Shirts on hand to assist students and a Drop-In centre ran "by students for students" in the initial weeks.

Finding	Rating & Implication	Recommendation	Management Response and Action Plan
Induction is a process, not an event. It takes time... There would appear to be a number of opportunities to build upon existing efforts and further improve the Institute induction processes. For example: • The existing Induction programme is focused on first years. There is an opportunity to have an induction process for all years. • The Institute does not currently conduct any semester 2 re-induction activities e.g. Student Resource Centre information sessions being re-delivered to students, pop up help desks, etc. This is something we have observed in other institutes where a number of days / weeks are dedicated to formal re-induction activities. Similarly, the Institute currently runs Clubs & Societies Days in semester 1. In other Institutes, we have observed these running	**Observation** Risk of failure to adequately support the transition into higher education resulting in poor student experience and possible withdrawal. Different levels of department and programme induction activities could lead to differing student experiences.	1. Review and evaluate the Institute's existing induction processes against good practices observed including: - Induction for years 2,3 and 4; - Semester 2 induction activities; - Mature student induction; - Formal evaluation of induction; and - Formally branded early weeks' induction programmes.	Management accept the recommendation as outlined and can confirm that we have already commenced review and evaluation of our existing induction programme. This revised induction programme, with collaboration between academic departments, central student support service and students union, will be introduced in semester 1 of 2017/2018. **Target Date** Semester 1 2017 **Responsible Party** Ms Sarah L Cumbre, Student Services Manager

Finding	Rating & Implication	Recommendation	Management Response and Action Plan
in both semesters 1 and 2.			
• The Institute does not currently run a separate induction for mature students. In some Institutes we have observed an induction day for mature students being held prior to wider induction. The purpose of this separate induction day is to afford mature students the opportunity to meet and socialise with other mature students (mature student numbers can sometimes be quite low across programmes). The process sometimes involves mature students who have gone through the process themselves to enable them to share their stories.			
• The Institute's induction model is not formally evaluated. We have observed this being done in other Institutes by means of staff and student surveys.			
In a significant number of Institutes in which we have performed this review to date, we have observed branded early weeks' induction programmes aimed at providing targeted support to students. The extended induction programmes observed have ranged from 4 to 6 weeks in duration. Each of the weeks has its own theme, designed to focus students' attention on various issues considered to be important for settling in and thriving in higher education e.g.			
- Welcome			
- Get Involved			
- Time Management and Assessment			
- Personal Health and Wellbeing			
- College Knowledge - Academic Supports, financial assistance, becoming a class rep, etc.			

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Finding	Rating & Implication	Recommendation	Management Response and Action Plan
- Ask Again, etc. The extended induction programmes require high levels of collaboration across the Institute. Academic departments are encouraged to develop their own programme based social and academic induction activities aligned to the themes. A number of pre-existing activities tend to form part of the early weeks' induction programmes however they are highlighted and presented to students in the form of a branded, coherent package In Appendix K we present a framework for developing an early weeks' induction programme developed by LIN Student Led Learning.			

Appendices

Appendix A – Terms of Reference

Terms of Reference Internal Audit Review of Student Retention (Ref No: S02)

Objectives

The objective of the internal audit is to provide assurance to the Audit Committee that management have effective mechanisms to identify, monitor and address student retention issues.

Scope and Approach

- We will work with AIT to gain an understanding of the progression rates for each Faculty and conduct detailed testing in specific areas to establish student retention programmes / processes in place.

- We will review the following against good practice guidelines:
  - AIT policies on student retention
  - Systems and processes in place to identify and monitoring progression issues, and
  - The facilities in place to improve non-progression rates of students within the Institute.

- In scoping our review, PwC have agreed with AIT to focus on the Faculties of Science and Health, Engineering and Informatics and Business and Hospitality. We will meet with the Dean and one head of department from each faculty.

Desk top documentation review: Review of AIT student retention policies, procedures and initiatives, evaluations of initiatives to date, current and historic progression rates for each school and the HEA Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education.

Interviews and Walkthroughs: Including interviews with Registrar, Access Officer, Student Services Manager, MIS Business Intelligence & Development Manager, Learning and Teaching Coordinator, PASS Coordinator, a focus group of students, a sample of Heads of Faculty / Departments and the Student Union's President.

Terms of Reference agreed by:

Athlone Institute of Technology: Bill Delaney

PwC: Ken Johnson, Partner

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Appendix B – Assigning Ratings for Findings

Rating	Basis of our classification
Grade 1	A **critical** weakness which could compromise internal controls potentially resulting in significant loss to AIT or which could be interpreted as a critical weakness in the governance oversight function of AIT and which should be addressed as a matter of urgency. A finding that could have a: • *Critical* impact on operational performance e.g. resulting in major disruption to Institute or inability to provide a quality service to students for more than 3 days, or leading to a loss of the majority of students; *or* • *Critical* monetary or financial statement impact; *or* • *Critical* breach in laws and regulations e.g. resulting in material fines, penalties being levied on the Institute or funding being withheld*; or* • *Critical* impact on AIT's reputation or brand e.g. resulting in sustained adverse national and/ or international media coverage and political reaction.
Grade 2	A control weakness which could undermine the system of internal controls and / or operational efficiency and should be addressed within three months. A finding that could have a: • *Substantial* impact on operational performance e.g. resulting in disruption to Institute or inability to provide a quality service to students for up to 3 days, or leading to a loss of a significant number of students *or* • *Substantial* monetary or financial statement impact; *or* • *Substantial* breach in laws and regulations e.g. resulting in substantial fines and consequences; *or* • *Substantial* impact on AIT's reputation or brand e.g. resulting in unfavourable national, or local media coverage, or a significant number of student complaints.
Grade 3	A weakness which does not seriously detract from the system of internal controls and / or operational efficiency but which should nevertheless be addressed by management within six to 12 months. A finding that could have a: • *Moderate* impact on operational performance e.g. resulting in limited disruption to Institute or inability to provide a quality service to students for up to 4 hours, or limited impact on students; *or* • *Moderate* monetary or financial statement impact; *or* • *Moderate* breach in laws and regulations with no fine, and no regulatory investigation; *or* • *Moderate* impact on AIT's reputation or brand e.g. resulting in limited media coverage, or some student complaints.
Observation	A finding that does not detract from the system of internal controls and / or operational efficiency but which should be addressed by management within 12 to 18 months. Findings in this category can be raised to highlight areas of inefficiencies or suggested good practice. A finding that could have a: • *Minor* impact on operational performance e.g. resulting in disruption of non-core activities for up to 2 hours; *or* • *Minor* monetary or financial statement impact; *or*

- **Minor** breach in laws and regulations; *or*
- **Minor** impact on AIT's reputation e.g. resulting in no media coverage and no student complaints.

Appendix C – List of Personnel Interviewed

We met with the following people throughout the course of our review.

Name	Title
Dr Niall Seery	Vice President for Academic Affairs / Registrar
Ms Sarah La Cumbre	Student Services Manager
Mr Kevin Ronan	President, Students Union
Ms Theresa Ryan	Access Officer
Dr Don Faller	Dean of Faculty of Science and Health
Dr. Carol O'Donnell	Head of Dept. of Life & Physical Sciences
Dr Austin Hanley	Dean of Faculty of Engineering & Informatics
Mr Joe Lawless	Head of Dept. of Civil, Construction & Mineral Engineering
Mr Eoin Langan	Dean of Faculty of Business and Hospitality
Mr Trevor Prendergast	Head of Dept. Accounting & Business Computing
Dr Tony Johnston	Head of Dept. of Hospitality, Tourism & Leisure Studies
Ms Dympna Fitzgerald	MIS Business Intelligence & Development Mgr.
Ms Mary Goode	Admissions
Ms Nuala Harding	T&L Coordinator
Ms Aoife Walshe	PASS Coordinator
NA	Student Focus Group

Appendix D – AIT Non-Progression Rates

The Institute prepares an annual report with analysis of first year non-progression rates at the School, Department, NFQ and programme level, using the HEA 1st Match census date as its basis. The report is presented to EMT annually however there is no agreed timeframe for the preparation of the report. Below, we present the data in graphical format, firstly for the Institute as a whole, and on the following pages by department.

AIT Non Progression Rates

Institute Total — % of Non Progression by Year: 2011: 26%, 2012: 25%, 2013: 22%, 2014: 21%, 2015: 23%
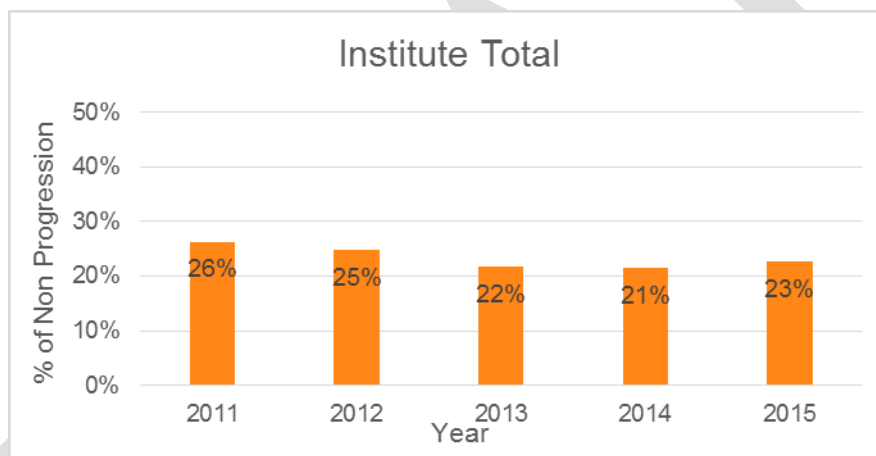
Business & Management Studies Non Progression Rates
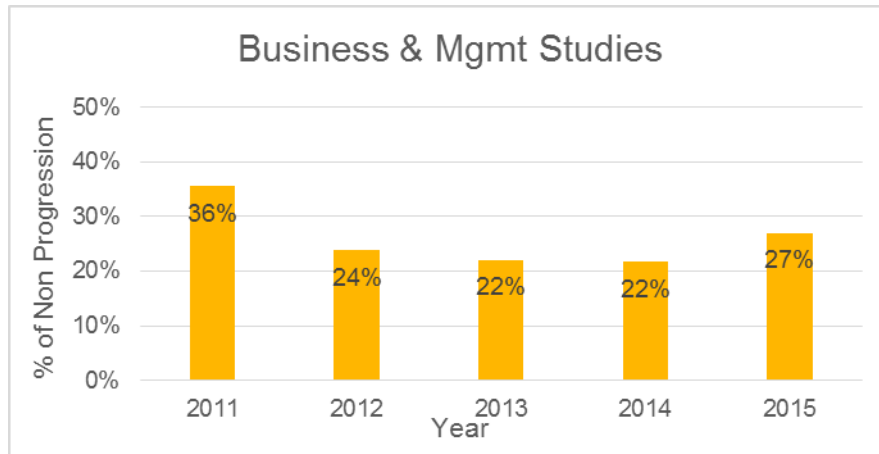
Accounting & Business Computing Non Progression Rates

Business & Mgmt Studies

% of Non Progression

Year	Value
2011	36%
2012	24%
2013	22%
2014	22%
2015	27%

Accounting & Business Computing

% of Non Progression

Year	Value
2011	34%
2012	32%
2013	23%
2014	27%
2015	33%
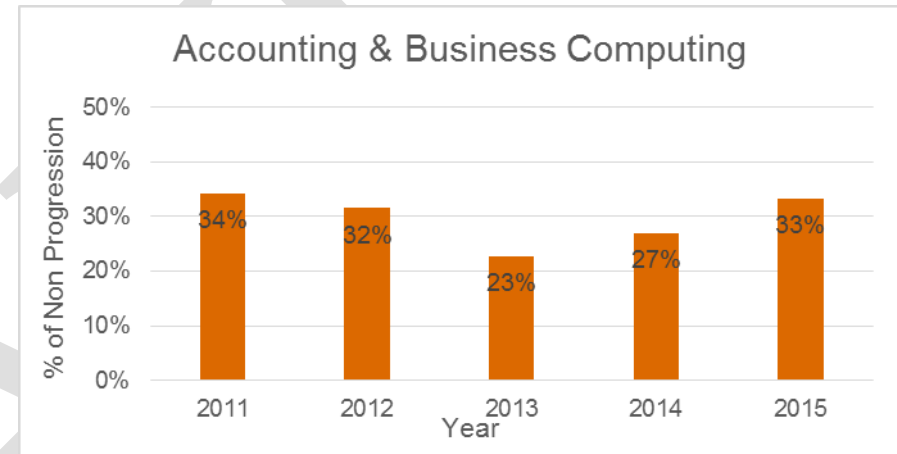
Design Non Progression Rates
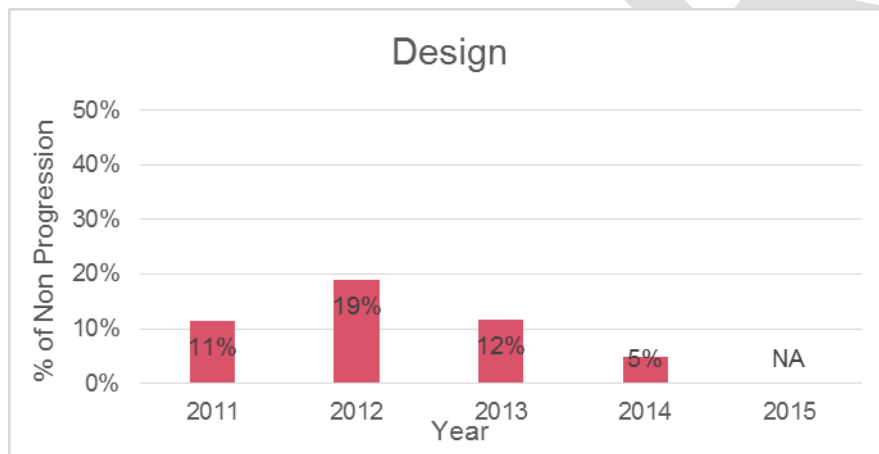
Hospitality, Tourism & Leisure Non Progression Rates

Design

% of Non Progression

Year	Value
2011	11%
2012	19%
2013	12%
2014	5%
2015	NA

Hospitality, Tourism & Leisure

% of Non Progression

Year	Value
2011	28%
2012	24%
2013	26%
2014	27%
2015	32%

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Life & Physical Science Non Progression Rates
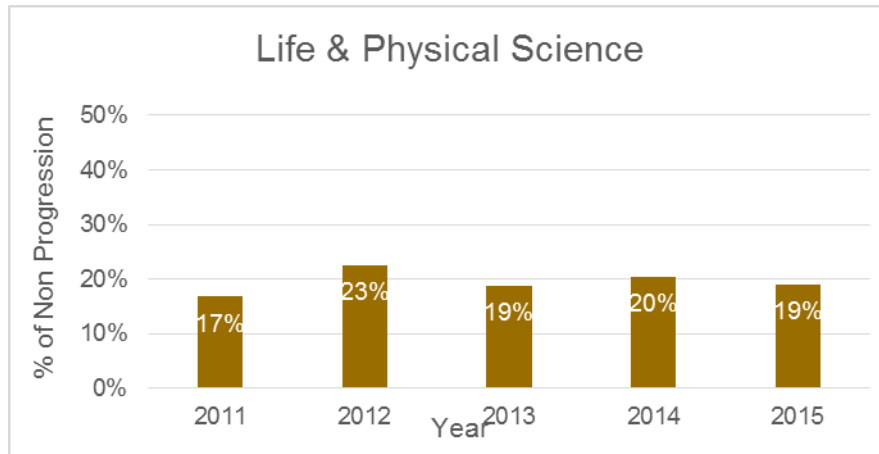
Civil Engineering & Construction Non Progression Rates
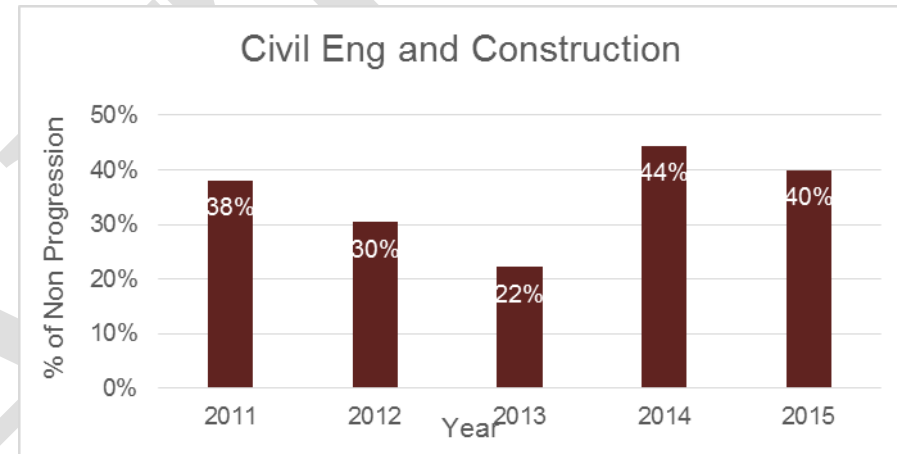
Mechanical Engineering Non Progression Rates

Electronics Computer & Software Eng. Non Progression Rates

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Mechanical Engineering

Electronics Computer & Software Engineering
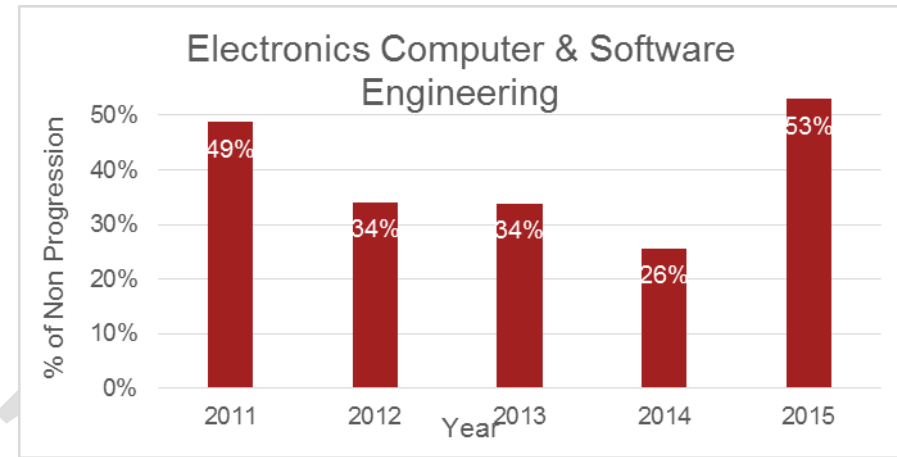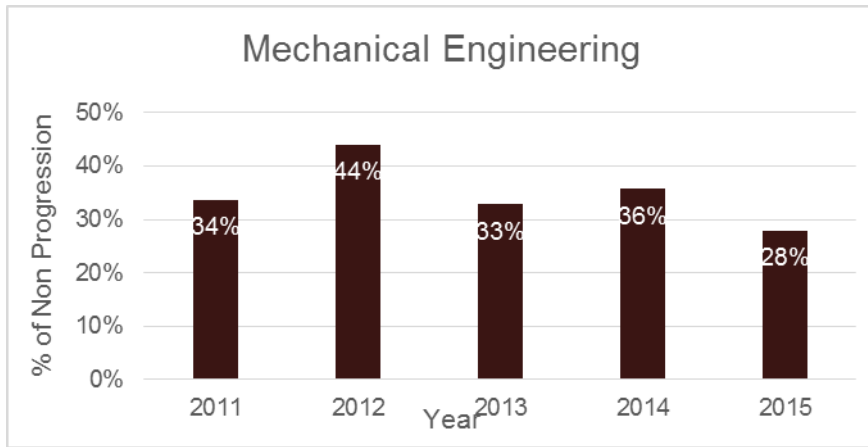
Social Studies Non Progression Rates

Social Studies
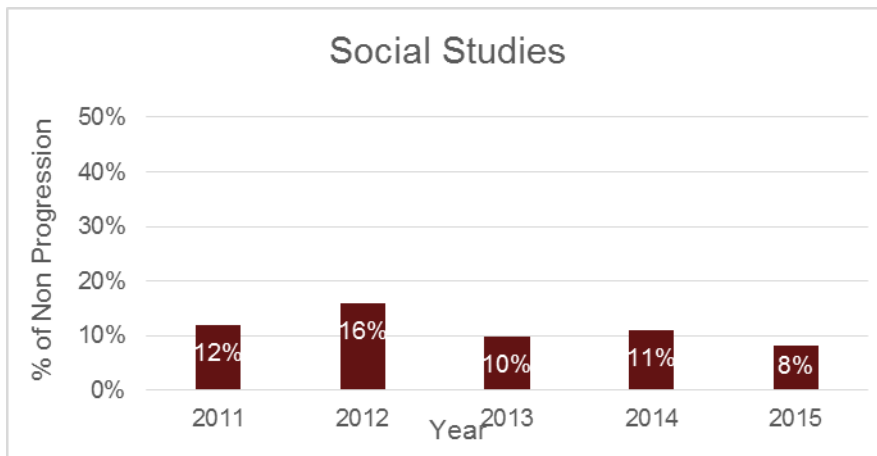
Nursing & Health Studies Non Progression Rates

Nursing & Health Sciences

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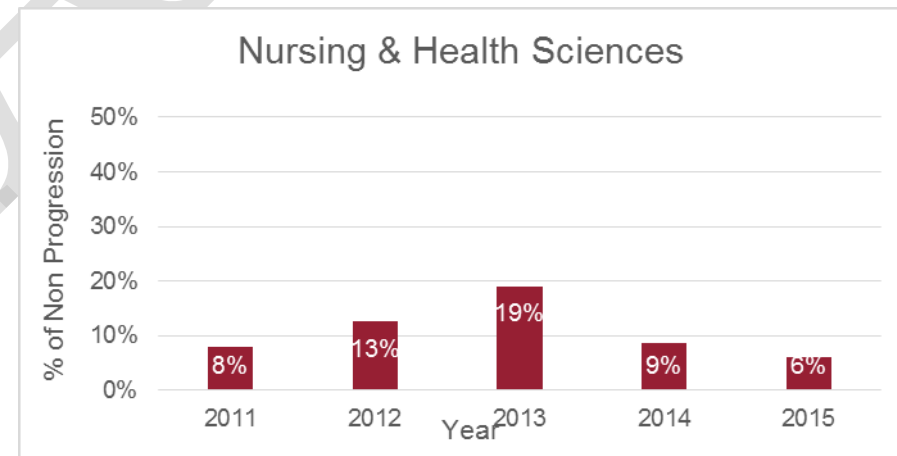
Appendix E – HEA Study of Progression in Higher Education 2013/14 to 2014/2015

The HEA Study of Progression in Higher Education 2013/14 to 2014/15, published in April 2017, reports on the transition from first year to the following academic year for 26 HEA-funded institutions. In this section, we provide a snapshot of the analysis for the 14 institutes of technology to provide some insight into how AIT compares with the other Irish institutes of technology. The 14 institutes include:

- Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT)
- Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB)
- Cork Institute of Technology (CIT)
- Institute of Technology Carlow (ITC)
- Dundalk Institute of Technology (DKIT)
- Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT)
- Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT)
- Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT)
- Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT)
- Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT)
- Institute of Technology Sligo (ITS)
- Institute of Technology Tallaght (ITTA)
- Institute of Technology Tralee (ITTRA)
- Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT).

The census dates used for this analysis – 1st March 2014 and 1st March 2015 – span the academic years 2013/14 and 2014/15. Students who repeated a year or who changed course or programme type within their original institution were identifiable and are grouped with those deemed to be still present. For the

purposes of this report, only student data pertaining to full-time undergraduates (NFQ levels 6-8) was analysed: student records pertaining to undergraduates studying at NFQ levels 6 and 7 in the universities and other colleges were not analysed.

IOT Level 6 Non Progression Rates
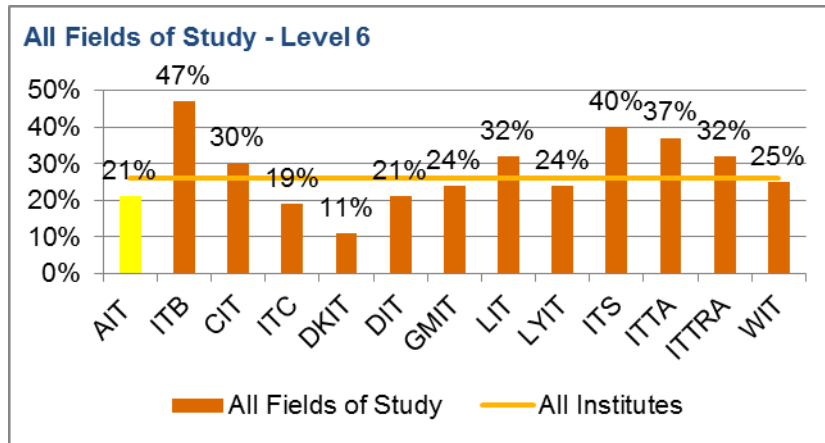
IOT Level 7 Non Progression Rates

IOT Level 8 Non Progression Rates

All Fields of Study - Level 8

Bar chart showing percentages by institute (AIT, ITB, CIT, ITC, DKIT, IADT, DIT, GMIT, LIT, LYIT, ITS, ITTA, ITTRA, WIT):
- AIT: 16%
- ITB: 20%
- CIT: 16%
- ITC: 14%
- DKIT: 14%
- IADT: 15%
- DIT: 14%
- GMIT: 20%
- LIT: 22%
- LYIT: 13%
- ITS: 10%
- ITTA: 16%
- ITTRA: 15%
- WIT: 17%

Legend: All Fields of Study — All Institutes

Healthcare – All Levels

Social Science, Business, Law, Arts and Humanities - All Levels

Healthcare

Bar chart by institute:
- AIT: 11%
- ITB: 12%
- CIT: 10%
- ITC: 10%
- DKIT: 12%
- IADT: 0%
- DIT: 13%
- GMIT: 16%
- LIT: 17%
- LYIT: 8%
- ITS: 10%
- ITTA: 9%
- ITTRA: 16%
- WIT: 11%

Legend: Healthcare — All Institutes

Social Science, Business, Law, Arts and Humanities

Bar chart by institute:
- AIT: 20%
- ITB: 41%
- CIT: 18%
- ITC: 17%
- DKIT: 19%
- IADT: 17%
- DIT: 7%
- GMIT: 25%
- LIT: 25%
- LYIT: 31%
- ITS: 32%
- ITTA: 24%
- ITTRA: 24%
- WIT: 19%

Legend: Social Science, Business, Law, Arts and Humanities — All Institutes

Science, Agriculture and Veterinary – All Levels

Engineering (excl. Civil) – All Levels

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Science, Agriculture and Veterinary

Science, Agriculture and Veterinary values: AIT 24%, ITB 25%, CIT 15%, ITC 16%, DKIT 13%, IADT 0%, DIT 15%, GMIT 17%, LIT 18%, LYIT 21%, ITS 20%, ITTA 21%, ITTRA 18%, WIT 14%

Legend: Science, Agriculture and Veterinary — All Institutes

Engineering (excl. Civil)

Engineering (excl. Civil) values: AIT 31%, ITB 43%, CIT 30%, ITC 28%, DKIT 29%, IADT 0%, DIT 22%, GMIT 36%, LIT 32%, LYIT 36%, ITS 35%, ITTA 33%, ITTRA 38%, WIT 24%

Legend: Engineering (excl Civil) — All Institutes

Construction and Related – All Levels

Services – All Levels

Construction and Related

Chart showing Engineering (excl Civil) percentages with All Institutes line:
AIT 31%, ITB 43%, CIT 30%, ITC 28%, DKIT 29%, IADT 0%, DIT 22%, GMIT 36%, LIT 32%, LYIT 36%, ITS 35%, ITTA 33%, ITTRA 38%, WIT 24%

Legend: Engineering (excl Civil) — All Institutes

Services

Chart showing Services percentages with All Institutes line:
AIT 25%, ITB 25%, CIT 28%, ITC 12%, DKIT 21%, IADT 0%, DIT 20%, GMIT 22%, LIT 21%, LYIT 23%, ITS 23%, ITTA 23%, ITTRA 23%, WIT 23%

Legend: Services — All Institutes

Computer Science – All Levels
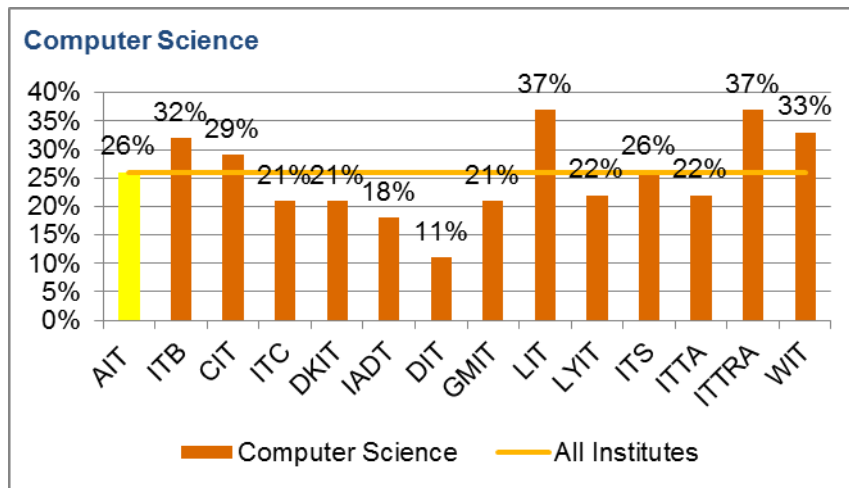
Appendix F – Measuring Non-progression

Below we provide examples of methodologies used elsewhere in the sector for measuring non-progression:

Methodology 1

An analysis of the students who have Completed / Progressed, Repeated, Changed or Left their programme based on the number of enrolments on November 1.

Data definitions:

- Enrolled: number of enrolments on November 1
- Completed/Progressed: number of enrolled students who have progressed to the next stage of their programmes or successfully completed the award stage
- Repeat: Number of students who did not progress and who decided to repeat in their current programme
- Changed: Number of students who enrolled on a different programme
- Left: Number of students who left without completing their programmes.

Note:
V2 22.6.2017

- Data is selected from full-time, major award, undergraduate programmes
- Standard and repeat enrolments are included and Accumulation of Credits and Certification of Modules (ACCS) enrolments are excluded.

Methodology 2

An analysis of progression via a comparison of students registered on the 1st November census date in Year (n) versus Year (n+1) using Student ID numbers.

Appendix G – Follow-up review of WG Report on Non-Progression

#	2014 Considerations:	AIT Update 2017	Status
1	Consider appointing and timetabling a personal tutor for each first year student. This role could involve pastoral and academic counselling, from one of the student's lecturers, who would be given a timetabled hour. A model commonly used in the UK (the working group chair has experience of this from three universities King's College London, University of the Highlands and Islands and the University of Derby) allocates each first year student three annual meetings, one in September (as a welcome, get to know you meeting), one in January (to review progress to date) and one in April (to discuss exam concerns and suggest professional development opportunities for the summer). Students have a professional development folder, standardised across the college, which includes meeting record sheets where targets are set and discussed with the lecturer. These meetings typically last ten minutes each. When 'problem' students are identified, extra support is then sought from the HOD, student support or other relevant areas within the college	Not implemented: This was, and remains very desirable, certainly in the Faculty of Business and Hospitality. However, it is very much linked to resources and it's not something that we were in a position to offer across all courses. Some of the HTL courses have it and the personal tutor can make an impact on retention. The impact is difficult to quantify but student feedback is very positive.	
2	Rigorously enforce college policy on attendance in first year. When students see other students being removed from a course due to non-attendance it may result in a more serious attitude towards studies, improved attendance and, as a result, improved pass rates. To do this	Not implemented: We have looked recently at digital ways to monitor attendance but have not identified a suitable mechanism yet. Attendance is	

	lecturers would likely need a swipe card facility throughout the College. For courses with smaller numbers, one extra piece of coding/complexity is needed for taking online attendances in Moodle to allow the separation of students on different courses enrolled on a common Module. This is an easy fix and would allow the online recording of attendances to be much more useful.	rigorously enforced in some disciplines (e.g. science laboratories) but not all.
3	An academic support centre with tutor support would be worth considering as current tutor support is not joined up. There is a project for such a centre under discussion through SIDF.	Implemented: This was created – the Academic Writing Centre – and is certainly having a positive impact. A new tutor was appointed in the centre in Spring 2017.
4	Appointment of a 'Retention Officer' was discussed by the group, but not recommended as it may become a 'catch-all' type position and an unclear job role.	This is a point which I believe should be reconsidered now. We recommended not setting this up (and didn't set it up) but as issues evolve it's possibly a role with some merit.
5	Use Programmatic Review process to place highly engaging content early in first term of first year.	Partly implemented: Where feasible this was implemented and has also been adopted in new course design.
6	Use Programmatic Review to ensure that course scheduling and pacing meets the needs of the student body, to the most practical degree possible.	Fully implemented.
7	The Deloitte report suggests that institutions should introduce a compulsory, pro-active, relevant and collaborative induction activity for incoming first year students, run by a senior member of staff. All students would participate in the activity, peer interaction would be promoted, a sense of belonging would be generated and contact between staff and students would be facilitated.	Fully implemented. We hired external team building companies to help run events, which took place in September 2017 for all incoming students in Business, Science and Engineering.
8	It was suggested that we distribute an assessment to students in Week One of term to impress upon students the need for a serious attitude towards their studies.	Fully implemented in Faculty of Business and Hospitality.
9	Continue investing in student support services. These play a crucial role in retaining students with academic, personal, social, mental and financial difficulties	We have invested in 3 academic tutors. We have developed an academic writing centre. We have a student Counselling service.

10	Consider timetabling in context of retention. Many courses will have specific timetabling needs; some may benefit from longer days, other from shorter days. Some may need to be spread out, others more condensed. For example, from 2015/16, the Diploma in Restaurant Management in HTL will run long days on Mondays and Tuesdays. This is a change from 3 shorter days – Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday - to allow the student body, who are primarily mature adult learners, to work in the industry on Wednesdays onwards when their employers need them.	Implemented where feasible.
11	Use Programmatic Review to review the number and type of assessments to ensure it is appropriate for the programme	
12	Enhance transport links. There is anecdotal evidence that non-attendance can be linked to poor public transport access, especially for morning and evening classes.	Not implemented.
13	Consider opening/ developing a relationship with a commercial crèche with subsidised rates for students' children.	We financially support students in need of crèche facilities.
14	Improve online, campus and lecture theatre visibility of student support services.	Fully implemented and ongoing.
15	Facilitate internal transfer of students onto most appropriate course, where possible.	Fully implemented.
16	Consider grade entry point of students – would a higher CAO point entry result in lower intake, but improved retention?	Partly implemented.
17	Would smaller class sizes result in improved progression rates?	More research is needed on this point.
18	Train staff in dealing with different learning, language, race and culture issues	Supported by Learning and Teaching unit and ongoing.
19	Require students to pay fees up-front – i.e. issue registration cards, passwords, IT access, etc. upon payment of fees.	I believe some improvements to registration systems are ongoing.

Appendix H – Student Verification Status Report

Student Verification Status Report - 201500   Semester 1 : 01/09 - 31/10

School / Dept: Science   Humanities

Program / Yr: AL_DGRAPH_7   BA in Graphic Design   Y1

Module: _____

ID	Student Name		Reg Status	Has the student been in attendance? (Yes / No)	If No, Last known attendance? (Date)	Are there attendance issues that require follow up?
A00235695	Ajala	Oba Zacha	RG	☐	☐	☐
A00230196	Allen	Georgina	RG	☐	☐	☐
A00235211	Bannon	Trevor	RG	☐	☐	☐
A00234924	Boland	Joseph	RG	☐	☐	☐
A00235455	Boyle	Stacey	RG	☐	☐	☐
A00233619	Collins Darby	Rebecca	RG	☐	☐	☐
A00235986	Concannon	Niamh	RG	☐	☐	☐
A00236040	Croghan	Sean	RG	☐	☐	☐
A00191082	Curley	Brian	RG	☐	☐	☐
A00236365	Curran	David	RG	☐	☐	☐
A00236360	De Carvalho	Bruno	RG	☐	☐	☐
A00228979	Doyle	Hannah	RG	☐	☐	☐
A00236237	Farrell	Mie	RG	☐	☐	☐
A00228337	Gajic	Maja	RG	☐	☐	☐
A00231422	Gill	Brandon	RG	☐	☐	☐
A00235595	Griffin	Thomas	RG	☐	☐	☐
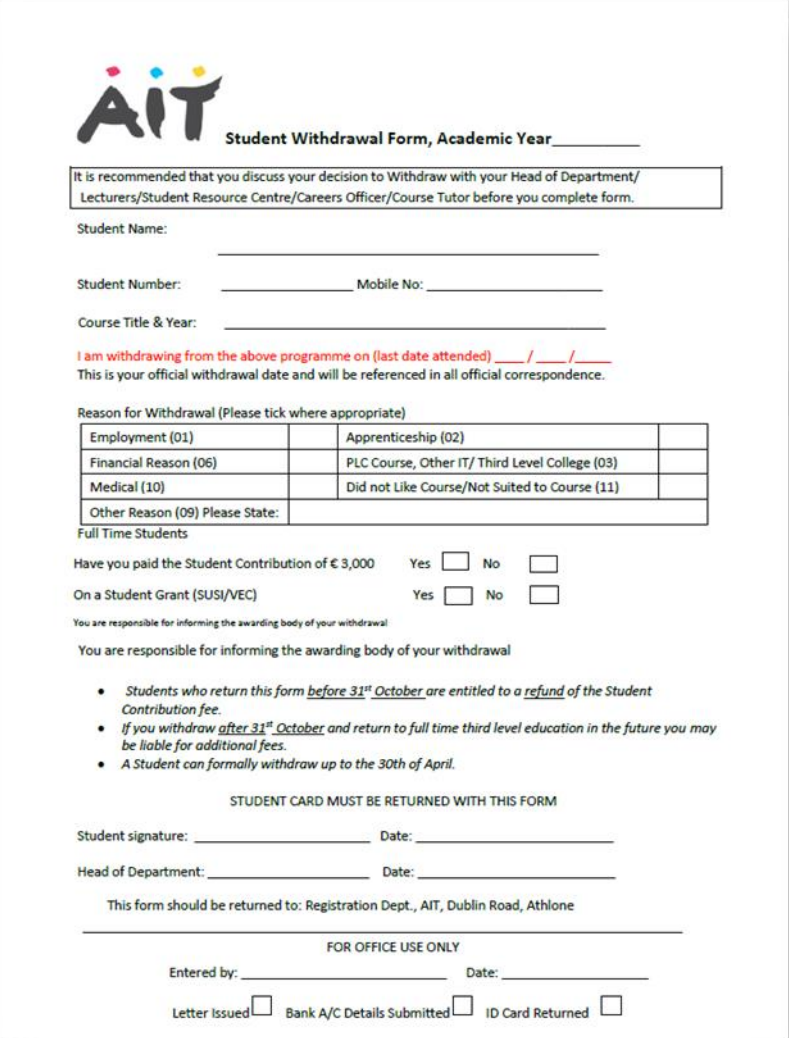
Students attending but not on list: _____

_____

_____

Signed by: _____   **Date:** _____

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Appendix I – Student Withdrawal Form

Student Withdrawal Form, Academic Year_____

It is recommended that you discuss your decision to Withdraw with your Head of Department/ Lecturers/Student Resource Centre/Careers Officer/Course Tutor before you complete form.

Student Name: _____

Student Number: _____ Mobile No: _____

Course Title & Year: _____

I am withdrawing from the above programme on (last date attended) ____ / ____ /_____
This is your official withdrawal date and will be referenced in all official correspondence.

Reason for Withdrawal (Please tick where appropriate)

Employment (01)		Apprenticeship (02)	
Financial Reason (06)		PLC Course, Other IT/ Third Level College (03)	
Medical (10)		Did not Like Course/Not Suited to Course (11)	
Other Reason (09) Please State:			

Full Time Students

Have you paid the Student Contribution of € 3,000   Yes ☐   No ☐

On a Student Grant (SUSI/VEC)   Yes ☐   No ☐

You are responsible for informing the awarding body of your withdrawal

You are responsible for informing the awarding body of your withdrawal

- Students who return this form *before 31st October* are entitled to a *refund* of the Student Contribution fee.
- If you withdraw *after 31st October* and return to full time third level education in the future you may be liable for additional fees.
- A Student can formally withdraw up to the 30th of April.

STUDENT CARD MUST BE RETURNED WITH THIS FORM

Student signature: _____   Date: _____

Head of Department: _____   Date: _____

This form should be returned to: Registration Dept., AIT, Dublin Road, Athlone

_____

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

Entered by: _____   Date: _____

Letter Issued ☐   Bank A/C Details Submitted ☐   ID Card Returned ☐

Appendix J – Student Focus Group

As part of our review, PwC met with a mixed group of 10 students from the below listed programmes:
- 1st year Civil Engineering
- 2nd Year Mechanical Engineering
- 4th Year Social Care
- 4th Year Pharmaceutical Science
- 2nd Year Business & Law

This focus group was organised by Sarah La Cumbre (Student Services Manager) and facilitated by PwC. The primary objective of the focus group is to gain insights into:

- The reasons why students choose to study their programme / at AIT;
- The students' experience of initiatives to support the transition to AIT; and
- The students' experience of the academic and non-academic supports available to them at AIT.

The below themes emerged from the Student Focus Group:

Topic	Student Experience
Programme Content	• For some students, expectations of their programmes differed to the reality encountered e.g. the level of Mathematics and Physics content on the Engineering programmes was higher than expected by some students; the number of law modules on Social Care was not anticipated; and the Business & Law programme was more heavily law focused than envisaged by some students.
Induction	• The students were generally satisfied with the Institute tours and talks given as part of the Induction process. • 1st year students praised the Student Bonding/Activity Day that was introduced and piloted this year. Participating students highlighted that it provided an opportunity for students to socialise, interact with their peers and make new friends. • 2nd-4th year students observed that the Student Bonding/Activity Day would have been a great opportunity during their 1st year induction. • Some students had participated in icebreaker activities in initial lectures, etc.
Student Support Services	• Generally, there appeared to be a strong awareness of the support services available in AIT. • Some students were unaware of the existence of the Academic Writing Centre (AWC). One student, who had engaged with the AWC as part of a class wide initiative, had found it to be very beneficial.

	• Some students highlighted the lack of availability of tutor services at certain times of the semester when there is a high demand for same.
	• Some of the engineering students emphasized the lack of a Physics tutor in their Faculty as being an issue, particularly for students who have not studied Physics for the Leaving Certificate.
Attendance	• A number of the students are subject to strict attendance monitoring with 75% attendance required at labs and practical's in order to progress. Other students stated that there is no monitoring of attendance on their courses.
	• Some of the students on programmes that are not subject to attendance monitoring stated that they would be more likely to attend classes if attendance was monitored.
LDHE / Communications Module	• The general view was that the Learning and Development for Higher Education (LDHE) module was a good and effective module in 1st year.
	• Some students highlighted issues with regards to consistency between lecturers e.g. the approach to answering questions in law modules; the referencing styles favoured by lectures within the same programme e.g. Harvard versus APA.
	• There can sometimes be inconsistency between the teaching in the LDHE module and the preferences of individual lecturers.
Timetabling	• All students noted that timetables in the initial weeks of the academic year tend to be quite unstable.
	• Room changes can sometimes result in students being moved to rooms in buildings which were not covered as part of their induction tour
Student's Union	• The SU was viewed very positively by students with some highlighting the positive work done in relation to mental health e.g. the Mind Your Mates campaign.

Appendix K – Early Weeks' Induction Programme

SLL
Student Led Learning

A framework for developing an early weeks' induction programme: 6/12 month lead in time!

So what can institutions do within first weeks of new incoming students' arriving on campus to enhance their successful transition to Higher Education?

'All interventions or activities should aim to create a culture of belonging, through: supportive peer relations; meaningful interaction between staff and students; developing the knowledge, expectations and confidence to be successful HE learners; and providing an HE experience which is relevant to interests and future goals.' **The UK What Works? (2012) research project for HEA(UK)**

1 Develop a prototype proposal for a branded induction programme and win institutional support; senior management commitment essential to success.

2 Identify and engage main supporters, build goodwill and work up collaborative projects with Faculty management, Central Student Support Service managers, Students Union officers, Buildings Office, Event Management personnel, Arts Offices, Sports Office, Access Service, Clubs and Societies, Catering and Canteen Managers

3 Develop a strong brand and message

4 Decide duration and themes.

5 Collaborate with Students Union, Arts Office, Sports Office, Central Student Services, Library and Learning Support Centres to design, timetable and ultimately deliver appropriate events, avoiding duplication.

6 Work with academic departments to create department led, programme focused events

7 Organise appropriate promotional materials, banners, bunting, pop-up desks, leader sweatshirts, templates for weekly calendars/posters, email templates, social media campaign.

8 Recruit and train a student leader team to support delivery of the programme under supervision of an appropriate office of Institute

9 Deliver and record programme of events as they roll out, creating a resource bank for coming years

10 Review the programme with all stakeholders using interviews, surveys and comment cards

11 Revise next year's programme in light of review

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Athlone Institute of Technology

Non-Progression Analysis Year 1 to Year 2 Full time new entrants

2015/16 to 2018/19 Academic Years

Dympna Fitzgerald MIS Office – July 2019

Table of Contents

Introduction

Student Success is a priority for Athlone Institute of Technology. Reviewing regularly what the data is on Progression or Non Progression is part of our Institute annual processes.

Annually the HEA publish their Institute Profiles and we report positively overall compared to the sector norm, in particular in the subject (ISCED) areas of Health and Welfare, Business, Administration and Law and Services.

The typical profile of students most likely to 'not progress' includes the following characteristics[1]:

➢ Relatively low points on entry
➢ Male
➢ NFQ Level 6 & 7
➢ Studying Computer Science
➢ Studying Engineering or Construction
➢ Students from the lower Socio Economic group

My report identifies whether a student is enrolled in the institute on the next stage 12 months later. So the most current numbers included in this report looks at March 2018 SRS Full time new entrants and using the unique student id reports whether they are enrolled in March 2019 on Stage 2 of a programme[2].

I include previous years' data for trending purposes. Each programme is assigned a Field of Study (ISCED) based on guidelines set out by the HEA.

At an institute level we have improved our progression rates in 2017 (81%) and 2018 (81%) when compared to previous academic years (Average 77% over previous 6 years).

When we look at it at NFQ Level, the Level 7 & 8 programmes are reporting improvements while the level 6 is more sporadic, reporting 25% non-progression in 2018 compared to 22% in 2014.

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[1] HEA, A STUDY OF PROGRESSION IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION 2014/15 TO 2015/16

[2] Note the HEA Progression report includes students who are repeating Year 1 in their data. This equates annually to an average number of 40 (circa 10 in FT mode and balance PT).

Non-Progression – AT A GLANCE

In the coming months we will be in receipt of the Institutional profile for 16/17 and 17/18 Academic years. The HEA gave us an opportunity to review and verify the results ahead of publication. It is important to note that the HEA methodology includes repeat students as progressing, in our detailed analysis we do not include repeat students.

Table 1 Non Progression by Level for 2015/16 to 2016/17 AIT compared to IOT sector

Non Progression 2015-16 => 2016-17 (14/15=>15/16 %s in brackets where relevant/comparable)			
	Non-Progression Rate	*All Institutes of Technology*	*National Non-Progression Rate*
Level 8	13% (17%)	15% (15%)	10% (11%)
Level 7	21% (27%)	25% (25%)	25% (25%)
Level 6	22% (26%)	28% (27%)	28% (27%)
All Levels	**19% (23%)**	**20% (21%)**	**14% (14%)**

Table 2 Non Progression by Level for 2016/17 to 2017/18 AIT compared to IOT sector

Non Progression 2016-17 => 2017-18 (15/16=>16/17 %s in brackets where relevant/comparable)			
	Non-Progression Rate	*All Institutes of Technology*	*National Non-Progression Rate*
Level 8	11% (13%)	15% (15%)	10% (10%)
Level 7	21% (21%)	23% (25%)	23% (25%)
Level 6	13% (22%)	23% (28%)	23% (28%)
All Levels	**15% (19%)**	**19% (20%)**	**13% (14%)**

The above presents a positive story for AIT with a reduction in %'s across all NFQ levels.

Analysis by Field of Study (or ISCED Code)
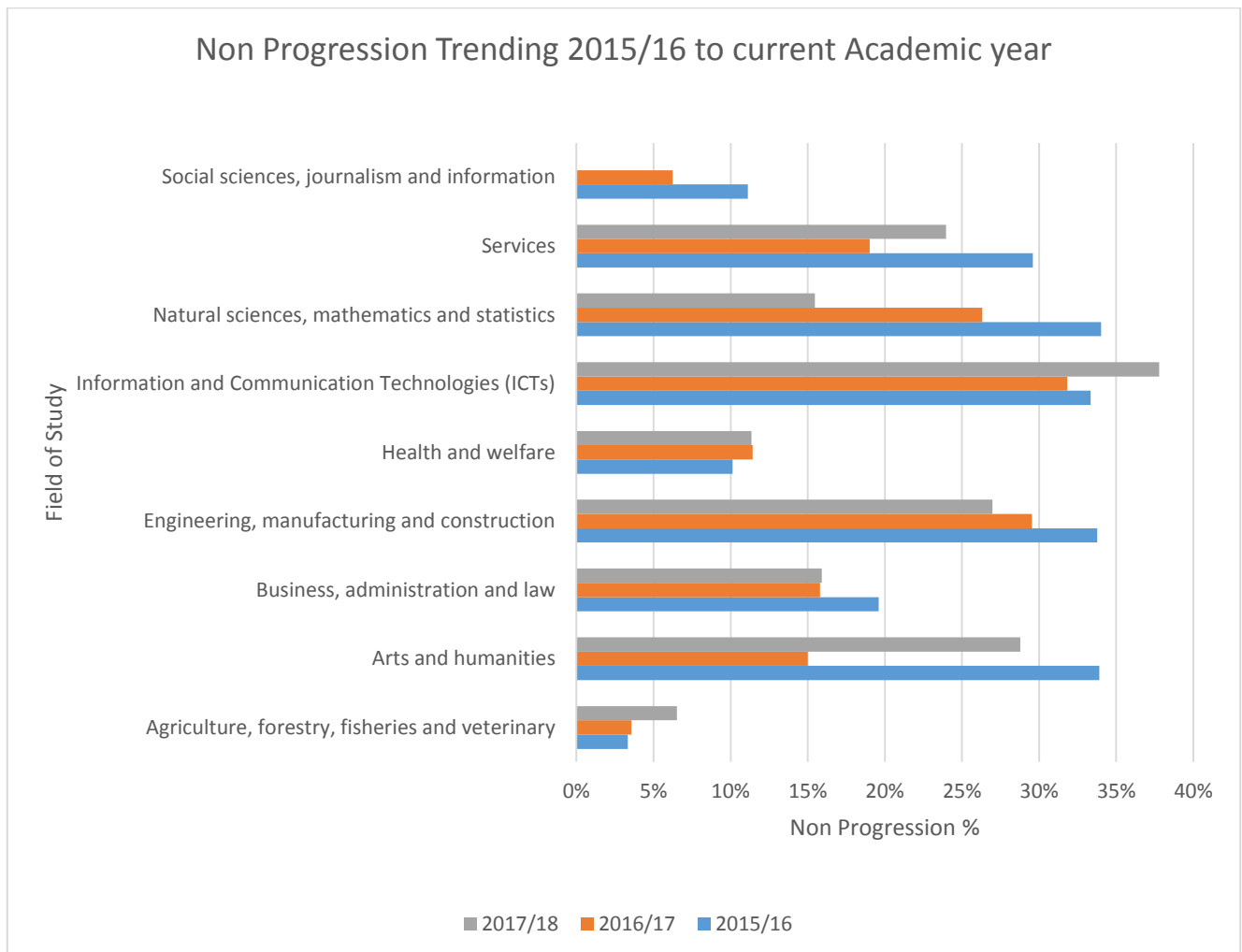
Figure 1 Non Progression by Field of Study 2015/16 Intake to date

On reviewing the above graph, one can see that the trend is positive over the timeframe analysed in 6 out of 9 of the ISCED groupings reported on here. I attach in *Appendix A* the programmes grouped within each Field of Study. It is worth noting that the progression statistics two Fields of Study of Agricultural/Veterinary science and our Health and Social programmes is above the Institute averages. The Information and Communications grouping contains the suite of programmes that are most challenged within AIT and all HEI's in respect of non-progression. On further analysis the drop out and failure rates are higher than the norm. The subjects include Mathematics, Networks and Software Development. Detailed data at modular level is available and has been circulated.

Analysis by NFQ Level

Following analysis of last year's progression data using March 2019 SRS we can see up to date data across each level of study for Year 1 students progressing into Year 2.

Analysis of Non Progression Year 1 New Entrants Full time by NFQ Level					
	2013/14 to 2014/15	2014/15 to 2015/16	2015/16 to 2016/17	2016/17 to 2017/18	2017/18 to 2018/19
NFQ Level	**2014**	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**
06	22%	27%	26%	15%	25%
07	28%	26%	27%	26%	20%
08	16%	14%	17%	15%	14%
Grand Total	**21%**	**23%**	**23%**	**19%**	**19%**

* Non Progression in this report is defined as where a student has not progressed to Stage 2.

I present the table above in a graph which shows the positive trend in Level 7 and Level 8 programmes and Level 6 up to 2017 was showing a great improvement but progression into 2018 took a reduction back down to 25%. There is one outlier in this data. The Level 6 in Music up to 2015/16 AY was reporting an average of 35% non-progression. In 2016/17 100% or 21 students progressed to Year 2 which was exceptional. In 2017/18 10 of the 27 students (37%) did not progress. When I queried this with the relevant Head of Department, Trevor Prendergast there was no obvious explanation to the success of 2016 group except that it was observed they worked really well together and that this was a significant factor in motivation of the group.
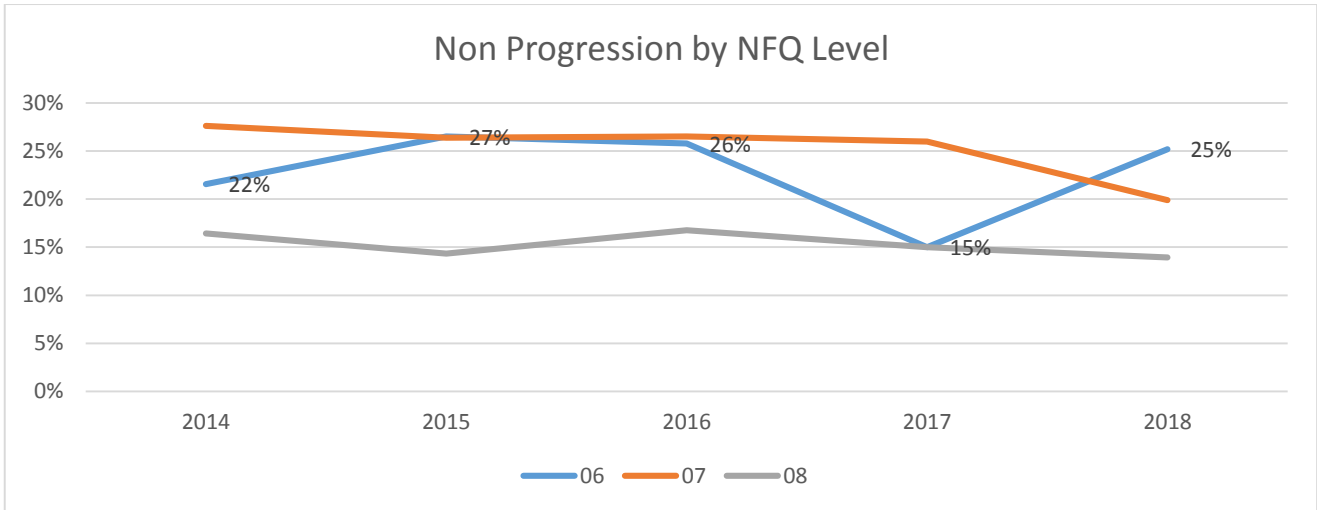
Figure 2 Non Progression by Level for historic 5 years 2014 to 2018 Academic Year

Also progression of the 2017 intake level 6 programmes on Sports and recreation (14/34 or 41%), the Civil Engineering Level 6 (8/18 or 53%) and Electronics and Computer Engineering (3/5 or 60%) was a factor in the overall non progression rate of 25%.

Analysis by Department

Reviewing the data at Department Level allows us to look to analyse the specific programmes that are under the various functional areas. We will take a deeper dive at programme level later in in this report. The most recent Academic year is reported to the most right, thus dark blue is data representing non progression %'s into 2018 Academic Year.
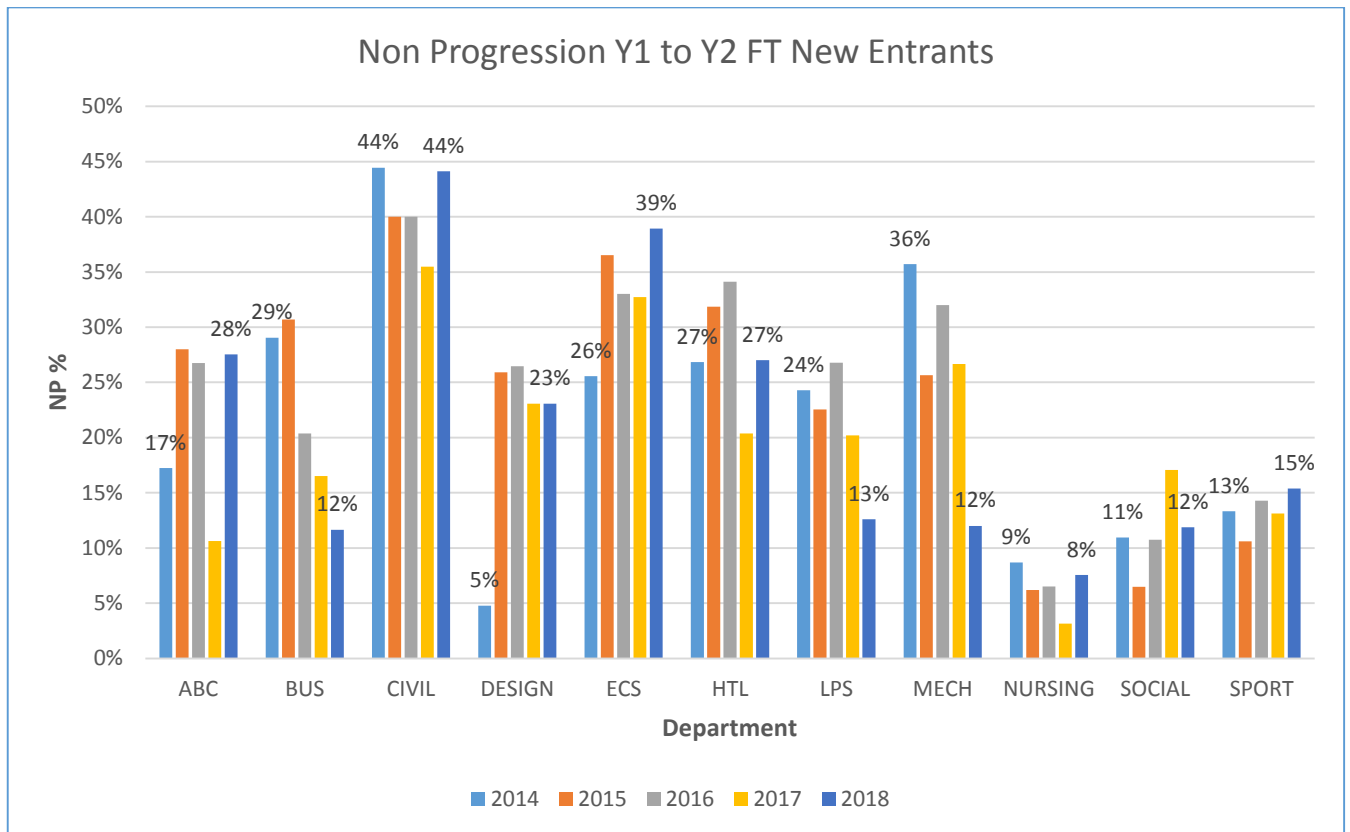
Figure 3 Non Progression by Department for historic 5 years 2014 to 2018 Academic Year

Non Progression trending by ISCED Code
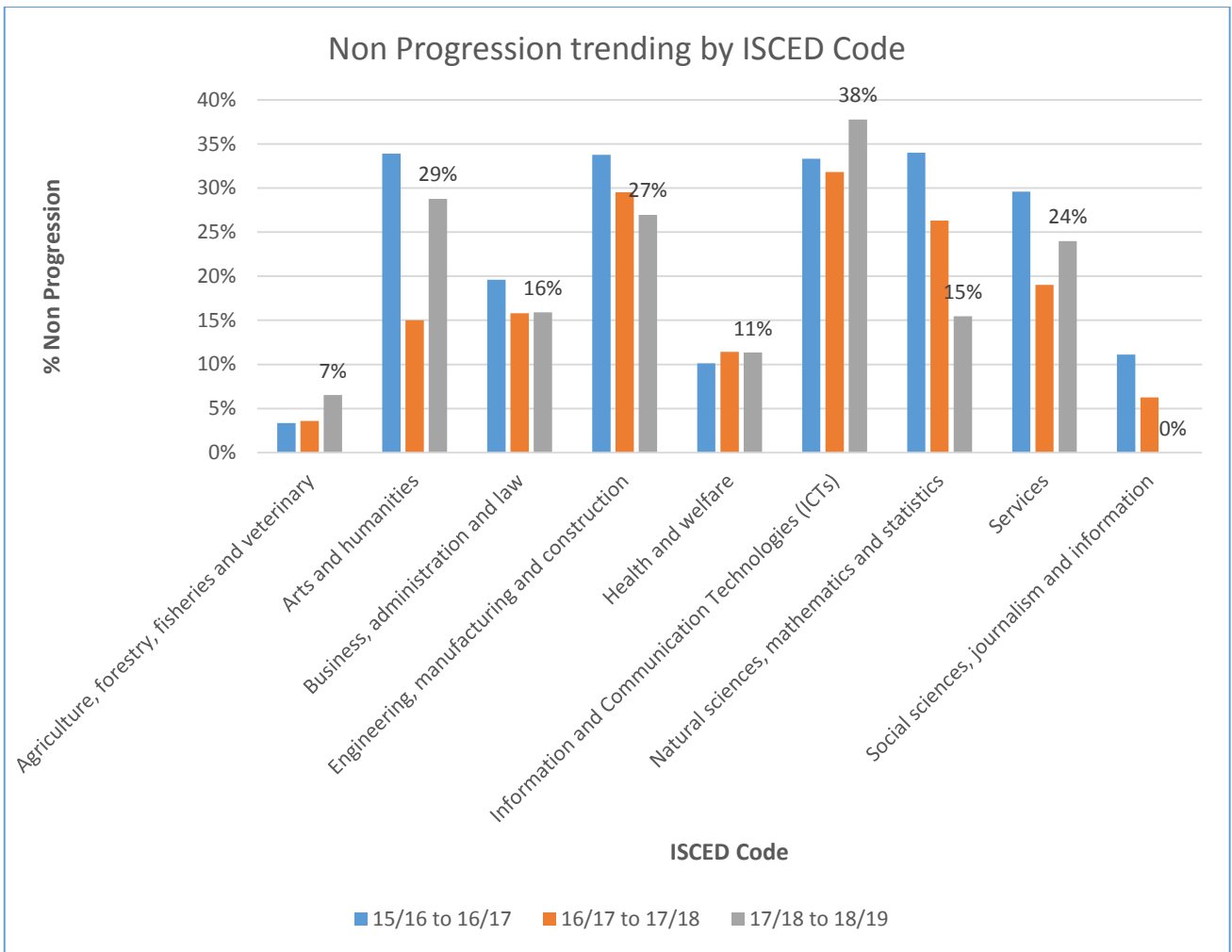
Figure 4 Non Progression by Department for historic 5 years 2014 to 2018 Academic Year

A Programme of Study is assigned an ISCED code (International Standard Classification of Education) which is the reference international classification for organising education programmes and related qualifications by levels and fields. This classification was developed by UNESCO to facilitate comparisons of education statistics and indicators across countries on the basis of uniform and internationally agreed definitions.

Progression Data – By Department within each Faculty

AIT is reporting higher progression rates at all levels when benchmarked across the IOT sector.

Progression 2016-17 => 2017-18

Table 4: Overall Non-Progression Rates by NFQ Level 2016/17 => 2017/18

	AIT Progression Rate	All Institutes of Technology	National Progression Rate
Level 8	89%	85%	90%
Level 7	79%	77%	77%
Level 6	87%	77%	77%
All Levels	**85%**	**81%**	**87%**
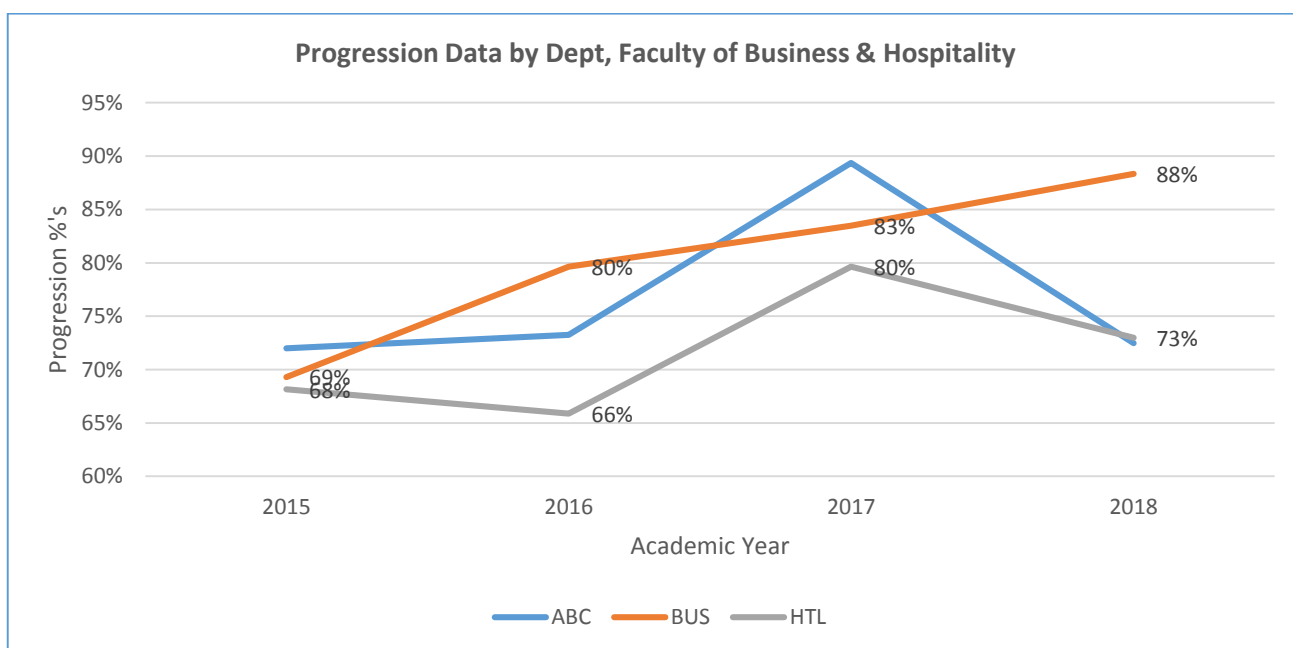
Figure 5 Progression by Departments within Faculty of Business and Hospitality 2014 to 2018

The greatest improvement in progression %'s is observed in the Department of Business and Management Studies. It has improved progression by almost 20% in 4 Academic years. In student numbers this relates to 91 out of 103 students progressing, compared to 70 out of 101 in 2015. There were 2 programmes Business Psychology and Business and Law where 100% of students progressed to 2018/19 AY. More details later included in analysis by programme.
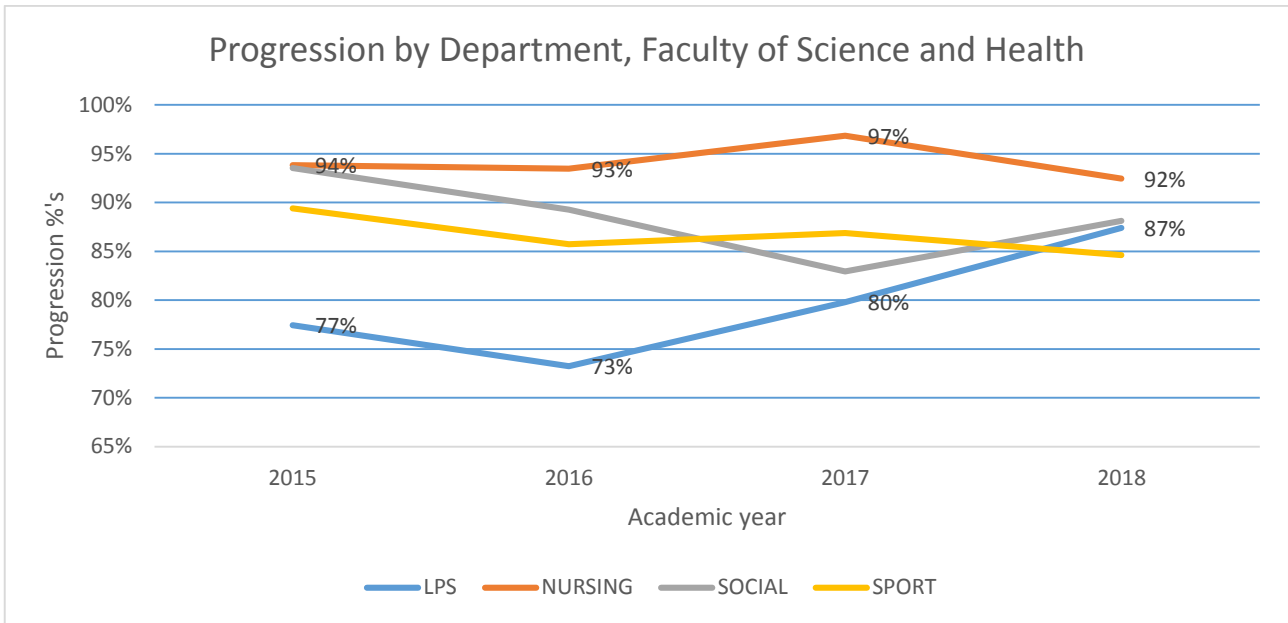
Figure 6 Progression by Departments within Faculty of Science and Health 2014 to 2018

The biggest improvement is observed in the Department of Life & Physical Sciences, showing an improvement of 10% since 2015. This relates to 125 of a total student cohort of 143 progressing from Year 1 to Year 2 into 2018, compared to 106 out of 140 in 2015. The Departments of Nursing and Healthcare is reporting very good progression rates at 92%.
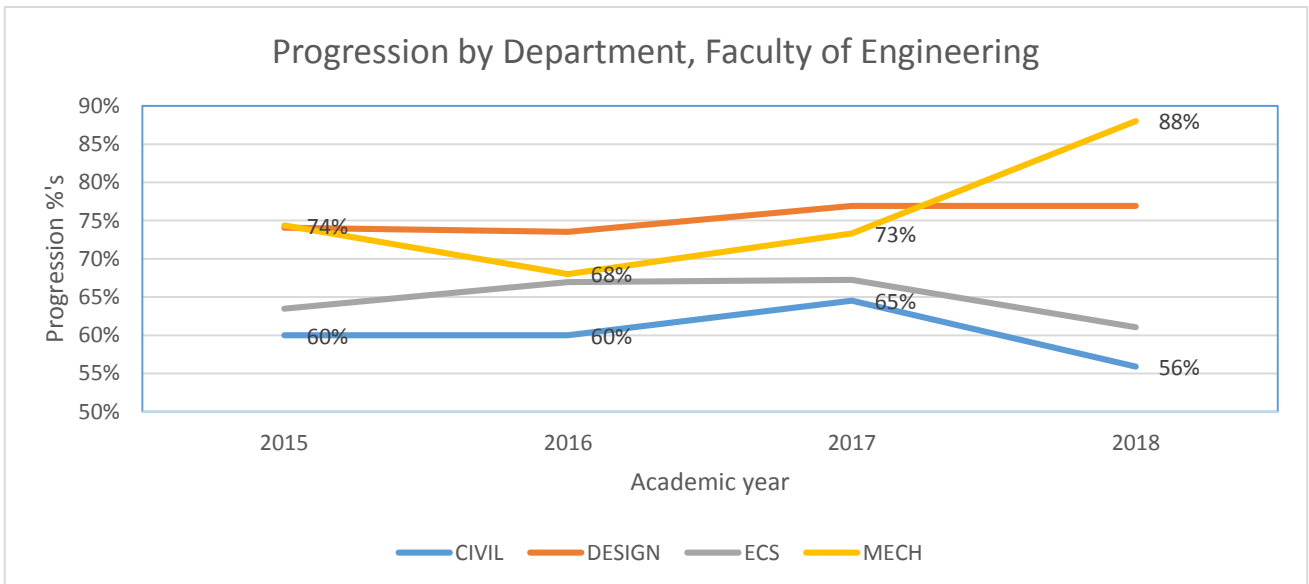
Figure 7 Progression by Departments within Faculty of Engineering and Informatics 2014 to 2018

An increase of 14% is seen in the Department of Mechanical Engineering. Our analysis will show on improvement on all 6 programmes which are common taught in Year 1. There were 50 students enrolled full time in 2017/18 in Year 1 of which 44 progressed successfully into Year 2 2018/19 Academic Year, compared to 58 of a starting full time cohort of 78 in 2015/16. The factors contributing to this can be confirmed by the Faculty but having had discussions with Faculty Administrator, the introduction of mandatory 75% attendance is seen as the main reason for such an improvement in progression numbers. In 2014/15 it was proposed and agreed at Academic Standards and Quality (ASQ) that practical assessments of 1st year (Mechanical Engineering) modules will require a minimum attendance of 75% for the modules of Engineering Science, Mechanics 1, Materials and Processes and Engineering Workshop, Drawing and CAD 1.

At the end of this report I will present the tables of data by Faculty and will detail each programme and the full details on enrolments at March each year and non- progression numbers for each programme. I would recommend that further analysis be carried out by each Department using the data available at module level to review, discuss and action as deemed appropriate.

Conclusion

This report provides a quantitative overview of the non-progression of students between 2014/15 and 2018/19. The findings of this report show that our progression rates have improved over the last number of Academic years in respect of our first year Full time new entrant cohort progressing into year 2, going from 77% in 2014/15 to 81% in 2018/19.

It is evident that monitoring of student attendance, minimum attendance requirements and engagement with the students following assessments is playing a critical role in improved outcomes for progression.

This can be supported by the significant improvement in progression in the Departments of Business and Management Studies and Mechanical, Polymer and Design.

It is important to analyse the characteristics of students who are not advancing in their studies in order to identify those most 'at-risk' of non-progression. Early intervention in the undergraduate cycle is vital to ensure that students have the academic & social supports and guidance that they need to enhance their motivation, engagement and performance.

Successful participation and completion is a priority goal in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2015 – 2019 (NAP).

It is very much embodied in the Higher Education System Performance Framework 2018 – 2020 with particular focus within the Objective 1[3] and 4[4] in respect of Participation, Completion and Student Success strategies.

It is recommended that further analysis be carried out by each Department using the data available at module level to review, discuss and action as deemed appropriate. Data is available at modular level and had been circulated last year to Heads of Department. I have just received data at modular level for 2018/19 Academic Year and will be circulating in the coming days.

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[3] Objective 1 'Providing a strong talent pipeline combining knowledge, skills & employability which responds effectively to the needs of our enterprise, public service and community sectors, both nationally and regionally, and maintains Irish leadership in Europe for skill availability'

[4] Objective 3 ' Significantly improves the equality of opportunity through Education and Training and recruits a student body that reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population '

Non Progression by Programme Department

Table 2 Non Progression by programme for the Faculty of Business and Hospitality

Analysis of Non Progression Year 1 New Entrants Full time by (		2014/15 to 2015/16			2015/16 to 2016/17			2016/17 to 2017/18			2017/18 to 2018/19			over last 4 years	Level	Dept	Field of study (ISCED)
Faculty of Business and Hospitality		Student Count	Non Prog	NP %	Student Count	Non Prog	NP %	Student Count	Non Prog	NP %	Student Count	Non Prog	NP %				
AL_BACCT_B	Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Accounting	22	6	27%	19	2	11%	22	5	23%	25	4	16%	19%	08	ABC	Business, administration and law
AL_BALAW_8	Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Accounting and Law	0	0	0%							4	2	50%	50%	08	ABC	Business, administration and law
AL_BOFIS_C	Higher Certificate in Business in Office Management	11	3	27%	16	3	19%	17	2	12%	0			16%	06	ABC	Business, administration and law
AL_KCOMP_D	Bachelor of Science in Business Computing	9	3	33%	7	3	43%	6	2	33%	0			32%	07	ABC	Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)
AL_BEQNE_C	Higher Certificate in Business in Equine Studies	25	4	16%	14	3	21%	26	1	4%	13	3	23%	14%	06	ABC	Business, administration and law
AL_BMUSC_C	Higher Certificate in Business in Music and Instrument Technology	21	7	33%	25	11	44%	21	0	0%	27	10	37%	30%	06	ABC	Arts and humanities
AL_BSCMP_6	Higher Certificate in Computing in Business	12	5	42%	5	1	20%	2	0	0%	0			38%	06	ABC	Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)
AL_BBLAW_8	Bachelor of Business and Law (Honours)	21	8	38%	12	4	33%	17	5	29%	15	0	0%	28%	08	BUS	Business, administration and law
AL_BMKSM_6	Higher Certificate in Business in Social Media Marketing	19	5	26%	17	4	24%	0	0					32%	06	BUS	Business, administration and law
AL_BPSYC_8	Business Psychology	11	0	0%	9	1	11%	16	1	6%	13	0	0%	4%	08	BUS	Social sciences, journalism and information
AL_BBSTD_C	Higher Certificate in Business	31	12	39%	40	9	23%	30	3	10%	38	9	24%	23%	06	BUS	Business, administration and law
AL_BDIGM_7	Bachelor of Business in Digital Marketing							20	6	30%	13	2	15%	24%	07	BUS	Business, administration and law
AL_BSTUD_B	Bachelor of Business (Honours)	19	6	32%	30	4	13%	20	2	10%	24	1	4%	13%	08	BUS	Business, administration and law
AL_BSPMT_D	Bachelor of Arts in Spa and Wellness Management	14	3	21%	7	1	14%	5	0	0%	0			18%	07	HTL	Services
AL_BSREC_C	Higher Certificate in Business in Sport and Recreation	51	18	35%	40	12	30%	44	9	20%	34	14	41%	32%	06	HTL	Services
AL_FCULA_6	Higher Certificate in Arts in Culinary Arts	29	8	28%	26	5	19%	22	4	18%	32	3	9%	18%	06	HTL	Services
AL_OBARS_6	Higher Certificate in Arts Bar Supervision	13	5	38%	29	17	59%	15	5	33%	24	6	25%	39%	06	HTL	Services
AL_OLEIS_7	Bachelor of Arts Hotel and Leisure Management	28	9	32%	27	9	33%	22	4	18%	21	7	33%	29%	07	HTL	Services
	Faculty of Business and Hospitality	**336**	**102**	**30%**	**323**	**89**	**28%**	**305**	**49**	**16%**	**283**	**61**	**22%**	**24%**			

Table 3 Non Progression by programme for the Faculty of Engineering and Informatics

Analysis of Non Progression Year 1 New Entrants Full time by Co		2014/15 to 2015/16			2015/16 to 2016/17			2016/17 to 2017/18			2017/18 to 2018/19			over last 4 years	Level	Dept	Field of study (ISCED)
Faculty of Engineering and Informatics		Student Count	Non Prog	NP %	Student Count	Non Prog	NP %	Student Count	Non Prog	NP %	Student Count	Non Prog	NP %				
AL_CCIVL_7	Bachelor of Engineering Civil Engineering	8	3	38%	18	6	33%	15	9	60%	8	5	63%	47%	07	Civil	Engineering, manufacturing and construction
AL_CCIVL_C	Higher Certificate in Engineering in Civil Engineering	17	7	41%	2	2	100%	3	0	0%	15	8	53%	46%	06	Civil	Engineering, manufacturing and construction
AL_CQSUR_8	Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Quantity Surveying							13	2	15%	11	2	18%	17%	08	Civil	Engineering, manufacturing and construction
AL_DANIM_8	Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Animation and Illustration							19	5	26%	26	5	19%	22%	08	Design	Arts and humanities
AL_DGRAPH_7	Bachelor of Arts in Graphic Design	27	7	26%	34	9	26%	20	4	20%	13	4	31%	26%	07	Design	Arts and humanities
AL_EELCE_C	Higher Certificate in Engineering in Electronics and Computer Engineering	15	8	53%	4	1	25%	11	4	36%	5	3	60%	46%	06	ECS	Engineering, manufacturing and construction
AL_EICTE_7	ICT Engineering Common Entry	39	14	36%	24	11	46%	12	9	75%	19	8	42%	45%	07	ECS	Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)
AL_EMACD_7	Bachelor of Science in Software Development (Mobile Apps and Connected Devices)				27	6	22%	31	8	26%	27	7	26%	25%	07	ECS	Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)
AL_ESFTW_8	Software Design Common Y1	59	19	32%	44	16	36%	36	9	25%	34	14	41%	34%	08	ECS	Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)
AL_EWIRC_7	Bachelor of Engineering in Electronics and Wireless Communications	0	0	0%	3	1	33%	0	0					33%	07	ECS	Engineering, manufacturing and construction
AL_KCENG_7	Bachelor of Engineering in Computer Engineering	2	1	50%	6	0	0%	10	4	40%	10	5	50%	36%	07	ECS	Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)
AL_KNTWM_7	Bachelor of Science in Network Management				1	1	100%	13	3	23%	0			29%	07	ECS	Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)
AL_EMCHC_7	Mechanical Common Y1				12	6	50%	33	7	21%	13	2	15%	26%	07	MECH	Engineering, manufacturing and construction
AL_EMEPY_8	Bachelor of Engineering (Honours) in Mechanical and Polymer Engineering	10	1	10%	9	1	11%	21	3	14%	11	1	9%	12%	08	MECH	Engineering, manufacturing and construction
AL_EMECH_C	Higher Certificate in Engineering in Mechanical Engineering	7	0	0%	6	3	50%	10	4	40%	2	0	0%	28%	06	MECH	Engineering, manufacturing and construction
AL_EMECH_D	Bachelor of Engineering in Mechanical Engineering	17	7	41%	10	3	30%	11	6	55%	10	1	10%	35%	07	MECH	Engineering, manufacturing and construction
AL_EMECT_D	Bachelor of Engineering in Mechatronics	21	4	19%	7	1	14%	7	0	0%	8	0	0%	12%	07	MECH	Engineering, manufacturing and construction
AL_EMERE_D	Bachelor of Engineering in Mechanical Engineering and Renewable Energy	23	8	35%	6	2	33%	8	4	50%	6	2	33%	37%	07	MECH	Engineering, manufacturing and construction
	Faculty of Business and Hospitality	**245**	**79**	**32%**	**213**	**69**	**32%**	**273**	**81**	**30%**	**218**	**67**	**31%**	**31%**			

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Table 4 Non Progression by programme for the Faculty of Science and Health

Analysis of Non Progression Year 1 New Entrants Full time by Cou		2014/15 to 2015/16			2015/16 to 2016/17			2016/17 to 2017/18			2017/18 to 2018/19						
Faculty of Science and Health		Student Count	Non Prog	NP %	Student Count	Non Prog	NP %	Student Count	Non Prog	NP %	Student Count	Non Prog	NP %	Average over last 4 years	Level	Dept	Field of study (ISCED)
AL_NVETN_D	Bachelor of Science in Veterinary Nursing	26	2	8%	30	1	3%	28	1	4%	46	3	7%	6%	07	LPS	Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary
AL_SBIOT_8	Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Biotechnology	18	5	28%	10	4	40%	23	5	22%	16	3	19%	26%	08	LPS	Natural sciences
AL_SBIOT_D	Bachelor of Science in Biotechnology	9	4	44%	12	7	58%	8	6	75%	5	3	60%	51%	07	LPS	Natural sciences
AL_SBIOV_8	Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Bioveterinary Science	29	4	14%	20	6	30%	11	0	0%	20	1	5%	14%	08	LPS	Natural sciences
AL_SFORX_7	Bachelor of Science in Forensic Toxicology	17	6	35%	15	6	40%	5	1	20%	8	2	25%	31%	07	LPS	Natural sciences
AL_SMICR_8	Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Microbiology										12	0	0%	0%	08	LPS	Natural sciences
AL_SPHAR_B	Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Pharmaceutical Sciences	9	1	11%	8	1	13%	10	3	30%	14	3	21%	19%	08	LPS	Natural sciences
AL_SPHSC_7	Bachelor of Science in Pharmaceutical Science (Drug Development and Analysis)	23	2	9%	16	3	19%	10	2	20%	10	1	10%	21%	07	LPS	Natural sciences
AL_SSCIE_C	Higher Certificate in Science Bioscience/Chemistry	33	13	39%	16	6	38%	9	3	33%	12	2	17%	35%	06	LPS	Natural sciences
AL_NDENT_C	Higher Certificate in Science in Dental Nursing	22	2	9%	21	0	0%	22	1	5%	16	0	0%	5%	06	NHS	Health and welfare
AL_NGENR_B	Bachelor of Science (Honours) in General Nursing	35	2	6%	35	3	9%	38	2	5%	40	3	8%	7%	08	NHS	Health and welfare
AL_NPSYC_B	Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Psychiatric Nursing	17	0	0%	18	0	0%	19	0	0%	22	1	5%	3%	08	NHS	Health and welfare
AL_SPHAR_C	Higher Certificate in Science in Pharmacy Technician	23	2	9%	18	3	17%	16	0	0%	28	4	14%	9%	06	NHS	Health and welfare
AL_HEYCE_7	Bachelor of Arts in Early Years' Care and Education	30	0	0%	32	2	6%	30	1	3%	37	2	5%	4%	07	Social	Health and welfare
AL_HSOCA_7	Bachelor of Arts in Applied Social Studies in Social Care							44	8	18%	63	10	16%	17%	07	Social	Health and welfare
AL_HSOCA_7CN	Bachelor of Arts in Applied Social Studies in Social Care							23	10	43%	20	3	15%	30%	07	Social	Health and welfare
AL_HSOCS_B	Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Social Care Practice	42	3	7%	51	5	10%	32	3	9%	40	4	10%	9%	08	Social	Health and welfare
AL_HSOCS_C	Higher Certificate in Arts in Applied Social Studies in Social Care	53	4	8%	49	3	6%	0	0					10%	06	Social	Health and welfare
AL_HSOCS_CCN	Higher Certificate in Arts in Applied Social Studies in Social Care	14	2	14%	17	6	35%	0	0					21%	06	Social	Health and welfare
AL_SNUTR_8	Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Health Science with Nutrition	21	0	0%	24	3	13%	26	4	15%	22	2	9%	11%	08	Sport	Health and welfare
AL_SPHYS_8	Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Physical Activity and Health							9	3	33%	12	5	42%	38%	08	Sport	Health and welfare
AL_SPTEX_8	Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Sport Science with Exercise Physiology	33	4	12%	40	6	15%	34	5	15%	35	5	14%	14%	08	Sport	Services
AL_SREHAB_8	Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Sports Therapy with Rehabilitation	31	5	16%	41	6	15%	30	1	3%	35	4	11%	12%	08	Sport	Health and welfare
	Faculty of Business and Hospitality	**485**	**61**	**13%**	**473**	**71**	**15%**	**427**	**59**	**14%**	**513**	**61**	**12%**	**13%**			

Appendices

Appendix A: Programmes grouped by Field of study March 2017

Field of Study with programmes under each for AIT	Count of stuID	
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	**46**	
Bachelor of Science in Veterinary Nursing	46	
Arts and humanities	**66**	
Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Animation and Illustration	26	
Bachelor of Arts in Graphic Design	13	
Higher Certificate in Business in Music and Instrument Technology	27	
Business Administration and Law	**132**	
Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Accounting	25	
Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Accounting and Law	4	
Bachelor of Business (Honours)	24	
Bachelor of Business (Honours) in Business and Law	15	
Bachelor of Business in Digital Marketing	13	
Higher Certificate in Business in Equine	13	
Higher Certificate in Business Studies	38	
Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction	**89**	
Bachelor of Engineering (Honours) in Mechanical and Polymer Engineering	11	
Bachelor of Engineering in Civil Engineering	8	
Bachelor of Engineering in Mechanical and Renewable Energy	6	
Bachelor of Engineering in Mechanical Engineering	10	
Bachelor of Engineering in Mechatronics	8	
Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Quantity Surveying	11	
Higher Certificate in Engineering in Civil Engineering	15	
Higher Certificate in Engineering in Electronics and Computer Engineering	5	
Higher Certificate in Engineering in Mechanical Engineering	2	
Mechanical Common Y1	13	
Health & Welfare	**335**	
Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Social Care Practice	40	
Bachelor of Arts in Applied Social Studies in Social Care	83	
Bachelor of Arts in Early Years' Care and Education	37	
Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Athletic and Rehabilitation Therapy	35	
Bachelor of Science (Honours) in General Nursing	40	
Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Health Science with Nutrition	22	
Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Physical Activity and Health	12	
Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Psychiatric Nursing	22	
Higher Certificate in Science in Dental Nursing	16	
Higher Certificate in Science in Pharmacy Technician	28	
Information and Communicatins Technology	**90**	
Bachelor of Engineering in Computer Engineering	10	
Bachelor of Science in Software Development (Mobile Apps and Connected Devices)	27	
ICT Engineering Common Entry	19	
Software Design Common Y1	34	
Natural Sciences, Maths and Stats	**97**	
Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Biotechnology	16	
Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Bioveterinary Science	20	
Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Microbiology	12	
Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Pharmaceutical Science	14	
Bachelor of Science in Biotechnology	5	
Bachelor of Science in Forensic Toxicology	8	
Bachelor of Science in Pharmaceutical Science (Drug Development and Analysis)	10	
Higher Certificate in Science in Biosciences and Chemistry	12	
Services	**146**	
Bachelor of Arts in Hotel and Leisure Management	21	
Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Sports Science with Exercise Physiology	35	
Higher Certificate in Arts in Bar Supervision	24	
Higher Certificate in Arts in Culinary Arts	32	
Higher Certificate in Business in Sport and Recreation	34	
Social Sciences, journalism and information	**13**	
Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Business Psychology	13	
Grand Total	**1014**	

Appendix E: Interview Re-evaluation

Ideas for challenging students with poor results:

This document provides some background and tools to use in one to one discussions with students who have demonstrated poor results in a number of subjects, with the aim of supporting behaviour change.

Some key considerations are outlined along with some practical strategies / tools to use.

<u>**Key considerations**</u>

Research in Motivational Interviewing (MI) approaches highlights that <u>telling</u> people what to do is not the way to go (as it can spur defensiveness, blaming others etc), but rather **facilitating** - using conversation - the student to articulate that they need to change, and tease out with them how they need to change is important.

Building up a **good rapport and empathy** with someone is and can be achieved by listening actively, reflecting, asking open ended questions, normalising. I think that this could be a good approach to take prior to engaging them in some of these exercises. So engaging a student in conversation and exploring the past semester and how it they thought and felt it went would be useful.

The MI approach also emphasises that if we are to advise, or to share knowledge, or have someone engage in some techniques that **asking permission** is likely to be a good tactic e.g. "Is it OK if I share some information with you that might be helpful?" or "if its OK, we have some different tools that we could use here to help you, what do you reckon, we could have a look at some of these and see if some might help?"

In the MI approach highlighting a **disparity** between where the student wants to be and where they are now is crucial for change. Finding out more about where the student would like to be by asking questions about plans for after college, or over the next year or more can help show the disparity.

Explaining where a student **lies relative to other students** in terms of their performance might be one way of highlighting the need for change. Providing **normative data** about how students perform when they fail modules can also highlight the need for change. A neutral non-judgmental and sensitive presentation of this data could facilitate this.

Scales that gauge the **importance of changing**, and **confidence in changing** help people to assess where they are in relation to a certain behaviour and can be followed up with questions that the student can answer around what they can do to make the jump to a higher score.

 A readiness to change scale is another options

 "On the following scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is definitely not ready to change and 10 is definitely ready to change, what number best reflects how ready you are at the present time to change your approach to learning?"

Another tool that is used is the **decisional matrix** which requires the student to identify the benefits and costs of changing (and not changing)

Steps towards change: Some students may not be **too sure** about how to change. So for example the student may not be aware of supports that could be available to them. In this case we should aim to ask permission to give some advice and based on what the student has been saying to us, we can give information about learning supports that may be available in AIT.

Asking questions like...

"How can I help you get past some of the difficulties you are experiencing?"

"If you were to decide to change, what would you have to do to make this happen?"

A one page handout with the supports that AIT offers to students may be useful here to aid brainstorming around how to improve.

Self-Efficacy: The literature on Motivational Interviewing also highlights the importance of self-belief that a change can be made. Again, some of this will possibly involve trying to identify and reduce the **barriers** to achieving the goal, so exploring these would be good, and finding out how they can be negotiated.

But also **showing how other students have turned things around** may help here too. Also **affirming some of the accomplishments** that the student has previously achieved. E.g. the student may have passed some modules, the student put in a lot of work and talent to get to college in the first place.

Breaking down the work into **smaller achievable goals** would likely help, and **writing these goals down (SMART goals)** would likely increase adherence to the goals. So for example working with the student to identify small changes that could lead to the bigger change and identifying these could be useful.

"Therapeutic Paradox":"Paradoxical statements are used with students in an effort to get them to argue for the importance of changing.

It is hoped that after students hear such statements they would seek to correct by arguing for change (e.g., "Bill, I know you have been trying to improve for the past few semesters, but you are still not attending lectures, maybe now is not the right time to change?"). It is hoped that the student would counter with an argument indicating that he/she wants to change (e.g., "No, I know I need to change, it's just tough putting it into practice."). Once it is established that the person does want to change, subsequent conversations can involve identifying the reasons why progress has been slow up to now.

Tools / Strategies

Option 1

- Ask the student to rate (write down) their performance in the semester on a scale of 1-10. Then rate their **potential** to perform on a scale of 1-10. Ask them then to provide (write down) 2 main reasons for the gap.
- Then ask them to look ahead to the next semester – using the same potential to perform score ask them to rate how they could score if they addressed even one of the reasons for the gap.
- Ask then to write down 3 things they are going to do differently in the next semester
- Tell them you will meet them again at the end of semester to assess the scores again

Option 2

Ask the student to complete the following table based on what s/he thinks each group would say about his/her focus / habits / performance for the last semester.

Self-rating	Friends in Class	Lecturers	Parents
+	+	+	+
-	-	–	-

What are you most proud of?
What would you most like to change?
What is stopping you?

Option 3

- Provide a comparison of the student's results with the average performance of the rest of the class.
- Ask are your comfortable sitting in this category?
- Ask what do you think those that performed better than you did that you didn't do?
- Someone has to be in the bottom x % of the group – I always meet those people when the results come out – will we make an appointment now for the end of the second semester to go through the motions again – and suggest a specific date and time and say you will follow up with an email to confirm

Option 4

Have a list of typical excuses that students use for explaining away poor results on a sheet of paper.

Ask the student to pick the 3 that they are going to use now to explain their results to you and the 3 they will use when they are explaining the results to their parents.

Then give them a fresh sheet and ask them to take it away and before the end of the day to honestly select the top 3 reasons and to ask themselves if they really want to continue this pattern for their years at college.

Option 5

You can assess motivation based on a 'yes' answer to each of the following questions:

Do you value the qualification you are studying for?	
Do you feel you have the ability to do well if you put in the effort?	
Do you trust that the college will award you with the qualification if you reach the standard required?	

Option 6

Where do you see yourself in one, two, three years' time?
List specific things that you will have to do to make that happen.

Option 7

> Your approach to learning/studying hasn't been successful. Starting at the beginning of the semester, identify all of the things you would do differently if you could.

Option 8

Thinking about change

The behaviour you are thinking about changing:

Importance

How important is it for you to change this behaviour right now?

Please rate how important you feel it is to change on the following scale with an X, where 0 is 'not important at all' and 10 is 'the most important thing'.

0 _____ 10

Confidence

If today were the day you decided to change the behaviour, how confident are you that you could do it?"

Please rate your confidence on the following scale with an X, where 0 is 'not confident at all' and 10 is 'very confident'.

0 _____ 10

Option 9

Decisional matrix

	Staying the same	Changing
Benefits of		
Costs of		

Option 10

Change Plan Worksheet

The changes I want to make are:

The most important reasons I want to make these changes are:

My main goals for myself in making these changes are:

I plan to do these things to reach my goals:
Plan of Action

When

The first steps I plan to take in changing are:

Some things that could interfere with my plan are:

Other people could help me in changing in these ways:
Person

Possible ways to help

I hope that my plan will have these positive results:

I will know that my plan is working if:

Source: Miller and Rollnick, 1991

Appendix F: Disconfirming Evidence

Each table represents the CAO cut-off points and the CAO point total of the median student for each programme. The ranking by CAO points performance in percentile is also presented for both points totals.

Higher Certificate in Business

	Minimum CAO Points	Percentile of Student at minimum CAO Points	CAO Median Student	Percentile of median student
2010	140	84	270	62
2017	200	81	310	59

- The intake of the student body got slightly stronger by 3 points in the percentile for both measures.
- If in 2017 the points totals were both reduced by 1 CAO point: the Percentiles would have been identical.

Bachelor of Business Level 8

	Minimum CAO Points	Percentile of Student at minimum CAO Points	CAO Median Student	Percentile of median student
2010	275	62	320	51
2017	300	64	310	54

- Despite an increase in the CAO points total, the student intake was slightly weaker in the final year than the first.

Bachelor of Business and Law

	Minimum CAO Points	Percentile of Student at minimum CAO Points	CAO Median Student	Percentile of median student
2010	250	66	320	49
2017	300	62	310	49

- The intake at cut off was slightly stronger with the median intake identical.

Social Media Marketing/ Digital Marketing

	Minimum CAO Points	Percentile of Student at minimum CAO Points	CAO Median Student	Percentile of median student
2012	160	82	270	65
2017	207	81	291	64

- Despite a significant increase in points, there was no significant change in the quality of student intake.

Business Psychology

	Minimum CAO Points	Percentile of Student at minimum CAO Points	CAO Median Student	Percentile of median student
2014	295	63	360	46
2017	291	64	347	52

- No significant change in the intake of students.

Information accessed from CAO website www.cao.ie

Appendix G: DCU Ethics Approval

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

Owen Ross
DCU Institute of Education

Prof. Gerry McNamara
School of Policy & Practice

5th July 2021

REC Reference:	**DCUREC/2021/165**
Proposal Title:	**A mixed method approach evaluating the impact of the Faculty of Business and Hospitality's student success model within the Department of Business and Management, in Athlone Institute of Technology, over eight academic years.**
Applicant(s):	**Owen Ross and Prof. Gerry McNamara**

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your application to DCU Research Ethics Committee (REC). Further to notification review, DCU REC are pleased to issue approval for this research proposal.

DCU REC's consideration of all ethics applications are dependent upon the information supplied by the researcher. This information is expected to be truthful and accurate. Researchers are responsible for ensuring that their research is carried out in accordance with the information provided in their ethics application.

Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee. Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

Geraldine Scanlon

Dr. Geraldine Scanlon
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee

Appendix H: AIT Ethics Approval

TUS
Technological University of the Shannon:
Midlands Midwest
Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta na Sionainne:
Lár Tíre Iarthar Láir

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22 November 2021

Owen Ross

Re: A mixed method approach evaluating the impact of the Faculty of Business and Hospitality's student success model within the Department of Business and Management, in Athlone Institute of Technology, over eight academic years. (PHD in DCU)

Dear Owen

Thank you for your application which you submitted for approval to the Research Ethics Committee. The committee is granting approval with no further recommendations/clarifications.

We wish you the best in your research.

Kind regards

Mary McDonnell Naughton

Chair – Research Ethics Committee

Appendix I: Informed Consent Form

Research Study Title

A mixed method approach evaluating the impact of the Faculty of Business and Hospitality's student success model within the Department of Business and Management, in Athlone Institute of Technology, over eight academic years.

Clarification of the purpose of the research

I have been invited to attend to offer my views based on my knowledge of how first year of business programmes were offer in AIT over an 8 year period. I acknowledge that all data gathered is for the purpose of evaluating the student success model and associated impact on student retention in the Department of Business & Management in AIT. The data will be kept by the researcher and will only be used for the purpose of a PHD and subsequent related publications.

Confirmation of particular requirements as highlighted in the Plain Language Statement

I have agreed to participate in a focus group which will be recorded. I understand my input will be anonymized. Where names are mentioned, those names will be anonymized when during transcription. A full legal guarantee of anonymity cannot be provided despite the commitments of the researcher.

Participant – please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)	
I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)	*Yes/No*
I understand the information provided	*Yes/No*
I understand the information provided in relation to data protection	*Yes/No*
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study	*Yes/No*
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions	*Yes/No*
I am aware that my interview will be audiotaped	*Yes/No*
My participation is voluntary	*Yes/No*
I am aware that I may withdraw from the Research Study at any point.	*Yes/No*
I am aware every effort to maintain confidentiality will be made but I acknowledge the legal limitations have been explained to me.	*Yes/No*
I know where the data will be stored and how it will be disposed of.	*Yes/No*
I consent to the use of my data for future studies associated with the Student Success Model under evaluation.	*Yes/No*

Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

Participants Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Witness: _____

Date: _____

Appendix J: Plain Language Statement

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY
Plain Language Statement

Title of Project

A mixed method approach evaluating the impact of the Faculty of Business and Hospitality's student success model within the Department of Business and Management, in Athlone Institute of Technology, over eight academic years.

Researchers

Owen Ross, PhD Student, School of Policy and Practice, DCU Institute of Education
Prof. Gerry McNamara, Supervisor, School of Policy and Practice, DCU Institute of Education

Introduction to the Research Study

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Title of Project

A mixed method approach evaluating the impact of the Faculty of Business and Hospitality's student success model within the Department of Business and Management, in Athlone Institute of Technology, over eight academic years.

Researchers

Owen Ross, PhD Student, School of Policy and Practice, DCU Institute of Education
Prof. Gerry McNamara, Supervisor, School of Policy and Practice, DCU Institute of Education

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Appendix K: MG1 Focus Group Transcript

Okay, so thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this focus group today. I have circulated to you the student success model that is being evaluated, the plain language statement and the consent form. So, to begin the questioning today, would you mind describing your perspective with regard to first year provision in the department of business and management or the wider faculty of business and hospitality?

Manager B: We take turns or what….

You can speak at any time, in any way that you feel comfortable. You can take turns, you can cut in on each other, you can support each other, whatever you like.

Manager C: I will go first Owen, I suppose, the first thing to consider is the elephant in the room, of covid-19 and the last two years and trying to implement a retention model that's effective during a period of disruption, is challenging and a lot of the good stuff in that retention model was parked and side-lined for the last 12 months, for obvious reasons.

If I was to restrict this to the pre-covid era, which all of this research pertains to and which I should have clarified at the start, and how then would that change your view on how the first year experience was pre-covid?

Manager C: yeah I suppose I'm just talking to covid but to give context to how I'm thinking about the bit from four years ago, because what's been frustrating over the last 18 months is the memory of the good stuff that we did back in sort of 2017, 18,19 and so on, before this challenge came in and there was a lot of stuff building that had good potential to really have an impact and but obviously paused at the moment. Some of the things that we were doing, I suppose, back in those years was the field visits, the induction talks, the team building events at the start of the year, the one-to-one tutorials, the meetings with students who failed assessments and so on. There was a lot of richness going on and all that, there was a lot of kind of good work, but very, very Labour intensive. Partly covid but partly the demands of the HOD role I think it's slipped by the wayside somewhat in the last two years, as well, and not just covid but also the kind of volume of stuff that we've to do as a head of department it's kind of taken a backseat I would think, not sure what maybe (other focus Group Manager)'s view is on that, but it's someone else's go.

Manager D: yeah I'd agree, I think you know the reactionary nature of the role, you know, has reduced the focus on students success and student retention it's more I want to turn this into a rant about the head of department role, but there is less focus on retention and stuff like that, even basic down to reports on you know each semester student progression stuff like that. Very much so.

Manager B: I suppose I think I'd been in a very different position to the two of you guys, such I haven't been in the role for a couple of years. And when I was in the role - coming into the role, I was very much of the opinion that it would be very much student-facing but actually in the role I realized that you might never see a student from one end of the Semester to the other unless you made it your business to do so, and anything that you did do involving student facing tended to be a problem that came to your door and yeah it is it actually takes a very conscious effort on the part of a Head of Department to engage with students and to see life from the students' perspective As a lecturer, I would certainly be of the opinion that the calibre of first-year student has been in decline for a number of years and because of that, I think and a number of factors, the risk associated with

student progression is increasing and that necessitates measures to counter that risk, such as the measures we're discussing today. You have a lot of students, for example, that come into college by default they're not sure what the programme is about they haven't made a conscious, informed decision to do a particular programme and they have sticker shock nearly in the first month or two and there's a huge element of that and that creates its own problems with motivation and attendance and People feel out of their depth people feel sometimes that this is not for them and, of course, five weeks go by very quickly, and all of a sudden during a place that it's very difficult to come back out of.

Manager A: Maybe Owen maybe go back, we already do have another related question about the kind of establishment or the build up to the establishment of the kind of formal strategy.

No, I mean the thing is, I just want, I suppose, to give you a general open question just to get people started, I suppose, and I have a list of questions here, obviously I shared a copy with you of the student success model in advance of this, and my first question is to what extent do you think that the actual student success model adequately reflects the first year experience and in the Faculty of business and hospitality?

Manager A: Just before we go on in following up on what (other focus Group Manager) was saying in terms of and (other focus Group Manager) and (other focus Group Manager) and then like as you will all be aware, in terms of the Policy evolved over a long period of time, and probably started off in the early stages in 2010 without being a formal policy. The national strategy for higher education was published the following year, but it was widely leaked, and that was the time of programmatic review. That was the time when the learning to learn module was introduced, which then evolved into you know the module that it's called nowadays. I think it's learning and development for higher education. You know and that's another whole element around that and the early interventions that we tried to implement, that further refined and developed into the policy, you know, so I think it's important to remember that context as well you know. Would you repeat your other question there again?

yeah just to what extent do you think that the student success model adequately reflects the first year experience in the Faculty of business and hospitality?

Manager A: I think I think it, I think it reflects it well; I mean I totally echo what (other focus Group Manager) said, the transition to online has been has been a challenge and challenge every HEI not just Athlone obviously, I no longer work in Athlone. But it's been a challenge for us as well, too, but to go back to (other focus Group Manager)'s point and we're actually working on a separate project within TU Dublin on trying to enhance our success with students and reduce our level of attrition but within the school that I work in we actually have very, very high progression rates. You know, and a lot of that is do down to that we're getting very, very good students coming in, on high points, our level 8 programmes will be over 800 points- sorry 400 points I should say and our level 6s are all over 300 with a lot of them are, you know just missing out on a B.Comm, our equivalent course because those points have gone up significantly in the last three years and they're opting to take a level six programme. We currently don't offer the level 7 as part of the city campus offering. But they take down and they do is but go back to the broader point. Yes, I think it did; I think you know we were always looking to enhance, improve, reflect on what aspects of the model worked what didn't work, how could we grow and develop it and refine it as we went along, as we Looked at the literature, look at what was working what wasn't working and again I think that reinforcement came as well, when you shortly after before I left or in the word. You know, every learning analytics and I get into that but, like, for example, when they were doing that project for the national forum for teaching and learning, looking at student success and possible potential of learning analytics. There was a guy

from UCD. He was the seconded to the National Forum, and he came down to talk to us about it and he was saying that we had a lot. Lots of organizations or HEIs had ways of identifying these students who are at risk. We had already in place, the mechanisms to deal with students who are at risk, I mean that was one thing, where we had a huge advantage, and I think that was down to all the work that was being done by the various people involved in interacting with First Years.

And it's called the DESSI project, with Lee O'Farrell is the one you're talking about.

Manager A: yeah yeah yeah exactly yeah yeah, Lee O'Farrell five years ago.

Right, and (other focus Group Manager) I think you were coming in, were you?

Manager B: I am just going to make the point on the student success model that you circulated, and I think is very important, which it does and it deals with loads of different, highly scientific term there, aspects of students access and there's probably five or six different areas there which are dealt with and I suppose it's very important point, this is that some students will respond to maybe only one of those, other students might respond to two of them, given that every students experience is different and their own background and their own motivations and their challenges are different it's important to have the model as inclusive as possible to deal with whatever eventuality might be threatening that students progression, an interesting question might be what could be added to it, I don't know the answer to that, but it seems very comprehensive this back from an initial reading.

Manager A: just to reiterate that (other focus Group Manager), the literature on this, talks about very you know, Multifactorial, multi-dimensional very situational based- approach to which You know, so I mean, I think the model captures a lot of those elements; you know.

Manager C: Well, one of the things I think is really interesting with it, is that it's an agile enough graph, model whatever you want to call it that can adapt to whatever the context is, so there are ingredients in that model that are still retainable during covid, for example. But there's been other challenges, apart from covid that you know there's there might be a different challenge that comes up for a specific group of students coming in, for example, we might have a new intake from a new College, that is not you know, providing students that are not high enough quality and they're more at risk of dropping out, So it has all of the different ingredients, it can cope with the different types of people coming in, and I think that's -that's a really useful aspect of it. One thing that I think that if it falls down on, though, is that it's very aspirational and strategic in its nature, but these things often fall down on Owen as you, you often say yourself: on tactics, you know. And it's all very well and good thing you know we'd have. You know I don't know a guest speaker coming in, but then the guest speaker comes in and does maybe not particularly inspirational talk, you know or the student gets the head bitten off them at the registration desk and it collapses on a tactical issue, then, as opposed to the sort of big umbrella picture that we that you have on this.
The other thing that I think is worth saying about it is that, and this is a critique of it from a layout perspective. To get better stakeholder buy in across the College, I think it would need some graphical design work and layout work to I think better explain to all of the different people involved across the College, so that it's not it's not a kind of an academic paper diagram which it is at the moment, but that it's a, it's a model that's understood and used on an operational basis by the different people across the College, whether it's registration or student services or Father Shay, students union or whoever, and that, if it is graphically better presented it could be getting better buy in.

and…

Manager A: Could I just add a minute, one point particularly, come back to one the (other focus Group Manager) mentioned earlier on in terms of covid, but I know it's not just Pre covid, post covid but you're not really too concerned around covid but, like the field trips, for example. And one of the ones we did prior to when I left was where (other focus Group Manager) organized to go to Ashford castle, to bring a group of first year hospitality students to Ashford, you know, that was a great opportunity for the students to see where their future career can take them, you know and we probably don't do enough of that in terms of are you know say I'm coming in first year you just assume you're going to be there for three or four years or whatever doing your degree you don't want so we Make it clear to them that this is what you can do in terms of your job Okay, for some of them, they may be aware of that, if they have family or friends that work within the hospitality sector, but they don't know it's not just hospitality but equally applicable to those come to doing business as well, what did you can you go on a trip like that they can see that they can say, well, I can I can I can work here, you know.

Manager C: And of course signposting is the key word there on that, because it was Brian O Rourke who set up those field visits for us, and he would always say you know, start off by showing the students, the destination. And then we can map it back and how they can get there, you know and that Ashford visit that wouldn't have existed in a silo, or it wouldn't have been not visit and that it's you know it would have been followed up by a guest lecture from someone of the Ashford people coming down to AIT. And it would have been followed up by some placement opportunities being distributed and that kind of ongoing, that ongoing contact. But you know and again not to go back to covid too often, but all that stuff has been stripped away in the last 18 months, and it has meant that this whole model is taking a backseat and probably need a bit of a refreshment or an update, maybe, based on what happens next you know. Working on the assumption we will be back on campus and maybe it can be just rolled out again but there's the whole online world that needs to be considered there too and I suppose the point being that none of these things ever exist in a vacuum there's this global macro issue affecting us all now but equally there can be a localized issue in the college could be you know personnel or could be, It could be a restructuring issue, or whatever you know for all for all we know they'd sort of Change the layout of programmes or something to move us all from four year to three year degrees, or whatever, and I think those kinds of localized issues need to always be accommodated in the model like that.

 And I suppose prior to Covid, what impact do you think the model had on first year provision in the department of business and management or the wider faculty of business and hospitality?

 Manager D: I think it was in some ways it's hard to quantify, you know, like, for example, interviews with students who have failed first year modules. How do you quantify the impact of that? I mean retention or you know attrition rates, or whichever you measure. I found a lot of them were actually fearful that they're coming in and getting a bollicking rather than a holistic approach and that was the first thing I said to them always look I'm not here to give you a hard time I'm here to see what we can do to help, so you know the impact of that or even a qualitative nature of measuring the impact of that, I think is tricky enough; you know I'm just looking at a few of the other ones.

Manager B: Just on that, (other focus Group Manager) I think from my experience in there, that doing the actual student interviews was one of the most beneficial aspects of it, and not just because of the benefit to the students and the motivational impact of trying to avoid being called in to meet your head of department which I think was significant, but it also it also provided and this may only apply to me, but it provided me with valuable intelligence on how the system was working from the students' perspective, what obstacles the student was facing that I might not have been aware of, maybe organizationally, maybe staff wise, maybe certain elements of programmes that

they were challenged with; information was coming back up the line as well, and I found that exceptionally valuable.

Manager C: yeah massively agree with you there on that (other focus Group Manager), when I when I would walk around the College, the meetings with students would have given me at least 10 conversation starters for staff to pick up on. It could be ranging from so and so thinks your lectures are brilliant to so and so says that you've been, you know, cutting the classes short by 10 minutes and you know, there are always great nuggets of information gathered in those.

Manager A: yeah, I mean, I think I think I think it did, I think, like you go back to say. The approach that we took with the transition related module, you know, whatever you want to call it: learning to learn or learning development. Originally it was you do this assignment, given the assignment on induction day that to do independent learning. That frightened lots of students, you know, and created, shall we say, a sense of fear that you don't necessarily want to create which we recognized and modified and changed the module based on feedback from students, feedback from the academic staff, You know, and like a lot of things that it developed and on reflection we made changes to it's always was much better, you know, but it still gave an early warning. For staff that somebody is potentially at risk, and I think that's a key part because one of the things we want is some flags that students are in trouble, you know, and I think we will probably get to this later, but I think learning analytics is something that certainly can contribute to that in the future and then go back to the DESSI project that we're talking about, it's then what you do when those flags are raised, and what interventions that you take our key to it all, but it is very much important to go back to the points that (other focus Group Manager) and (other focus Group Manager) were making there about the journey of the student and the student experience - it is all aspects. You know, it's not just the school it's their you know, pre-information on CAO their CAO, and the information sent out pre coming in for induction, then it's induction and then all those processes, right up until they start getting their lectures.

Manager C: In any piece of social science research as well, it's next to impossible to justify or to look at cause and effect of one action, you know. And I mean, from the head of department perspective, one of the things that I would have done would have been to look at the international field trips. I think at one point, we had, I think it was 152 students have gone on an international field trip and 148 of them had gone on to complete the course. So of course I pulled this out as a statistic and said, you know that 90 whatever percent of students who went on an international field trip successfully completed their course and therefore it shows that this is something that contributes positive positively towards progression and so on but of course, I always left out the fundamental underpinning reason why people would go on field trips- They were more likely already to be the better motivated student, to be the more academic student and to be the more engaged student. But leadership didn't make them that, just enhanced it and developed it, but you know it's the same for any aspect of that model, you know you could look at it. I think we didn't we didn't we try to analyse it once, for the students who attended the meetings, how many of them went on to complete, to complete their exams at the next sitting. I suppose it's impossible to quantify if that did the job or if it was going to happen, anyway; you know you need to kind of run both things in parallel to check that but there's some aspects of the model, I suppose, as well, which were, you know, they were really potentially very impactful but didn't really ever happen, for various reasons, you know. Things like the head of department emeritus you know, Peter was in that role for some time with them obviously became ill and that didn't run any longer so there were some of the things that I suppose just in theory, you can see why they would make sense. This is one of the challenges with a piece of research like this, because it's impossible to quantify a lot of the stuff it's very difficult to show to your managers why you should be getting the resources, you need to implement it so it's

maybe a question of justifying it in the qualitative sense, looking for narratives around the individuals that it effected and so on.

Okay, So, would I be right to say what I'm hearing from you is already kind of emerging that it's very difficult to quantify particular aspects that were more or less impactful and that it's potentially all of the actions combined together that made it. Is that what I'm kind of hearing from you at this stage?

Manager C: I think that'd be fair, a fair sum of what I've been trying to say there. I mean, you can't look at one of these things and say it contributed more or less to the overall picture. I mean the international speaker might have contributed with international leadership might have contributed 90% of the progression reason for one student but only 10% for another, and you know the meetings with Peter Mellin might have contributed 90%, for one, but only 10% for another. Then, of course, external factors that were not even aware of could have could have had an impact as well, but overall, this goes with a holistic sense that it's all going, you know it was all going in the right direction. What the challenge with it is to quantify it.

Manager B: I agree with that (other focus Group Manager) I think that and I'm sure, maybe (other focus Group Manager) you like maybe hard numbers on this sample size, you would want to get quantitative data on the effectiveness of each individual factor will be beyond any single institute but I think we are about the qualitative here, we're about it we've think was most effective and why, what are we trying to what would we feel from our experience that's that worked better than anything else would that be right Owen?

I mean, like we can get into specifics, as we go down through it because I mean my next question was what actions are interventions, do you consider to be the most effective as part of the model, and I suppose, rather than trying to quantify it just to really give your gut feeling as to what actions and interventions in your view, were the most effective.

Manager C: In HTL, I think, by far, was the teaching and learning qualifications for the staff. I think that that had the biggest impact. It modernized their teaching delivery, and it developed a more empathetic approach to different types of learners. So I'm not I'm not kind of choosing the easy option here, but that was the one that sort of most holistically addressed lots of the first year experience points and if you got everybody up to that standard I think it's probably the quickest win on a very practical level, I think that the one-to-one meetings were excellent I think they had a huge impact, I always felt very good after those in that I felt a potentially made an impact on individuals, I had coached individual students into having a sort of a reassessment of why they were doing an academic course in the first place, and for others, they just simply give them a kick up the bum that they needed to go ahead and complete the course. There were others that we did that I think were very, very Labour intensive. I mean, the one-to-one meetings are very Labour intensive but were very rewarding. For the individual students, but also as (other focus Group Manager) said from a kind of data gathering point of view, you know intelligence and there were some that I felt were kind of maybe less of impactful than others.

We will be coming to those.

Manager C: yeah I think the most positive ones, I think there was probably the one-to-one meetings and the parents evening actually was quite good, I always wish it was better attended, you know, I think that really had the potential to be to be very impactful and I remember, there were some really useful little things in it, everything from the parents being able to top up student's AIT cards so they could you know, give them money to spend on in college to understanding the ECTS

framework, to telling them about how many hours of study, they should be doing, and so on, I think that was potentially really good, but you know that'd be my top three I suppose there would be the one to ones, the parents evening and the what was the other one I said oh yeah the teaching and learning, I think that those three would have been for me.

Manager A: yeah no, I agree, I think you know the parents' evening one is; it is interesting and like I'm probably coming at this from a different perspective, now as well, too, in that I see going back to the main point on what (other focus Group Manager) said, I see the students, now that I can do TU Dublin have far more ambition for themselves and far more motivation, self-motivation than AIT students. I came across you know and that's an interesting dynamic and I would agree about the parents and it is a shame that, you know, like even if you just look at Erasmus or something if this goes into suppose a broader societal shall we say ambition for individuals is like Erasmus, we have very few people ever go on Erasmus and we put a lot of effort into going out. Whereas; you know we were oversubscribed by about a factor of two for our Erasmus, you know, and they have to go away for a full year, not just a semester, you know. But I would agree with what (other focus Group Manager) said I don't think I would add, is, I think that you know I think the intervention in terms of where we you know; we had a group agreement that the HOD would kind of be like a student success advisor go back to the European conference for European first year experience that we attended and that whole concept of the student success advisor I do think that's something that offers a lot of potential and probably hasn't been continued; I think that that one in particular if you were to use older mature students, particularly. I would suggest women whose children have grown up and have you know teenagers themselves can associate with them. I think that's one that didn't get the full opportunity to develop its potential.

Manager D: I think just to add on Owen sorry, just add on to what (other focus Group Manager) has said, (other focus Group Manager) as well, (other focus Group Manager). I think I mean that certainly the one-on-one chat to students individually and the parents' evening, I definitely completely agree, but I think there's also, it took me a long time to realize that the demographic of students; we were getting like (other focus Group Manager) commented out of there, (other focus Group Manager) alluded to it as well and in TU Dublin - the calibre I suppose the do you know Michael Barrett, in IT Sligo? I may have told before, I may have mentioned his whole PhD thesis was on the…. I suppose was those from maybe more rural background where they were the first to go to college and that in itself brings problems; I think it took a long time for me to kind of appreciate that that's what, in essence, what we were dealing with, not all the cases but certainly in some cases, and I know certainly in accounting I've probably you know, we've probably got the higher achieving students compared to other courses, perhaps, so I won't say as bad as things are not that bad, but in terms of the issues I do see are probably far less in accounting than, perhaps in other programmes, so I suppose getting to talk to them getting to talk to the parents demystifying the higher education experience for students and for parents, I think, was so important and taking that fear you know out of it and that that's you know I've said on more than one occasion to students see I don't bite, you know and that kind of acceptance by them that they can come back and that they can ask and that they're not afraid to drop me a note and say, can I drop into you and ask you about X, Y and Z I think that's part of it, too, as well, for me.

Manager B: yeah and I certainly agree with what you say about the background of students and a lot of students That don't have experience and their families have gone to college and a lot of deficiencies in terms of what they bring to college they don't know what to expect they don't know what's expected of them and clarity of expectation is something that we're not good at. We tend to take things for granted. We've done it every year: it's grand, that every other student and fill you in and you will get on fine. For a certain type of student that's fine, but for an increasing number of students it's not fine and we tend to lose, we tend to the students because of that. And to go back to

Owen's question in terms of what were the most important factors in the student success model? My very strong opinion is that what gets measured gets done, and so, when the student feels and sees that they are being monitored closely and that there will be feedback or consequences if they're not doing what they're supposed to be doing or if they're not achieving what they're expected to achieve, and I think everybody has mentioned the head of department one-to-one meeting as a crucial factor I totally agree with that Because, not only because of the feedback it gets for the student and for the head of department, but for the sense of accountability it engenders in the student body that somebody's watching here, and if there isn't performance people realise there's a problem, and you will be asked about that, so if you're not comfortable to be asked about your performance and why it's not up to scratch well that's a motivator to get it up to scratch, within that as well, I think, and something, but I don't think anybody's mentioned yet, but the drive to speed up feedback from assessments, I think, as a major factor. Especially first-year students who don't know how they're performing relative to expectations, could suddenly be 9, 10 weeks into semester one before they get the feedback from the first assessment and realize there's a problem and I think quick rapid feedback and I know the rapid issuing of the first assignment has been an important factor, but I think more critical than that has been the rapid feedback from that first assignment so students themselves realize after two, three weeks If what they're doing is up to scratch or not, and I think that couple of weeks is crucial in terms of setting up for success in first year.

OK thank you for that. What actions or interventions do we consider had little or no positive impact?

Manager C: I think some of the actions have more relevance in some departments and also this changed on a yearly basis you know, like none of these models exist in a temporal vacuum. So, for example, financial issues weren't a particular problem for the students on the Failte Ireland courses until they became an issue when Failte Ireland withdrew funding and suddenly our students found that they had a 3000 euro fee to pay plus 600 euro on uniforms, books and knives and so on, and there were increased discussions with people like The student access fund and St Vincent de Paul and the student Union and so on Father Shay to find students money to get over the line, so it wasn't an issue one year and then it was an issue the next year. Also, the demand for courses changes the profile of students coming in and (other focus Group Manager) and (other focus Group Manager) talked about that at some length there and I really agree with them and (other focus Group Manager) as well on the points of what the calibre of students coming in. So if you're taking in high-achieving students on three or 400 points plus they have a different category of needs than those on AQA courses. There was one year, where I mapped all of the points on the culinary arts intake and the average intake was on 298 points which really surprised people that there was an actually very good academic calibre coming in, on as far as I recall, all those students passed all of their first year exams that term. For the next two or three years that programme has been at AQA because the demand simply isn't there and with that comes a whole range of social issues, financial issues and first in the family in college type of issues, so the value of each of these fluctuates on a course basis, but also in the temporal basis. There's none that I would say, never have any relevance, but I'd say that what's relevant, one year on one course may not be relevant for other courses that year, or for the same course the following year If that makes sense, the ones that I think we're really valuable were to just spoke about the last time I think You know, have consistently been valuable for all courses at all times and because of their kind of general nature with some of the others, I think, and possibly have had a bit less impact at different times So that motivational techniques, for example, and the interviews with students who fair the first year modules are really valuable when the students show up However, if you get the AQA students maybe on bar supervision, for example, and they don't show up to that meeting, then it's not a particularly valuable tool in your armoury and maybe something more … auditing or punitive as (other focus Group Manager) hinted at there

in terms of monitoring is more valuable for a group, like that. So, I couldn't choose like a couple that aren't valuable, but I think you get the point that they fluctuate in value, depending on the course and depending on the bigger temporal issue, you know.

Manager A: I would say that it's hard to say that there isn't value because it probably is value for one or two students of its value, then you know it's probably worth doing you know, the one thing I'd say which we didn't get great buy in was for the team building event, you know, and I'm not sure if that's if you're like if we were to say we have to put something that we would question, but again I couldn't really comment on that I think it would be unfair that the students comment on what they thought the team building event does that add value to them or not.

Manager C: Actually, I'm not, just because there was in a conversation with some of the lectures last week we've been planning, one for I suppose. We have so many students next year who haven't been on campus and need an induction. yeah exactly, so we have a great one for now for September, where we're going to bring them into Dead Centre Brewing in town and get them to meet with the owner and brewer there they're then going to go on the Viking Mike boat up to Hudson Bay and go at Bay Sports and have a Walk around the Hudson Bay hotel and the new the new glamping site that they're building there and I think stuff like that is you know it's really important because they see the lecturers, you know, in their civilian clothes and having fun and interacting with them and they see them having the industry interaction at a very high level as well, I think all that stuff is really, really useful. Yeah, it was always a pity that you know when we tried the barbecues and the events in the, in the arena that you know that the attendance was low and engagement quite poor, really.

Manager B: And I suppose, from my perspective, I was going to mention the team building event as well as I can't say it wasn't beneficial, but I didn't see the evidence coming through from that but again that's only a gut feeling there's nothing to support that. I was, I would be concerned about elements of programme design where we might have maybe made the first year experience a little bit easier for students or maybe front loaded some of the more pleasurable and less onerous modules to try and make the first year, especially the first semester easier on the students. I'd be fearful that that might have a negative knock on impact on future semesters and years and the retention of students in those areas. Whereas something might have had a very beneficial effect on semester one year one, maybe some of that effect might be reversed down the line. Again, not evidence-based, just an instinct that I felt was a risk. The other thing that did occur to me at the time, if some of our interventions are focused on getting first years through that maybe I'm talking about things like maybe the best staff going on first year programmes, things like You know, more focus on guest speakers and all the rest of that possibly we're pulling people through first year that maybe would be better off not progressing and that if that is the case for a student they're better off figuring that out in first year, rather than later in the Programme.

Manager C: Some of that (other focus Group Manager) as well, obviously, is not just about progression, it's partly marketing, promotion of our courses, you know, so We do these things to be able to say it open days about how exciting our content is and attract the students there in the first place. That's you know, that's the problem, I totally agree with you that many of them get pulled over the line only to reach their limit in second year instead of first year, you know and that's definitely a problem.

Manager B: I know it's not an argument, not to do these things, but maybe it's an argument to follow through better in second and subsequent years or maybe it's an argument to be more discerning in terms of allowing people to fail if we think this maybe it's, the best thing for them or transfer

courses, or something and again, I know that's a big call for a head of department or anybody to make for a student but there are certain people who aren't suitable for certain courses.

Ok, thank you very much for that. As depicted in the model, there are three foundation blocks, namely that it was a team-based approach; management, led and driven, and that was an underlying principle that it takes four years to bring a student all the way to becoming a fully independent learner. What is your perspective on these foundation blocks and to what extent do you believe that they underpinned the model?

Manager A: I think they are very important, I mean I think like, if you look, look if it's not been driven by somebody it's not going to happen, so I think that, you know, it has to be driven by somebody so it has to be driven by somebody so who can who can affect change or get things done so it's very important that has that has that buy in and I know there's different structures, you don't have course tutors or course chairs or programme chairs, So there isn't somebody else that can do it, it falls on the head of department, so that that person has to do it so it's very much that and to reiterate the other point, it does take four years, I mean you can take somebody you are you're an independent learner after four years you know I mean the whole idea nowadays higher education is lifelong learning, it's not just your undergraduate degree it's your postgrad and soon for Mr Doyle to be Doctor Doyle and so You know, it's a journey, you know and I think to go back to we're talking about in terms of the first year and trying to you know inspire them on that journey in terms of by showing them going on field trips, having guest speakers all that sort of stuff in there I think that that that that's very important, you know, so that then by the time they come to 4th year or their final year, depending on how long the course is, they are more, they are on that journey, you know, like, I mean he you never stop learning and you never stopped developing so in terms of that and what was the other, the third one of the three?

Team Based Approach.

Manager A: Not yeah, of course, absolutely yeah. The team is important; I mean no one person can achieve all of the aspects of this on their own without the buy in from the academic staff who are delivering the modules and meet the students and to go back to what (other focus Group Manager) said earlier on about the interaction with staff even in terms of his status. The difference between the role of the lecturer and the role of the Head of department and that's significant because you do also want to the which we used to get in terms of the…. you know, an email or a meeting with a staff member in the corridor they're concerned about X, Y and Z students whom they haven't seen them for a while, would you drop them a note or whatever, you know, so those sorts of things are very, very important and that informal aspect to it, You know, is probably not captured in the in the model is very, very, very important, you know and It needs to be stressed; you know there's a huge amount of that that goes on in terms of meet the person in the corridor or meet them for a cup of coffee and say oh yeah, by the way, X, Y Z student - I haven't seen them for a week, you know, you know, have you heard of what's going on with them? You know and even, as happens among the students the staff members teaching on the programme themselves and they managed within themselves and make it known to members of the admin staff will then send a text or an email to the student and the HOD doesn't know about it. So that'd be my view of it.

Manager C: I think pillars are important, I agree with the principles from both of them I'm not sure so much about the principle the idea that it's you know, four years to become an independent learner either, I think that's kind of at odds with a lot of the stuff that we do in AIT and you know we have multiple entry points for courses these days. People who take first year part time and then join us at second year, or people who come from different ETBs, and so on I'm not quite sure that that independent learning is always achieved by the end of fourth year. I think the students are still

spoon fed an enormous amount of material, even at the later years. And many of them are kind of dragged - not kicking and screaming but they're dragged over the line to their degree, at the end, so I'm not quite sure about that as a foundation principle it's ideal, in theory, but whether it happens in practice or not - I'm not so sure. I'd agree with (other focus Group Manager) that it has to be a team-based approach, and I think probably more could be done on developing that team and making sure that everybody understands that they're on the team and across the College, you know that that that there's sort of, all people involved in the students journey, you have to really understand the model and where they fit in on it, and I think we understand quite well in the Faculty but beyond the Faculty, I'm not so sure. Management led and driven, I would agree too that somebody has to drive it, but the problem with some of these things is that there's so many different facets to that model That if that is seen as the head of departments responsibility - it's too much, and therefore it doesn't get driven, so I think it should be kind of management led and driven but with a significant amount of it delegated out really, otherwise it's just too great a workload to be effective, you know.

And okay so, is what I am hearing. Sorry is what I'm hearing so, that in your view, that the Foundation blocks kind of do capture it and are the relevant foundation blocks. Would that be a fair kind of summation of what you think as a focus group?

Manager B: A question regarding the Independent learning point and you guys are a lot more learned than me on these matters but is there a difference in theory, between a learner on a four-year ab initio level 8 and when they will be expected to achieve independent learning as opposed to a student coming in, on a level six for two years, doing a level seven add on and then a level 8 add on. Would there be any expected differential between those students or we dealing with an equivalence?

Manager C: Probably a departmental question there, like we did with them, is equivalent. Yeah, they share classes and everything so.

Manager D: yeah, we don't have you know as well, no; we don't have that scenario. It's even it is three years, but I would suggest that they are say yeah.

Manager B: Because I would perceive a difference, in the sense that our ab initio degrees tend to attract students who gain independent learning quicker and maybe it's a function of their incoming ability or whatever. Look at business psychology, for example, look at accounting, two kinds of very self- contained degrees, I know they, take accounting, particular intakes from other courses but generally speaking, a lot of students that start and Finish those courses are those who started on them, and they would tend to achieve independent learning much more quickly, I would find that students who come in on a level 6 progress to level 7 or to level 8 and I'm wondering should our programme structure reflect that and should our students Success Model reflect that? Or are we pretending nearly that they are equivalent, or are they actually equivalent?

Manager C: If they're not it opens up such an enormous range of questions, then, because you know, is a level eight, a non-native English speaking should and coming to us for a top up programme the same as one that we have taken through the years 1, 2 or 3 here, you know, you can start sort of start deconstructing the entire department and re-categorizing them all into different areas And you know the bigger macro level there's been all sorts of problems in the midlands as well, in terms of higher education, you know we've schools that have only 50% of their Leaving certs going on higher education, Extremely low uptake in things like young scientist and young entrepreneur competitions in the midlands, there's very, very poor metrics in lots of the scores of the students that come into us, I noticed a huge difference in AIT from the students that I would have known in Galway, I mean

worlds apart in terms of Social, financial, emotional issues, academic issues and abilities as well to be worlds apart, you know, even the high performing ones. So, I think you could start crawding away at the student pipes and you take the whole department apart on or the whole faculty apart into individuals, really.

Manager B: But we give them all degrees whether they achieved a level of independent learning outcomes or not, and, as you rightly said earlier, (other focus Group Manager) many of them don't and even many level nine graduates don't either.

Manager C: At the macro level, I agree with you, though, the 6s and the 8s are worlds apart.

OK, I just I just move this along if you don't mind because whereas it's a fantastic educational debate, I just want to focus a small bit more on the model because I'm conscious of time as well, and can I just go through briefly with you and just get your opinion on the six pillars, the component parts of them, so, starting with the habit forming pillar, which is the first assessment which is time-consuming and easy to achieve high marks, assessments at regular intervals during the early phases of programmes and an early intervention for poor performing students, can I just ask you about your perspective of this pillar is?

Manager D: I think if I mean is that purely aimed at the LDHE module or is that particular pillar broader?

It's Broader.

Manager D: Okay, that changes my answer slightly. I mean, there's no question, habit forming is so important. There's no question about that, and I think that the, you know, the culture shock that some particular, perhaps our students encounter going from higher education, sorry from leaving Cert to higher education is colossal. Sorry I lost my train of thought there. Was going to focus on LDHE. I do think it's yeah, my own personal view, is there probably are more literature orientated ways of ensuring student success, research-based practice that could be implemented rather than perhaps the way it's being done now, but I do think, I mean I mean habit forming really is, for me, an early intervention and there are certainly two key parts of it that ingrained, in the sense of what's required into students at that early stage.

Manager C: I think it has all the key elements there in habit forming you know, an early assessment, continuous pieces of work, and so on, I think that maybe I think what's where maybe it could be enhanced would be social habit forming could be could be quite you know and an important additional aspect to include on it. I immensely enjoyed my time in Galway and what my memories from Galway are more on the social side of it than the academic side of it. And that's what's missing, I think, in terms of retaining students in Athlone. If the social and liveability aspect of the town is added into this curriculum and this first-year experience model, you have here, I think, would enhance it a lot. I think that's possibly missing from it and possibly, where we could get a bit more stakeholder involvement from around the college in terms of developing kind of memorable social activities.

Manager A: Bringing back the bar!

Manager C: About yeah I mean yeah sure we all sat in college bar, you know yeah.

Manager A: No, that's very important, but go back to the broader point of the habit forming. I think that's the key. I think that's a key pillar others, and it is you know, in terms of when it was being

envisaged it was much broader than LDHE, because then you were able to drive it in terms of reinforce, shall we say, the transition that you were trying to make big will try to make the students aware of, you know, And that the whole ethos of, you know, if you do work regularly, you know, you will be keeping on top of your of your studies. Whereas if you're not and you're leaving it on last minute then you're not going to achieve, you are going to be going to that meeting with the head of department. And that habit forming to try and get in to it and I suppose again go back to say the leaving cert trying to get those habits that they would have had in the leaving cert and even enhance and develop them further so that they that they did that did that go to the lectures is yeah absolutely well and good, but on top of that, you need to be doing your own self-study. If you're not reinforcing that, the students won't necessarily do it, so I think it's very, very important that that's done, and that's one of the keys, because that would really the key pillar are the model in terms of what you are trying to in instil in students is, that is, that is, the habit, that work ethic that's required to be successful in higher education and beyond, and beyond, like there are lifelong skills, you know that whole your work ready work deadlines, all the elements that are in the in the LDHE model.

Manager B: Bearing in mind, of course, this is a vast difference in the level of habits they're coming in with. Some have not developed a study habit for their leaving cert at all. Sometimes you're trying to create it from scratch and it's a very difficult thing to do, but I agree - very beneficial.

Manager A: I think like go back to the terms of the way LDHE evolved in terms of that we had a number of different staff teaching it originally and I don't know if it is still the case but eventually we moved to one person teaching the vast majority of it or two people - there was a far more consistent approach to the module across all the different programmes, you know. I think that was key, and you probably were aware that we were under pressure, quite a few times to merge the groups and form them into larger groups, so that they could be, shall we say, as the way they reviewed by certain higher-level managers within the organization, more efficiencies within the teaching, but that would not been the right approach and we held our… stood firm in terms of does that model would not work, the whole success of the model we're trying to develop would have failed if we would have to increase the class size but that's not what it's about and your point is very valid (other focus Group Manager) on that because there are some students are certainly from a very, very low base, and you have to get them up to a much higher level than they're used to and that doesn't happen overnight.

Perfect and thank you very much for that. The student esteem pillar consists of the lunch for the high performing students, the briefing for students with failed modules, and the changes that we introduced to the student induction. And do you think the student? What's your perspective of the student esteem pillar?

Manager B: The launch for high performers, I don't think, had any impact on retention. But I think it was a very valuable initiative in terms of motivating high achievers to achieve even higher, and as such, it belongs in the model, although it probably had zero impact on retention. Again, just a gut feeling. The briefing for students with failed modules was mainly an efficiency drive. Obviously, students will benefit probably more from one-to-one information sessions than what happened previously, but a combined session left us able to benefit far more students with the same amount of time on our part. And again, whether it had an impact on retention or not is arguable, the students would get the information one way or the other. Student induction is crucial I would agree that the changes to the induction made have more user friendly it created a collegiate atmosphere, rather than it being an information dump, 90% of which they were going to forget in 5 minutes and it became a more interactive experience, which I think set the tone for the year in college, and again I don't know what it's like now, because he certainly improved immensely, in my opinion.

Manager D: yeah, I agree. I think it was actually my point or my thoughts, sorry, about the high performers' lunch, you know. You know, again it's difficult to quantify how motivational that was for the lower performing students and I don't know if it at all contributed to retention, exactly as (other focus Group Manager) was saying, I was thinking that before; I mean the briefing for students who fail modules whatever with historical context; I think that it's a time where emotions are high and clarity is needed; I do think that is so, so important. You know you can tell the students who want to do well, and who probably had a bad day or whatever, for whatever reason didn't do well - failed. They'll turn up, they'll ask questions and they'll get clarity and if they don't get the clarity, then they know who to get the clarity from, so I think that most definitely and, of course, the induction goes without saying, you know, the induction side of it is beyond critical and making it, you know, an introductory overview and again back to the point, look here's the three heads of the department and the Dean, we don't bite, we're here to help you, support you and do whatever we can, so I do, I do think it's so important it's interesting student esteem domain, I mean it's a discussion for another day and always esteem, the kind of the students what's the word, you know participation, student community, students maybe Which?

Manager C: ambition, maybe.

Manager D: Perhaps yeah, but it's more the encompassing as part of that. Induction, you know, bringing them into the organization, making them feel part of the student body, you know esteem is important, of course, as well, but that's a discussion, perhaps another day but just answer your question oh yeah, I do think it's so important.

It and thank you for that, and in relation to the student experience I'm very conscious that we've already…

Manager A: Owen just one thing on that I just come back in and then just in terms of like, I do think that the esteem pillar is very important, because I think you, you need to recognize students who achieve as well too. And I think subsequently, I've seen on social media AIT is now recognizing students who do well in their year. They get a kind of student award. I see Aoife Lane on some stuff around that. Did I see that or imagine it?

Manager C: There was a proposal to give them a medal.

Manager A: yeah okay, yeah, we do that just as a matter of interest. We, as I think it's actually very good, but go back to the lunch. It was very important that I think one of the big ones now whether it impacted retention or not, but I think it's great, better in terms of creating say chose their influence among the students who want to perform highly and we should be encouraging High performance.

Manager D: agreed, you know, like it's a prestigious event in so many ways.

Manager A: But yeah, and a key factor that I was getting to, is that we used to have…. we changed it from sandwiches in the staff canteen to lunch in the HTL restaurant. I think that took it to a different level completely.

Manager C: Although, although in saying that now, and just to give a counter viewpoint, that this is as well as unique to the Faculty as opposed to being relevant to the model in itself yeah was I was never comfortable with that, from a hierarchical position. It almost, you know, set HTL students up to serve the students across the Faculty. I always thought that to do that off campus, in a hotel or restaurant, would have been much more kind of independent and sort of rock that hierarchical issue, but that the ethos of it and spirit of it itself, I didn't have an issue with ever. I think the other

two issues that they shouldn't induction and the briefing for students with failed modules changed over the years from information dumps to more coaching-focused approaches, where we started using language in the failed modules briefing to being about how you can pass, not here is the form, you need to fill in to go into your repeat. And similar to be fair, the induction. I remember one senior manager saying you know, you're here now and best of luck with your course. It might not have been your first choice, but you know you'll be grand. But it changed over the years to bring in people like motivational speakers who were really good, you know, when they really modernized every possible thing and people weren't even you know, they're kind of quite proud of their achievement and looking forward to the challenge of the academic journey ahead. But at the start, as you know, and you've heard me talk about this before in the College, you know I made a list that first time I attended, we're talking about everything from social media bullying and people vomiting on each other to where you could get SDI tests, than you know, being much more about, okay you're going on an exciting academic journey and here's what you're gonna get out of it, but we need you to put a bit in and that really evolved. That hasn't been static at all. There have been different personalities, different lengths, different formats, online, offline, it's really improved enormously over the last years.

Thank you for that. In terms of the student experience, I'm conscious that we've spent time on the team building event, guest speakers and the international and domestic field trips but as a pillar is there anything anyone would like to add, or do you feel we've adequately covered it at this point.

Manager A: I think we've covered it well, okay?

Okay, thank you. The role of the academic staff pillar which sees the provision of feedback of assessments in a timely manner, the deployment of key staff in first year, Teaching and Learning qualifications, LDHE community of practice, teaching innovation and teamwork at the programme board level, what's your perspective on the role of the academic staff in the model?

Manager D: The theme, I was looking at this before I think the teamwork programme board level; I don't know how much that happens, to be quite honest. You know it's more of a functional operational meeting at the programme board. To get in, get stuff done, get out. And that's this there's this amount of reflection and looking back at suppose what worked what didn't work Because that's I think certainly something that we could improve on, you know, and I think that will improve from when we have programme directors, where it's you know, it's not the head department. You know, get another meeting out of the way from and moving on to the next one type thing, I suppose, as well, the key staff for first year, I mean again that's open to interpretation to define key staff and how do you define who is and is not key staff and so on, so forth. So as well that's I don't know and probably needs a bit been honing and refining. I notice you're smiling.

Manager C: I think what is really important in that Owen, is that feedback one and I'd just be cautious on that one that the box seems to hinge on provision of feedback in a timely manner, as if efficiency is the only aspect that's important there. I think there's two other things that really need to be considered in terms of feedback. One is the quality of feedback, so that the student really understands where they went wrong and what they need to do next, it's not just getting it to them quickly, it's giving them really meaningful feedback and, secondly, or thirdly, is how it's delivered You know people need that feedback in different formats, some need to hear it one to one, some need it written, some prefer to get an audio message of it, some need the generic classroom feedback, some prefer it on an individual basis. So, I think that it's not just the speed, it's the quality and the mechanism of delivery and you know whether it's delivered in a robust tone, or whether it's in an encouraging coaching tone, I think, is really, really important to consider as well.

Manager A: Now you know, I would say on that, the academic staff are key, meaning that they are from the face of the institution that the students see every day when they're when they're on campus, you know, obviously they interact with other people as well, but the academic staff are key to it in the issues, around you know, should we say, teaching and learning, you know I'd be of the view that the debate needs to be that all teaching and learning units should be rebranded teaching, learning and assessment units and to go back to what (other focus Group Manager) was saying, assessment includes feedback. You know, so I think that that's very important I know we've touched on it before in terms of who we have teaching, but it is important to have people who are going to engage Students teaching first year and look, no organization can have all of their staff in that sense, and the work that was referred to earlier on, with what was done in terms of learning and teaching staff lecturing first year is very, very important, but you can't have you know, 6 module superstars, that don't exist, you have to balance your resources around it. But, but the role of staff is key, and like the elements, those elements capture it well really you know, going back to the feedback, I would agree, and I think you know, the feedback can be there's a lot of feedback, now that could be automated. I know generally come back to LDHE and the lecturer who taught it, had automated a lot of it, you know, and it was you know a good way to get feedback, to go back to what (other focus Group Manager) was saying, a timely manner, but also good feedback and also, I think, then we changed the modules as well that students could feed forward so that they could, if they wanted to resubmit that piece of work for a higher mark, you know, and that was a change that we made in the latter stages of it, so that again students were seeing that I can take that feedback and use that feedback to get a higher mark, you know, not a huge number took it up, only those who were motivated but it also shows the opportunity for them to learn, and I think also covid is going to have a big difference on how we assess going forward. Because it has changed, how we assess, currently, ok accounting programmes are a bit limited because of exemptions but even then I think that the accounting bodies are going to have, to be more open towards a higher level of continuous or project-based assessment. I know this opens up other challenges, but I think you can make the assessment authentic. Then there is no reason why you can't make that transition.

Manager C: And one other quick one liner to throw in there is I don't think across our suite of programmes, we have enough opportunity at all for formative feedback; you know very few of the modules have it written in and delivered. That is a problem, you know.

Manager A: and I think in the future, like ED tech offers some opportunities around that.

Manager B: In terms of the feedback, I wouldn't limit it to the first assessment, I think all feedback should be delivered in a timely manner, and I think timely preliminary, even leaving quality feedback, detailed feedback to you next time, I'm going to preliminary instant or almost instant feedback, even just a grade has value as well, and then follow up later with the more detailed feedback I think it's one of the Most important aspects of honing one's performance in first year when one doesn't know exactly the standard expected, you know, and I know, an awful lot of people who would have been very worried about not doing well in accounting, for example, because they might have been only getting three quarters of the way towards the answer and weren't able to find the final answer but when they realized that is up to 75% of grade, that was much more reassuring to them, but they won't know that until they got the first set of results or got feedback from the first assessment in that subject you know I think the quicker, that is, the better. For every subject, for every assessment, not just the first one. Obviously, the role of staff I really agree with what everybody said there. Its interface between the Institute and the student has to be. Everybody has to be on message, everybody has to be in tune with what the team is trying to achieve. The programme boards, similar to (other focus Group Manager), in the sense that it has been probably quite limited, definitely in my experience, it's been: get the business done - get out. But to give the

examples of teamwork across the board level for particularly of the timing of assessments, that's been a particularly positive development, which came through the programme board, and so there are there are examples of that and I agree with (other focus Group Manager) that there could have been more but apart from that I don't have anything else to add.

Okay, thank you very much for that. In terms of programme design, we have the Moodle VLE analytics, developing graduate attributes, the assessment strategy and calendar of assessment. What's your perspective on the programme design pillar?

Manager A: I think it's very important as well, again to go back to what we were talking about at the start, all these elements are very important, they all integrate with one another there's not one that's more important than the others but programme design is key if you don't have, if you don't have a well-designed programme then you're going to have you're going to have difficulties and go back to say one that we talked about many times Owen, say like David Baume who is the UK academic we've talked about giving students when they sign up for a course in those early days an experience that they can relate to that they can tell their friends and family about what it relates to and what you're actually studying. You know I think I think that's very important, in terms of going forward, the analytics is key, and I think the one of the biggest things is that you need, we need, is flags. This model is going to develop further, you need flags in terms of students that are not engaging and you need this across all the connection points in the college, you know, everybody nowadays is coming in, well the majority of students are coming in with their own device, almost certainly a smartphone, they're logging on to the Wi-Fi, you know, we know that we know when they log on; the analytics are there. When they use their card in the canteen, we can know. When they go into the library, you know when they swipe their card, all these things are known. How many times they go into the VLE. Do they watch the asynchronous content? obviously that doesn't apply. It might in the future, but do they, do they access the VLE and how long did they spend on it? All of that stuff is there. You need that in some form of dashboard; you know that you can access and you can use, and you can use it as an intervention to identify students who are most at risk.

Manager C: I'd agree it's a very important pillar. I'm not sure how much the VLE analytics are used, like we're not we're not getting anywhere near close to their potential apart from kind of lecturers, maybe tracking when students last logged on and so on, that there wouldn't be anywhere near enough use of them. Pre-covid, obviously, that's increased a bit in the last few years. The graduate attribute model, not enough work has been done on that in the Faculty, I think in recent years. If I asked the lecturers to kind of explain the model that we had, I'd say probably a lot of them wouldn't have it on the tip of their tongue, they'd be aware of it from maybe the last programmatic review, but I'm not sure how much it's informed course design, in an ongoing sense in the last few years and the actual practical operational stuff like the calendar of assessments and so on, is really important, though that's you know The thing that generates the most angst among students when they've got you know assessments clashing with each other or problems arising from that often causes, you know, pushing people over the edge. I think that one is really, really important.

Okay, thanks, thank you very much for that and the final pillar, which is the student support pillar which would be the use of motivational techniques, the HOD emeritus, which was Peter Melinn's retention officer role, open door policy, the student services department, the parents evening, pass, the tutors and AIT connect. What value would you place on that particular pillar?

Manager C: Massive, massive. In HTL huge, like the amount of times I've had students that were about to drop out but somebody in student services made an intervention in that there could have been the counsellors, it could have been Father Shay, it could have been someone in the student assistance fund, for example, as someone in the student Union sorted a SUSI grant and its enormous

and it's a really valuable role for sure, all of those students support functions and student services functions. The other kind of aspects of it, like that the tutors, the parents' evening and so on, were really beneficial too. And again, would fluctuate depending on the course, depending on the student, depending on the year, but at different times have made an enormous impact and the one that hasn't been exploited anywhere near as much as it might be is the PASS system. We haven't really used that ever or promoted it in HTL anywhere near as much as we should, so I would say that that's probably one that's had less of an impact than the others.

Manager D: I think it's probably one of the more probably, one of the more important, in some respects: that it's the personal touch, you know, that it goes beyond the academic and all the other experience. It's the speaking to somebody outside of an academic context as in you're not talking about assessments, you're not talking about exams or topic and material- it's this, so I think the supports, but I agree with (other focus Group Manager) I don't know how much the Pass But yeah I think this is one of the options are there other than the group, then that help us was personalize the experience.

Manager B: Can I just make the point that the tutors in subjects like maths and accounting - The technical subjects, that the way I the way I look at those subjects. Students that are struggling at them can improve very, very quickly, with the right intervention, it's like it makes no sense and then suddenly it clicks and the role of the tutors in subjects like that to me has saved many, many students from failing, not just in first year. The people who might be failing financial accounting in music technology or struggling in office information systems at the time. Those students, you know, were capable students but just couldn't get accounting for whatever reason, and this tutor - crucial there and I think I think it has to be acknowledged as a huge part of the student retention process.

Okay, thank you for that. I'm going to share a document and share my screen with you here and can all of you see the non-progression rate for the Department of business and management? Yeah, Okay, so this charts the non-progression rate and the year one was the only year, where there was absolutely no intervention made by us and the model evolved as time went on. So, as you can see, in terms of headline rates within the department, the non-progression rate went from 36 to 12 and the three-year weighted average went from 28 to 18. In your view, was the progression rate fall due to the model or were there other factors that contributed to it?

Manager A: I mean you have to argue that it fell because of the model, you know, we go back to, you know, I talked about at the beginning, when we started this journey in terms of 2010 programmatic review that was kind of the base year, you know, and that's a significant reduction over that period of time, you know and I'm not sure if you're going to look at any variables, as part of your research, you're planning to do a quantitative analysis on that and it's difficult to do and difficult to get the data on it but I would say that it has to be a significant factor and again go back to what we're talking about earlier on. What one single one was the biggest contributor? I don't think it's easy. You can say that I think it's a combination of all of the things that we've been doing, that were done, continue to do that contributed to it.

Manager B: I agree with (other focus Group Manager) and I think you have to look at the data set, obviously, you can never know the counterfactual, but it has never exceeded 30% once since the first year and I don't know what the chances of that happening randomly are, but there's a consistent improvement there over eight years which one can't contribute to anything except the focus that has been put on student retention, over that period of time, I think it's entirely down to the model, with possibly some fluctuations due to random events or otherwise but the model is primarily responsible for that reduction.

Manager C: Well, I don't think you can ever quantify pieces of social science research, where there's not many different variables in putting into the outcome that are beyond your control or beyond the scope, I mean students who dropped out often don't know why they dropped out and ones who don't drop out won't have considered why they didn't drop out. At the same time, so the only way for you to really quantify this in any meaningful way will be to compare it to other business faculties, obviously, and also to compare it to other faculties within AIT. I mean there's you know, obviously events that happened in that period there, for example, where HTL wasn't in business and then was in business and so on. I would agree with (other focus Group Manager) and (other focus Group Manager) that the likelihood is very, very strong that have contributed enormously to that drop and it's difficult to quantify how much of it that it was. But statistically, it would look much more likely than not that the data given the third was a very significant three-year drop. A very significant drop, for the first year that come in and even with one-off events like absorbing the HTL department in, it didn't make it spike back up to the previous levels and, and I suppose another couple of years of data, but to strengthen the argument even further, and I know you're here to ask those questions and not the other way around, but it would be interesting to see if you can get the data from pre 2010 as well just to track it out over a longer journey.

Manager A: And we also be interesting to see if there's, no, no, you have to consider this but mapping CAO points as a variable in there, see if it makes any difference.

Manager B: You're comparing with other departments or other faculties and other colleges, would be an important control factor Yeah, but this is just the Department of business and management it's not the faculty.

Here, the statistics are only related to the Department of business and management. These are department ones, but it is a faculty model, but it's looking at the impact on and within the Department of Business and management. Okay, and thank you for that and then I'm going to again share material with you.

Manager C: An interesting one Owen to look up there might be to look at a correlation of other department size against their progression rates and non-progression. See if there's any correlations between the two would be interesting.

This relates to the student withdrawals before March 1st, so just as you know, the non-progression rate is from March the 1st in first year to March 1st in second year, so these are the early withdraws.

Manager C: Owen, can you zoom in on that a bit please, just a bit larger?

Oh, sure yes Sorry!

Manager C: That's great, thanks.

Better? Sorry about that, these give the student withdrawals before March 1st and in terms of the rate of student withdrawal and three-year moving average is very much a u shape, in that there were improvements towards the middle and of the timeframe in question before it kind of disapproved again. Would any of you have any perspectives as to why this might have occurred?

Manager B: This department again Owen?

Yes, all are figures from of Department of Business and Management.

Manager C: You see, that there were so many things that are outside our control in that. The period 2010 to 2014, there wasn't a huge amount of part-time work for students, you know. The period 2014 to 2018, the economy was picking up, there were a lot more distractions. There was more money in the economy, so presumably more nights out and presumably more part-time jobs and those distractions can cause non-progression. You know, so presumably it was something external, but I don't know.

Manager A: And Owen I know that students are required to when they fill in that form, I assume this is off the official forms? yeah you know, it'd be interesting to see if there's anything that comes out of the reason they're asked to cite a reason on the form. Because otherwise I would have no proof, it would be only just pure speculation as to why there is no make. It would be interesting to see if say, for example, financial reasons, was one of the reasons they exited, yeah.

Manager C: I mean, are the numbers even statistically relevant?

Manager A: Probably not, yeah.

Manager C: I mean yeah like you're talking about single figures for most of them, so it's Like you see the 11, the spike there in 2016 or 17 like for all we know, there was a group of triplets in the class that dropped out, you know and I'd say they're probably within a margin of error they're you know, they're probably not that different, Okay, what's the average there, it was probably 6% or something.

It's about 5 or 6%. Institutionally it's about 8 and nationally it's estimated to be about 5 as well, but it's a difficult one to track for a number of reasons, so, for example, a student withdraws to go take a place in a later CAO offer is included in that, so there are there are a lot of variables, I was just wondering if you had a view as to why there was a u shape.

Manager B: In a sense, around that time, were numbers challenged in some of the programmes in the department? That we were struggling to get in numbers and marketing ramped up massively in that period of time, so I'm wondering, would it be a sense that the quality of our intake might have dropped slightly in the later years of that series?

Yeah perhaps, Okay, some programme related questions and again, you may have absolutely no views on this, but statistically, the best performing programme in terms of retention was business psychology. Why in your view would that have been the case?

Manager D: I think that to me, that would be a factor of the points requirement for it. That it's higher points therefore higher achieving students. That would be my first reaction. Now I don't have anything to back that up, but that's what I would think.

Manager C: instinct would be the points, but also small class size, you know, you were talking kind of 20 students maximum in a group. They're very different to a group of 60 you know, they're going to get more individual attention. They're probably going to form deeper bonds with your classmates and that's going to help progression.

Manager B: it's a programme that was always in danger of being axed, so I think there was a massive effort, always put in to keeping the students there and growing as much as possible. It would have benefited from huge managerial attention.

Manager A: Also, I do think I do, like (other focus Group Manager) said, I think that the small cohort of students allowed the ability to build up a good dynamic within that core group, and I think that was definitely a factor in such a low level of attrition.

And statistically, the worst performing programme in terms of retention was the digital marketing or social media marketing offerings and again, would you have a view as to why that would have been the worst performing?

Manager C: instinct for that would be a very attractive course title, but maybe there might be a misunderstanding about the content. That'd be just instinct, a very superficial analysis.

Manager D: Again, would it be would have the converse, of the other ones that if it's social media digital marketing would attract, you know, creative types perhaps, that are maybe again, were the points lower Owen can you remember, for that? I mean, for students doing business psychology, I assume?

They would be lower than business psychology yeah, that they wouldn't have been the lowest points offerings in the department and the points averaged around the 250 mark, maybe.

Manager D: So, again yeah would it attract, as I said, to kind of marketing, the kind of creative type, you know that, perhaps, I think, if I remember correctly there's accounting and everything in it isn't there yeah.

Manager A: yeah financial accounting was one of the modules that had a high level of attrition and.

Manager D: There you go, it is back to what (other focus Group Manager) said, you know, is that perhaps it is the perception of what the programme might be versus the reality of what it is might impact it also.

Manager A: I think it was also a level 6 verses level 8 so again go back to some of the things we've been talking about, it was multi-factorial you know so, in terms of in terms of the reason why, why it happened.

And again, in terms of programme level, there was the most dramatic improvement of any programme occurred in business in law and which had monumental improvement, towards the end of the model and would you have any explanations why that might have happened?

Manager C: I guess with that kind of programme Owen, is that you had a high performing calibre of student coming on to it anyway, did probably would have been more receptive to those interventions.

Okay.

Manager B: It was a programme we all saw as more valuable and it was perceived to be by the student population, and I think a big marketing effort went into it, the law staff, in particular, I seem to recall being very dedicated in marketing that Programme and I think that might be enough.

Manager A: But, again, I think points profile played out there, that those students are coming in with you know, a good level of points, you know versus other programmes, and I think that was reflected in their ability, plus obviously the work that went into the model in terms of keeping them.

Okay, and thank you for that. I'm sharing the screen with you again and, and I wish this time to share with you student performance with regards to the autumn repeats and now I can make this a little larger. That okay for everybody?

Manager C: Good, yeah so.

These figures again relate to the Department of Business and Management and what they show is in the first table. The figure in bold is the percentage of students who were eligible to repeat who actually sat their exams. The second table, and the second set of bold numbers are those who did repeat and the percentage of those who subsequently passed their exams, and then the final one, which you may not be able to see.

Manager A: Just tab down, yeah.

yeah yes, yes, no.

Manager A: yeah yeah.

And the last one then is where you combine the two, which is those who are eligible to repeat how many of those became eligible to progress at the end of the repeat exams, so you can see, for example, that in the last set of figures that are in bold, the 53% is from the autumn setting of 2011 and that was the number who are eligible to progress, after the repeat exams of those who could repeat. Now the trend here and showed considerable improvement in the last three years, and obviously the last year, in particular, would you have any idea as to why that might have occurred?

Manager A: Owen, can we just go up to the top one again? There, yeah, I think they're interesting. Interesting data set, you know, I think. For me the big one, is the first one in terms of that those that were eligible to repeat and actually participated, you know, there was a reasonably significant number, I know it went down in 2012, 2013 but you know consistently high in a 17 and 18, you know, above 80%. Which is just something that was going on in terms of other years where they weren't even bothered to turn up for their repeats, you know, and then obviously you're seeing that because they're actually taking part and you have to say that the briefing played some part because more students were taking part as opposed to knocking on the door. Remember, it used to be a flood, big queue out the door in terms of people coming to talk to the head of department and you were saying the same thing to everyone, and you weren't necessarily giving them the amount of time that you could give to them in the briefing and reinforce some of the broader points and also they get to see that they're not the only ones in that boat. After knowing you, you can repeat, and you can you can be successful. You know it's not, it's just a blip rather than something that's terminal for your performance.

Manager B: I wonder, is there a certain element that's not captured by the data in terms of the number of modules those repeating might have had to repeat? So, if somebody has five modules to repeat, they might just throw the hat and not bother, whereas if there's only one or two modules are more likely to attempt to do that.

Manager A: But actually, everything I meant to say at the start is like, if you look at the eligible repeat for 2011 at 133 down to 38 in 2018, I think that's a huge drop that would point to that the success that the model was actually working, Absolutely.

Manager B: All the figures show success point to the potential success of the model in terms of the success rate, as well as the actual reduction in the repeat rate and I think it's a very positive set of figures.

Manager C: I suppose just to play devil's advocate on that as well, you would expect that the percentage to actually pass the repeats would increase if the model was successful. Yeah, if you know because.

Manager A: Absolutely (other focus Group Manager) yeah. Because it's working.

Manager C: yeah no, but what I mean is presumably it'd be reaching the good students and they wouldn't even fail in the first place. And then the students that will be left to do repeats would be the ones that you're not going to reach at all and they've been the really marginalized ones, so I'm surprised it's not the reverse, actually.

Do you think there's any particular reason why it isn't the reverse?

Manager C: Probably the reason that the lads gave at the start there, that it was by reducing the numbers of repeats that individual students have to do so that they had less modules to take, where they're far more likely to try them, I would say that's probably the variable that I'm not thinking through.

Manager A: is repeating and carry a factor? Repeat and carry came after. Or was it before that?

Repeat and carry would have come in and actually I think around 2008, (other focus Group Manager) so I think that's before.

Manager A: Yeah, repeat and carry came in with modularisation and semesterisation. yeah.

that's right yeah, thank you for that everyone.

Manager B: Looking at the numbers, the overall repeats are lower and the pass rate of those repeating is higher, so it's good and the model has to well, obviously we don't say it has to do drifters there's a high probability that the model had a significant baring on that.

I purposely left this one to last because I felt to put them, in some way, taint your answers to the previous one. But this is the percentage of total of aggregate modules passed in the department and what this statistic is that if every student has 6 subjects and there are 100 students, that means there are 600 modules and these numbers reflect the percentage of those 600 modules that would be passed.

Manager B: So, for a whole year?

Over full year yeah, by the student body, now repeat students were taken out with these but you can see in the department over the eight years it went from an aggregate of 65% of modules passed an aggregate 88% of modules passed and what are the three year moving averages from 70 to 84 and again my question, as all the time is what factors, do you think and resulted in such a significant improvement?

Manager B: So, just to clarify you excluded repeats? this is only students who passed the first attempt?

Yes, this is only the first-year population that year.

Manager B: Passing those modules at the first attempt.

no

Manager B: Passing over the year, I got you.

So yeah so, for example, in 2011-2012 they would have been the students who registered for the first time on the first of September in 2011 would have excluded the repeats from 2010.

Manager B: including the modules student passed during the repeat sitting that year?

Manager C: Yes, you're not carrying the legacy students on each year going forward?

correct, yeah.

Manager C: Again, it shows the same thing, it could only be a positive trend from 65 to 88 that the trend is going in the right direction and that coincides with the time of the model, With the time the model came in and there's possibly as always external factors playing a role there, but again, this is the trend is so positive on a three-year weighted average is so positive that, and it would be hard to make the argument that it was an external thing only. The model was a significant role in most.

Manager B: Agreed probability is high.

Okay, thank you very much for that. Do you believe that the long-term opportunity for the graduates was enhanced by changes that we made to the first-year experience?

Manager A: I would hope so, I mean I think that's one of the things go back what we were talking about earlier on, the habit forming, you know if you form good habits in higher education, hopefully you'll carry them on too. Like time management, adherence to deadlines, team working skills - All of those things, presentation skills, they're skills that are going to stay with you for the rest of your life. Now you don't just learn them in higher education, you learn them outside as well too in other things that you take part in, whether it be sports or you know, clubs and societies or whatever, playing music, whatever it is that you do but I would think it would contribute to it, yeah definitely.

Manager D: Definitely, even in terms of confidence, you know, again, you have students who perhaps parents or family didn't go to higher education and there is nervousness, trepidation so, by undertaking these interventions you're increasing their confidence, which would hopefully stay with them for the rest of their career.

Manager C: I would agree fully, the only thing I'd say is the model can't be static, you know, it will have to evolve because there's you know there's big things that are much more dominant in employability, at the moment that wouldn't have been as topical, a few years ago, the emotional intelligence and soft skills and so on are much more dominant in the discourse now than they were presumably 10 years ago as the model started to become creative. Historically, yes, but going forward, it would need, you know - evolution.

yeah and we're on the last set of questions.

Manager B: can I make a point before you go?

Sure, yeah yeah.

Manager B: Just in terms of the -we're measuring the success of the model by the rate of attrition reducing and non-progression reducing. There is another element of benefit - your question was about benefits to graduates in the long term. How might the improvements that the model has brought have improved the grades of other students and, as such, improved the quality of their degrees and ultimately their employability prospects and earnings potential? It's something that isn't I know within the scope of the study, but it is a huge potential benefit of the model, if we agree that it has saved X amount of students from dropping out, it's equally likely that it has enhanced the results and aspects of huge cohort of students.

Thank you, and so again, moving on to the final set of questions. A contribution we haven't considered is the contribution, if any, do you feel the Faculty administrative staff and might have made this model?

Manager C: Right, huge again very difficult to quantify but they play a role that evolves between the kind of almost parenting and pastoral to operational and administrative and the intelligence side of it as well is enormous and I don't I don't think that they can be overstated really in their role. I think huge.

Manager A: I would agree, I would echo that, very much so, in terms of.. to give you a parallel so within TUD, we have 2 admin staff within the Office. If you look at the terms of the office, on the ground floor first inside the door, the amount of traffic they used to get from students who have come into the ladies and they'd be able to answer the query. Deal with it. Whereas nowadays staff ..and this is more to do with the quality of the staff, and so I suppose one of the differences between Dublin and Athlone in terms of trying to attract quality staff is that everything then has to be sent to the Head of department or head of school, they can't even answer the most basic questions. You know, which is usually frustrating, because then you get a lot of operations stuff. So that they're usually, so go back to what (other focus Group Manager) was saying. They're that first point of contact the students on lots of queries and most cases the student wants an answer and they're in I'd say you know, 80% of the cases they're able to go out of the office with their answer got or they're able to say you need to go to X, Y and Z. To resolve that issue, whereas that doesn't happen in larger organizations, you know the poor students get sent from pillar to post.

Manager B: yeah, I agree. I think having the admin staff with the knowledge and experience they can filter out an awful lot of the issues away from the head of department and then feed the intelligence forward if there's a recurring issue which can focus attention. Good administrative staff is vital, I think, to the operation.

Thank you for that and the data from the study showed that on average between 3 and 4% of students a year per year in first year got enough credits to progress on to second year and chose not to, by their own choice, not because of their results. What reasons, do you think and students might have who can progress to the second year and subsequently didn't?

Manager D: I had an example of that just only this year. Now I know what this year is different as well. But when I spoke to the student's mother, as it is, as we do. The student actually had a history of this, the student had done two years in medicine and pulled out due to have completed them, hadn't failed anything and I believe they'd started somewhere else as well, I have completed credits

and again pulled out, so I think it was the third programme, so I think, in some cases. Whether it is social, psychological anxiety, whatever issues are certainly one element I would suggest.

Manager C: For HTL, Jobs! They got jobs. That was it. Unfortunately, no rocket science with it for our department. They got a job, and they left. I don't know the amount of times I have heard "I can progress but I am joining the guards", maybe 10 times since I started at AIT.

Okay so, thank you for that, and in terms of the wider institution, what level of support from within the wider institution but outside the Faculty do you believe there was for this model?

Manager C: Very strong from individuals and people like Father Shay, huge contributors to it and Sarah La Cumbre would have contributed. People like Teresa, different student Union Presidents, gave great contributions on an individual level. At a senior management level. I'm not too sure it was as well understood or adopted and I think had it of been, it would have been of enormous benefit because it would have been something people wanted to do but also felt they have to do, monitored and whether they engaged or not, you know and I think that it was easy enough to dodge if you didn't want to engage, really.

Manager A: yeah, I mean I think that obviously I have the benefit of sitting on the EMT, so had more exposure to it, but I think there were there was support you know Okay, can we say maybe… what's the right word? Controlled support, shall we say, and elements I think they were supportive of other elements that they weren't like the example I cited about trying to you know, reduce the group's, make the group sizes larger for the LDHE module.

Manager C: (other focus Group Manager) as well, people like Peter Melinn not getting replaced, you know.

Manager A: Oh no no no absolutely, but like, but they did agree to put Peter in, in the first place, you know I think that's…..

Manager C: That said more about their desire to assist Peter than to assist the Faculty when they didn't replace him, do you know what I mean?

Manager A: But I was just going to say that that was in part, that you know, and I mean, I think that, you know, they didn't fully appreciate the value of the level of retention, you know because like the original plan, the proposal that we put together was that we would employ, some of the more mature ladies who had graduated and had gone through the system to kind of go into that role and like, the cost wasn't going to be huge you know so I think that's something that certainly if it is to be successful and to be replicated elsewhere, you know management, senior management support and buy in to the programme is very important.

Manager B: I got the sense that senior management supported the programme, to the extent that it would save money, but not support us financially in terms of driving us if you know what I mean it was fine if it didn't cost us anything, great programme, great initiative, well done boys, pat on the back but don't ask for any money to make it work that's how I read it, I can then again I haven't direct experience of that as (other focus Group Manager) would have had but that's how I felt it was regarded.

Okay, thank you for that. We're coming to a conclusion. Now was there any aspect of this that you would have expected to have had the opportunity to speak about or that you thought there would be a focus on that we haven't covered?

Manager A: We've covered the most of it. Can I just ask, are you focusing your research purely on the Department of Business and Management?

It's the impact that the Faculty model had on the department

Manager A: okay.

Okay, my final question to so is that, from what I've heard in this particular focus group is you believe that the student success model worked and if I was to ask you to sum up, why do you think the student success model worked as the final question?

Manager D: multifaceted, it wasn't just one or two initiatives; it addressed a number of pillars; you know from the student experience, all the various aspects of it and there was a tacit acknowledgement to this, a tacit acknowledgement of that fact that it's not just one thing. You can't just bring them in, certain students and talk to them that improves retention. It's the acknowledgement that it's a multi-faceted approach is needed.

Manager A: yeah, I agree with (other focus Group Manager) I think one of the reasons it works so well, is that it encompasses all aspects of the experience for students in higher education in terms of the student services, which are a key part of the interaction, the academic staff, the school admin staff, the management team within the school, you know so and in terms of that. It's hugely…… They're huge factors. It wouldn't have worked if you were just trying to do it on our own, you know.

Manager B: yeah, I think it worked because it was focused on and I always believe what's measured gets done, so when there was a focus on student retention then people buy in to the model on the basis: That's what we're talking about all the time. That's what we want to focus on, therefore that gets done and I think that's a huge thing and you can't focus on everything, so this is what we chose to focus on at the time. As (other focus Group Manager) rightly says, it encompassed a broad range of factors, so therefore it caught a wide number of students at risk of dropping out. It was a well thought out model. It evolved thoughtfully over the years; it was added to, and it was tweaked where necessary. I just thought it was well managed.

Manager A: yeah I think to go back to (other focus Group Manager)'s point there, the evolution was an important element as well too. It wasn't static, going back to what (other focus Group Manager) was saying earlier on. It did evolve, we listened, we looked at what we did. Did it work? Did it not work? And you know, added to it and tried things, some things did work, some didn't work, you know, so like that, before like to say more things did work but ok say, for example, the student team building didn't work particularly well but we were willing to try them, you know and that's a key thing. I think a lot of education they're afraid to try stuff because they don't want to fail, and we encourage our students to fail, all the time, you know, so we should be willing to try stuff.

Okay, so.

Manager C: I think it worked because it gave a structure to something that we probably all feel a deep sense of responsibility to, you know. There's a kind of an ethical duty on us as educators, to give the best you can to the students and this diagram gave us kind of a structure to implement that, operationalize it, to bring people from first year to the second year of their course.

Okay, well, to (other focus Group Manager), (other focus Group Manager), (other focus Group Manager) and (other focus Group Manager) can I firstly formally just record my thank you to you

for giving up and being very generous with both your time and especially your thoughts in what has been a fantastically thought provoking focus group, and at this point and with your permission I'm going to stop the recording, is everyone happy with that?

Appendix L: LG1 Focus Group Transcript

Okay, good afternoon everybody, and thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this focus group. Could I ask you an opening general question in terms of what is your view, what is your view with regard to the first-year provision in the Department of Business and Management over the time frame and question?

LECTURER A: Well, I can make a start. It's a big question. I do remember a lot of positive things happening during that time and decisions that were made for first years during the years mentioned. And specifically speaking about the business psychology course. And things such as, if I'm to give examples, you know that we decided what kind of modules to put in the first semester like was one major thing to try and grab their interest and so on. In my own experience, it was very positive, and the difference was obvious, in terms of the student experience that was reported back to me and in terms of retention.

LECTURER B: I would agree with last, actually, yeah. I'm just thinking back now to that time period there would have been a change during that time period from say long thin modules into the semesterisation process, and you know, we would have had concerns at the time, about how first years would adapt to that. We had things like, you know, kind of ice breakers, maybe in the first week or so, are certainly within the first month. I think of once first years would have come in. And even the tracking of them throughout the semester and the chasing up of students who might have been weak or absent during the semester. Then that head of department type of interview, that would have been instigated after semester one exams. I think that was a very positive experience for first years.

LECTURER A: Yes, and even earlier than that a decision was made to give the students something to do straight away because you know they're there when they come to college for probably at their most motivated on their first day in a way when arrive in and they're dying to see what this is all about, and they got something to do, like they had an assessment. So, so it meant that for students who didn't know anyone or whatever, they were occupied. The danger, you know when it comes to retention and we talk about the induction crisis which exists in organisations as well, is that you lose people at the early stage, most likely time in organisations that people will leave their job is at the beginning. Because it's not what they expected and they don't feel able for it or they are scared or intimidated or they're nervous, it's exactly the same thing. And our first years got something to do. They had a deadline. And the other part of that then was they got feedback quite quickly, and that was acted upon. I think the head of the department came in at that stage. Anyone who didn't have that handed in, in week three, was followed up on. And followed up on now I don't mean pursued, but this was all sort of a caring approach really, see what kind of supports could be put in place for anyone that…and maybe try to get them on board, instead of losing them at that early stage, because it is a scary stage for students.

LECTURER C: I suppose the time period you're looking at just 2010 to?

2018 would have been the intake.

LECTURER C: I suppose, for me, the biggest change I saw was during the programmatic review of 2015. It's kind of hard to tell whether that's because I became more involved, anyway, because I went from part time to full time at that stage. But it seemed like the introduction of the legal skills modules and the business law degree and more scaffolding

generally across the board in all of the courses, through things like the mandatory LDHE modules as well seem to kind of give students for support sort of and more kind of one-on-one contact, even in classrooms that seemed to kind of sort of help them cope with the overwhelming workload in first year. And the shock to the system in the first semester first year. I think that was a lot more scaffolding of the first years in the first semester. I think Karen mentioned it as well, the ice breakers like the induction week they used to do with the first years. And they used to do an event over in the sports hall as well and bring them on and kind of, do you know, fun and games with the class. I think that was really positive as well, in terms of kind of breaking the ice between the class members and integrating them as a group, much more. The other change that we brought in 2015 would have been a lot more group work. So, the law course definitely, the law subjects and the business and law degree at where a lot of solo work, so a lot of essays and things like that, and then exams as assessments and, instead, then we brought in a lot more group presentations and group projects as a result of the sort of information that was relayed into the 2015 programmatic review. That made them work as a team or and I think for me, I saw a big change in how the group's integrated and how kind of glued together the classes were in that lead to an improvement in attendance. So, they were coming in to see each other, because they were a better, more cohesive group, and I think that's really important as well. And I'm not sure how that's played out in Covid, I know that's not part of the research but it's been interesting to see how that's kind of played out when they haven't met you know.

In advance of this focus group, I circulated the model to you that's under evaluation in this study. To what extent do you believe the student success model adequately reflects and the first-year experience within the Department of Business and Management?

LECTURER A: From memory, I did have a good look at this. Of course, I had forgotten about quite a few of the things until I saw them, and they did come back to me. I think there's no doubt that many of the practices that were put in place, deliberately put in place at that time, had a positive impact on the student experience and on retention. And again, talking about going back to the examples that I mentioned before, has been some of those.

LECTURER B: So Owen, are you asking if the model that you've put up for us to look at if that reflects of is that what you're asking?

If that accurately reflects what was happening on the ground at the time.

LECTURER B: I think it does too and as Linda said, it's only when you see it in writing that you appreciate the extent of all those changes that were actually put in place.

LECTURER C: I think it just as well, like, if the question is, was that model implemented fully in real terms? I think it was yeah.

Okay, and can I ask you what's your view on the model is?

LECTURER A: I think it's I think it's quite a complex model, and it does manage to include many elements, as I said earlier maybe more than I even remembered at the time. What's useful about it is, it is in the different sections, you can see the things that were going on, let's say, the part that was our own experience as academic staff. But It shows very clearly, all the other things that were happening that would support the things that we were doing, and that the things we were doing would support the things that were happening elsewhere.

LECTURER B: I think it's a very empathetic model is the word that I would use. It genuinely tries to show some empathy for how difficult it is for first-year students when they come in. You know, helps them to try and overcome you know those difficulties. So, empathy is the word that really strikes me, when I look at it now on the screen I'm looking at here from.

LECTURER A: And certainly student centred.

LECTURER C: Very kind of focused on enrichment as well, with all the guest lecturers, field trips, and then the feedback on the assessments and all those things kind of really ensure that it's kind of like a rich and responsive experience for the students. The only thing I would say about it is like everything's been analysed from an equality point of view, these days. And the model itself doesn't look at that standpoint, it doesn't just focus on maybe different barriers that students have as a homogenous group. But at the same time, because it's such an empathetic model. It nonetheless would help students that were struggling for a variety of reasons overcome loads of different kinds of barriers, I think. Particularly that approach of a kind of constant contact with the students and the interventions with the poor performing students, I think, will capture a lot of those issues anyway, even without deliberately based on an equality analysis.

LECTURER A: That's true Alison and even without that I think it shows that a lot of thought was put into the way that the human nature of just trying to understand how students might feel and coming at it from all different angles, to try and overcome any obstacles, not even the ones you mentioned, there yourself.

LECTURER B: Another thing that strikes me as well, and I know you want to just to focus on that particular timeframe. But in hindsight, looking back now and from where we are now. It also strikes me as a model that required a lot of resources's a resource intensive model, again we don't necessarily see now in the new university structure to be fair, but at the time it was a resource intensive model. Whether that's in terms of people or time or……

LECTURER A: And it did require, let's say, quite a bit of goodwill. A lot of things that happened were outside of, let's say, clearly specify things within the job description, people do other things you know, above and beyond.

Okay, thank you, what impact do you think it had on the first-year provision in the department?

LECTURER B: You mean on the success of it or just the delivery of it?

I mean on all aspects of it from the students' perspective, what impact do you think it had?

LECTURER C: From the point of view of some of the stronger students, I think some aspects of it were probably irritating like LDEH and things like that. But then, from the point of view of weaker students, I do think it helped bridge the gap for them, sort of bottom end of the class, and they're the ones being vulnerable to dropping out. I do think it probably had a massive impact on retention.

LECTURER A: I think it had a massive impact on retention. But funnily enough Alison and I'm thinking of business and law here because I was teaching LDHE on that for a couple years. It was the best students that attended LDHE. It actually was.

LECTURER C: But they attend everything.

LECTURER D: I think it brought the head of department a lot more into what was happening on a day-to-day level which, not like not like a stick or anything, but it meant that we were able to tell the Head, pass it up the chain of command if there was poor attenders and there was something done about it. And I just came in late, sorry. But again, with hindsight now this year I don't know if this is enough to say, but it doesn't seem to have been the same emphasis or…it worked well first year like over the last few years when this was running, first year worked a lot better than it has since Covid, I would say.

LECTURER A: And I think things were dealt with as they arose, things for not put off, and you know what I mean things didn't kind of just the whole semester go by and…not get around to actually dealing with things…. things were dealt with as arose very quickly, which is very good for everybody involved. The students as well as the staff to see that things were being tackled and sorted.

Okay, thank you. Looking at the individual actions or interventions with the model. Could I ask you to perhaps identify some of the actions or interventions that you think were the most effective that were introduced as part of this model? I wouldn't limit you to any number or you don't have to give any number, but I would suggest, maybe, if you could identify three each, it might be useful and you might all identify the same three I don't know?

LECTURER A: Just give me a second to look at the key ones again.

LECTURER D: It's any of the boxes, is it really?

The three black boxes are the underlying principles and then the ones that are closest to the centre are pillars, so student experience, esteem habit forming programme design role of academic staff and students supports. And then the ones that branch out of them are the actions and interventions associated with each one of those pillars.

LECTURER C: I think probably the LDHE and the early intervention for poor performing students and the team building, I think were really strong on the student experience.

LECTURER A: I think the provision of feedback, the first assessment in a timely manner. Is it mentioned there? it says deployment of key staff in first year. But you know, the way that the decision was made to try and have interesting subjects in the first semester rather than in the second, to try and get straight in there, I don't know what that comes under.

Yes, inexplicably, that was left off this model, even though when I presented the paper I highlighted it at the EYFE presentation. So, it would come under it would come under program design.

LECTURER A: I think that, students come in and they're so open-minded or you're going to find them at their most open-minded the first day, and if you can get straight into the interesting stuff, I think that was very good. Okay, the open-door policy okay, I think that worked, but it worked because the style of communication was, it was of concern, but it was also not taken any…how to put this…things were dealt with well is what I'm trying to say there in terms of an open-door policy. You can have an open-door policy, but that can be

meaningless if nothing is followed up on or dealt with properly. But I think things were dealt with and good advice was given to students and good support was given to staff. That's what I'm putting under that now might fit somewhere else better.

LECTURER B: The things that jumped out for me, the regular assessments that not leaving everything until the end of the semester. So those assessments, that regular and formative assessment, I think, was quite important. And another thing that I think was important as well at the time was, you know those graduate attributes that we had where, for example, Alison referred to it there, we had group work, putting together a lot of modules, we had presentations, encouraging that, from the start. I know in my subject I was very conscious of, having a written project element, to try and improve academic writing. So, all that was built in from first year and, again, because the students were getting feedback, the whole time about things like academic writing or presentations or group work, that they had the chance to improve and build on first year as they progressed through it as well. I am going to take it as a compliment that the key staff are in first year; I like that.

LECTURER A: When I saw that as well, I had a giggle! I had a colleague that once said to me that they wouldn't stoop as low as to teach first years!

LECTURER C: Wow!

LECTURER B: And funny enough, this is a conversation myself and Linda have had on other occasions as well. I actually think first year is a very important time for students to get introduced to the key staff actually, yeah.

LECTURER D: I do remember the Dean of Faculty said once, that he thought, you should have your best lecturers in first year so.

LECTURER B: And isn't he lucky he had!

LECTURER D: I think intervention, early intervention for poor performing students. But I think intervention by head of department, so if that covers early intervention. But intervention by the head of department in all things I thought was good. The tutors, is a huge resource for students.

LECTURER A: Particularly for your subject, of course, Luke.

LECTURER D: Yeah, that's what I find for that. Now it's not that many people going to the tutor this year. So there needs to be someone on top of managing the whole thing. I don't know where that fits into it. But, I think the assessments, looking like your assessment strategy calendar assessments all that, if you put work into that..

LECTURER C: yeah coordinating the assessments.

LECTURER D: I think that is huge because that really does drive a lot of the learning and the semester. But I put the, when I say early intervention, I'm talking about the HOD kind of role, I imagine and lecturers maybe. But really, it's the head of department kind of scaring them maybe, or supporting them or talking to them, whatever they need, you know.

Okay, what actions as part of the model do you consider had little or no positive impact, perhaps?

LECTURER B: I'm not sure about that parents' evening and.

LECTURER A: I don't think we were involved in that, were we? I don't remember.

LECTURER B: I'm not aware if it impacted or not. So, I did think that would be one that jump out at me straight away.

LECTURER A: I can't remember much about that now. I don't know about pass either, I never heard…. you know what I mean I don't…I can't comment, I suppose, on it because I didn't …..

LECTURER C: Worked quite well in our course. The students used it as an opportunity to find out how to do the assignments. And it was varied from year to year, but some years that was quite good utilisation of it by the first years. I remember other years where people are sitting rooms, waiting for students to come and they never showed. But generally, I think it was used to last in our course and I think it was very helpful.

LECTURER D: I don't know what…of course I wasn't involved…. the Moodle VLE analytics potentially has a lot of power or a lot of potential to be used. But I don't know how well it was used, I didn't do any.

LECTURER C: I think also it can be misleading as well, because some students get their friends to print off the notes and photocopy them and stuff like that, well they used to back in the day when people that did such things in real life! I have students who wouldn't maybe have a great track record on the Moodle analytics, but they do well in the exams, and they'd be attending class.

LECTURER A: It is a good support, depending on the students. I suppose, some of them would really use it.

LECTURER D: I'm looking this year and there's a bunch of people like 10 or 12 of them have not logged in seven weeks, you know, nearly since the start of the Semester. And I'm going nowhere with that. Nothing's happening with that. I look at and maybe looking…two years ago, but there's nothing much being done about.

LECTURER A: I'm wondering what AIT connect is?

AIT connect was a seven-week programme run by student services that was introduced about maybe 2016, maybe 2017. I'm not sure that helped at institutional level program for student retention.

LECTURER A: I remember one topic every week or something like that. Yeah, I don't know. I can't really say I don't know.

Okay, do you consider that was any negative consequences associated with developing this model?

LECTURER C: I think, Linda pointed it out earlier on that you rely a lot on goodwill and extra kind of work on the lecturer and staff and probably the head of department as well over and above the usual you know that you would expect to be doing.

LECTURER A: In other words, like that, the model is a great model, but it does require buy in and it does require that team effort, that we did have. But you wouldn't be able to superimpose that anywhere, just anywhere and that it would work without that, I think.

LECTURER C: I suppose require is a bad word in that context, even though we weren't required to do anything you didn't want to do. But it was, you know, a lot of the stuff that's in here would be extra over and above, you know.

The model has three foundation blocks that it is very much a team-based approach, that it's management, lead and driven. And that there is an underlying principle that it takes four years to bring a student all the way to fully becoming an independent learner. What is your perspective on these foundation blocks and to what extent do you believe it underpins the model?

LECTURER D: I'd agree with that like what Linda and Alison were saying there. It relies a lot on teamwork. between lecturers and between lecturers and HOD and management. And I do think it is management led and driven. Because if you don't have it management led and driven, it just won't happen because…..

LECTURER A: It's likely to fall apart.

LECTURER D: Yes, because everyone paddles their own canoe, we're all masters of our own little area as lecturers and unless someone kind of brings us together from management and drives something, it just won't happen. I think it's good. And the underlying principle four years I thought this was more looking at first year and getting them through first year and then after that they're kind of released into the wild, maybe!

LECTURER A: I guess maybe what it says to us is that, there's certain only certain expectations of a student in first year as well that they're not going to be the perfect graduate or whatever after one year it's only the beginning of their process, perhaps.

LECTURER D: That is interesting because we were we were talking about this in the context of programmatic review and I don't want to go off reservation. But with the LDHE this faculty type led assessment which drives graduate attributes and they all do it no matter what programme. Like if we're if we're looking at this underlying principle about four years, perhaps, it needs to go through to second, third, fourth year. Maybe not call it LDHE, but if that's the principal then we need to do something, again in the second, third, fourth year so it's done in first year. But it's not been done at the moment in other years. It has been left up to lecturers themselves to do whatever they feel is best in their own module or there's no management led kind of looking at assessment and how maybe a faculty led LDHE in other years needs to be looked at.

LECTURER B: I'm not sure about the four years either. I do think the underlying principle is that a good, solid first year impacts quite a lot on developing an independent learner in second and subsequent years. But I'm not sure that it takes the full four years that's just the part there that I would…

LECTURER C: I think it does for some, but that's not a consistent. There are some students, even three years, two years, you can see that they've kind of got the wings or whatever with it. And then there's other students that they don't until fourth year or some never do. But generally, for a kind of a collective average, maybe four years is about right. A lot of degrees

are moving to three now because people don't want to be in college that long. And I think what Luke and Karen were saying is correct, that the principle of the four years doesn't underpin this model really you know this model is all throw it all in the basket in first year and then let them off after that. I suppose, if that if it's meant to do, it doesn't if that's fair comment on.

LECTURER A: As far as the team-based approach is concerned, I think it might be a case of defining exactly what the team is, because I think that absolutely you do need the cooperation of the people who are involved. But there is a term a co-acting group as opposed to a team and a co-acting group is by definition a group that is working toward achieving a common goal, without personal communication and interaction among the members, okay? That the members of the group can work independently and parallel and that the outcomes of the sub-tasks can later be combined. Do you know what I mean? As opposed to, we didn't have to see each other all the time. We weren't a team that had a regular weekly meeting, whatever. So yeah, it's about the definition of a team.

LECTURER D: We were more collaborative based than team were we?

LECTURER A: We were collaborative, but we weren't. We did not have to even truly be completely aware of each other and meeting constantly to discuss things as they went along. You know, we could work away on our own in parallel and still contribute to this whole process. Okay, the term I came across in a book by Sternat in 2020 is a is a co-acting group. And that's what it's called. I don't know if that's of any interest here at all. But it's just something I was using, talking about and distinguishing between. So, I thought of it when I saw that team-based approach.

There's been a lot of interesting points around these and in terms of the whole model, am I kind of potentially hearing a suggestion that calling this a student success model mightn't be appropriate, and that it's more a first-year model or a first-year retention model and I don't want to put words in your mouth either?

LECTURER A: Well, I'm saying more of a first year, because that's what we are focusing on here. We were looking at first years from 2010 to 2018, so that's what I'm thinking of. And that's where my frame of mind and all my examples of coming from in this discussion. So, I haven't really thought past that.

LECTURER C: I thought it was based on the premise that student success is dictated by kind of a successful first year, because after that they tend to stay and you know if they make through first year. And if they do in first year, they build up confidence and they tend to do ok in the rest of the course, baring mishaps. So, I would call it a student success model, but based on an underlying principle that a solid first year is a good foundation.

LECTURER A: That's very true Alison. I'm just making the point in case Owen listens back on things that the examples I was giving. I wasn't thinking ahead, do you know I mean I was just looking at the first-year experience in the in the examples I gave.

I want to just go down through the various individual pillars and get your perspectives on it. So, the first pillar that I'd like to get your opinion on is the habit-forming pillar. And that was that the first assessment was time-consuming and easy to achieve high marks. Assessments at regular intervals during the early phase of programmes and early intervention for poor performing students. And I know we've covered some of this ground

already. But would you have anything additionally to say with regards to the habit performing pillar at this point?

LECTURER A: I just think it's vital, I think. I think it's one of the most important things. We all know about norm and norm development and it's not just about developing good habits, but avoiding bad habits. Because once habits are formed, once habits are formed, it's human nature, it's really difficult to change them. So, to me, that's one of the key aspects of it.

LECTURER C: There was a huge focus at one point on monitoring student attendance in class, taking attendance and then really kind of hauling students over the coals and threatening them with not being able to submit and stuff like that if they didn't meet the 55%. There was a brief period there where everything kind of got really intense or in the attendance. And that was kind of a stick approach. Whereas this is kind of much more of a sort of a supportive approach like wouldn't go to the carrot approach, but it's much more as Karen said earlier empathetic. So rather than applying a penalty if you don't perform the habit, it kind of puts in place to support necessary to create the circumstances where students can form the habits that are good. And then it's up to them as well there's an elements personal responsibility. I think that's much more of an evolved approach than you're in trouble if you miss your 75%, mark; you know.

Thank you, the next pillar is the student esteem pillar. And what was included in that was the student induction, the briefing for students, with failed modules, and the lunch for high performing students. What's your perspective on the student esteem pillar?

LECTURER D: I don't know why it's called student esteem. Is that the best? I can see esteem for lunch for high performers and maybe briefing for students. The student induction they get an awful lot thrown at them at the start. I wonder how much of it sticks in student induction. But I do think brief introductions with failed modules is important, and I didn't know there was a lunch for high performers. How many was at that lunch?

It would have been for, so say students who would have got a 1.1 in first year would have been invited to lunch the following November. And it's because and students on award years get the graduation. We did it on non-award years. So, second- and third-year ab initio programmes would have been invited as well. So, any non-award year for students who got a 1.1 they were all invited to lunch in the HTL.

LECTURER A: Well, I think it's really important that something like that is in place, because we spend a lot of time and a lot of our discussion is about trying to maybe look at weaker students and make sure that they get the…you know…that we try and help them reach their full potential and trying to keep them in. But it's extremely important to look at everybody else as well, including the ones that are doing fine without our support, that they would also get some of our attention.

LECTURER C: I would have had a lot of feedback from the students who were at that lunch and it meant an awful lot to them, to be recognised in that way. Because a lot of the students that got firsts in those tranches in that period of time. Some of them were because they had good circumstances and came from privileged backgrounds. But a lot of them came from very difficult backgrounds. There were students that had, families and the students that have disabilities and for them to overcome huge barriers and then have that recognition as you say outside of the award year, it was really important to them to keep them going and give them something to kind of you know strive for.

Okay, and the next pillar is the student experience pillar. And that's made up of three elements which are the team building event, guest speakers and international and domestic field trips. And so, would you have any perspective on the student experience pillar?

LECTURER A: Definitely students like guest speakers in my in my own experience. And again, it's the way you put it toward them, because you're getting a good speaker in and you get and you say to the students, this person is coming in, this is their background, they get to hear people in the real world and what's happening. And I find that they're motivated by things like that. And of course it gave them a break from this same person for their class, if they got someone coming in. I just remember one, again there wouldn't have as many of these things in first year. But we did have a trip to Arigna. And the students just loved it. We went on a bus to Arigna and it tied in with a lot of the things we've been doing in terms of scientific management. They met the miners, because it's the miners themselves that give the tours. We had our lunch in a little café and we came back and I'm telling you, it's just one of the best things that those students did. They loved it. And the college paid for us, or the department did. And they were just thrilled that they were getting this. They were getting this treat. It was a fabulous day.

LECTURER C: It was the same with the courts' trips. They really got a great kick out with them, and it really made them feel like the college appreciated them or something.

LECTURER B: I would just say about the guest speakers. I think again, looking back, students who certainly would have attended a guest speaker lecture would have appreciated and would have commented afterwards and certainly seem to enjoy it. But my recollection is at the time the challenge was to get students to go to the guest speakers, that it was often seen as a day off. I know that I would have practiced not actually telling them that there was a guest speaker appearing at all. It was the only way I could guarantee that I would actually have an audience for guest speakers. So, I do remember that being an issue that they wouldn't fully appreciate, not necessarily when the guest speaker was coming in. But they did appreciate it if they did participate. I would also agree that now again I wouldn't have used say field trips, but I do think students might have put more, they'd have appreciated more something like that.

LECTURER A: Can I say on the guest speakers because just from my experience from a different year, where I would have a few coming in. But the reasons that students would attend, because I tended to have a question on the exam that they had to discuss the knowledge from, let's say two or three of the speakers that they had and always make sure it was something relevant. And so, in that kind of situation, the students wouldn't miss a guest speaker and they will be there with their pen, you know. So, it was tied into the assessment.

LECTURER B: That would have been the way to go.

Okay, thank you. In terms of the next pillar, which is the role of the academic staff. So, the deployment of key stuff in first. Teaching and learning…

LECTURER A: Do you mean the best staff?

I mean the deployment of key stuff in first year. The teaching and learning qualifications. The provision of feedback on the first assessment in a timely manner. The LDHE, community of practice. Teaching innovation and teamwork at programme board level. What's your perspective on that pillar?

LECTURER B: I mean, from my own perspective, I mean I don't have a specific LDHE qualification myself. But I do recall being quite innovative with teaching and assessment at that time and their practices that still to continue to this day. And there was a lot of teaching innovation that actually went on at that time. I'm thinking of things like you know, using Moodle quizzes and game simulations and there was a lot more new practices that were brought in at that time, that I think were very, very successful actually.

LECTURER C: Simulated stock market thing you did, Karen was really popular as well.

LECTURER B: Yes, there was even other things now in economics that we did as well and even some of the other subjects, but not just in the teaching, it was more even in the assessments. That definitely changed. Prior to that, an assessment was just another little mini exam for the most part. But we did introduce difference different types of teaching and assessment. So, I think that was actually really, really important.

LECTURER C: I found that as well at that time we were encouraged to diversify your assessment methods and at the same time, I was doing the teaching and learning qualification. And that definitely had a massive impact on how I used assessments, because I used to only see it as a kind of like the summative assessments and then, we were introduced to all those ideas about formative assessment and the different roles it plays in teaching and learning. So that was a big impact for me definitely.

LECTURER D: I think it helps having done the learning and teaching qualifications. But I think more so what's important is kind of student centred or a supportive type lecture. Like some lecturers might be not suited first year, maybe or some might be better suited than others, so I don't know where that comes into the model. I'm not sure what way that could be put.

LECTURER B: Just on the qualifications, though I mean as I said, I don't have any of the teaching and learning qualifications. But I would have attended all of the teaching and learning training courses that were delivered, that we're not necessarily accredited. So, I think that's probably more important than the qualification. You know what, like you said, that you have an open-minded lecturer that's interested in innovation.

LECTURER A: I'm in the same boat as you there, Karen.

LECTURER D: An interest in it.

LECTURER C: Yeah, you're doing your CPD, basically.

LECTURER D: The non-cynics, maybe! That kicks in. I don't know what stage. But definitely some of …yeah…student centred…

LECTURER B: And again, not that we are trying to blow smoke up our own asses or anything! But, I do agree, actually, that deployment of key staff is very important in first year not just because I'm one of those staff, but I think that is vital.

LECTURER C: I think so as well.

LECTURER B: And maybe not just staff that are just kept at first year level, if you don't I mean you know. Staff that they might meet throughout the programme. But that those staff are introduced to students at first year. I think that's very important. Not even just from a student success perspective, but I think, from an academic perspective, that it's very good to teach first years, regardless of where you think they fit in terms of qualifications or experience or whatever.

LECTURER A: Just to go back to where we were talking about habit forming before. A lot of the habit forming, apart from the study habits, just the behaviour habits in class and all of these things. Like lecturers who don't teach first years, they don't realise how much has been done for them in first year by dealing with things. And I know that some issues can continue on. But you know those kind of habits that's very important and I think this model and at that time, that was very much the case. And we have to. Karen has heard me say this now recently, but we have to work our learning environment for everybody in that room. And if some are very much attention seeking or disruptive, that can have of a very negative impact on other learners and that's not fair to them. So that habit forming about what's kind of acceptable or not in terms of behaviour right from the beginning and nipping things in the bud, so students know the boundaries right from the start, if we can include that there, I think that there; I think that's very good for every student success that they all feel comfortable in a classroom, with their classmates.

LECTURER C: I think that goes back to student experience in parts of the team building as well. Because I know when we when I started, we had massive issues with bullying in classes in like kind of when I was teaching in 2011, 2012, 2013, there was a series of years after another where we had issues and conflicts and inter class conflicts and even like I remember the first few years I was teaching, there was some very dramatic scenes in class people walking out class and banging doors and all sorts. But it was really like everybody was very highly strung. I think all that team building efforts and the improvement to the student experience. And you know, enhance the class bond and lessened the level of conflict you'd see in the classroom. And I think that improved student experience that there was less bullying going on and that culture change was important.

LECTURER A: It is, because I mean think of any timid student or anyone, you know if your child came home to you and said, and you're delighted they got a place in college and they go in and they come home and they tell you some of those things like Alison just said. That could be the end of somebody.

LECTURER C: It was for a number of students that I taught. Yeah, they left.

LECTURER A: And you know they might have had a bad experience in secondary or something that might trigger it for them, and all this and they can say, no no, no, no, no, no not going back to that, I didn't think this is my college was going to be like. So, I think that's an important element for every other student, that they get to a comfortable learning, where they don't mind contributing in class and not open their mouth because of somebody else.

LECTURER C: Yes, there's definitely a more respectful learning environment for that.

LECTURER D: On this pillar I think there's one box with it isn't there that could be, which is a kind of the pastoral role that academic staff have, getting to know the students' names. If you think there's a student that's, like an issue of bullying there what Alison said, like stepping in, now, I didn't have ever had any issues with that. Or helping students for some reason, like finding out what the problem is, and maybe…whatever it is dealing with it telling them okay, you need to I'll email the head of department on your behalf. Because sometimes students are too timid to ask. I think there is a pastoral role in first year that isn't there needed in second or third years there might be. But that's not in that model there.

Okay, thank you very much for that. The next pillar is programme design and programme design would be in relation to new programme development that would have happened in the timeframe and also the programmatic review of 2015. So, there we have, and I know again we've discussed some of these already. We have developing graduate attributes, the mode of VLE analytics and the assessment strategy and calendar of assessments. Would you have any perspectives on programme design?

LECTURER A: Don't think I have anything to add.

So, people are happy enough that we've covered that in enough depth at this stage, are they?

LECTURER C: Well, I suppose the PR 2015 like really made our programme more cohesive and more coherent. And I got the impression of the departmental approach being more coherent as well, which I think gives the students kind of more confidence.

LECTURER D: Yeah, there was work done on, as Linda said moving things around different semesters and which made a big impact for digital media classes in particular and different things. It's very important programme design.

LECTURER B: Yeah and my recollection of it as well, was that graduate attributes in particular, I remember this emphasis on numeracy and on academic writing. Personally, I recall changing the assessment structure that I had in the lot of modules to make sure that there was that students were assessed on numeracy. For example, I insisted that all of my elective modules would have had some sort of an essay or academic writing to develop those research skills. So, like everything else, if the students don't see that there's something for it, they want to try and aim to improve those skills. So, that was very important to embed those graduate attributes, not just at the programme level, but in every single module. I recall there was a lot of work done at the time on that and that was very successful.

LECTURER C: I was just agreeing with Karen was saying. And I think the improvement to the assessments was really important in improving the student experience.

LECTURER D: I think it's like it does say management led and driven here. But I do think that the programme design, sorry the developing graduate attributes, is left very much up to lecturers and that if you got some interested or open to change, like Karen or Alison or you know whoever then that will be done. But if you don't, it won't be done. And it's kind of it is ad hoc, I would say. Now we get around that by development of key staff. But on a wider basis it's, I think it is a bit ad hoc the way that it's kind of left up to individual modules to develop graduate attributes maybe without looking at the whole perspective. And then how that goes from first to second if this is a four-year model what's done in the second, third and fourth year.

Okay, thank you and the final pillar and there's more actions on this with anything else, is the student support. And on that was the use of motivational techniques, interviews with students by the head of department who had failed first year modules. The HOD emeritus, which was the role that Peter Melinn took as a retention officer. Pass tutors, the open-door policy, the student services department, which is quite a large offering and the parents' evening. Would you have any perspectives on the student support pillar or any of the actions or interventions associated with it?

LECTURER A: Definitely, I mean you mentioned the HOD emeritus and I think that role was extremely important. And of course, I think Peter was the right person, and to do that. And I think you know students can feel anonymous and lost when they come into third level, a lot of them. But in our department, I think, they were not, and that's a big help. And so, having someone there, being known, was good. And we already mentioned the interviews with students. I think you felt the first-year module that was extremely important as well. Because I think there'll be a lot of students who don't do well, but it's not that they planned that and their hopes were higher when they started, their hopes probably quite high when they get their place, you know you get a place in third level and they would be motivated and things go wrong. And to stop them from just disappearing and falling through the cracks, all of those kinds of things that are mentioned there are vital to get those students back on track. And I can remember students who did have to have that interview with the head of department and whatever and they turned over a new leaf, because they just needed that little bit of maybe paternalistic support I don't know if I'm using the right word or if even you are allowed use those kind of words. But I think that's what they needed, and that's what helped them to keep on track and keep going.

LECTURER B: I agree that open door policy in particular and again speaking a little bit of hindsight in a post Covid world and a lot of other changes, where we don't have an open door now. Because what see now is quite a lot of time, students are directed towards a form, an online form that they fill out there's no person there for them to speak to, and I think that's really, really important. And I would be concerned about at the moment about the impact that's going to have for us going forward. But again, just to get back to that timeframe, I think that is important, but it has to be resourced. Again, I keep going back to that model worked, because I think there were resources in place. Now, you could argue that it needed more resources. I would say it did, particularly in the role of tutoring. For example, the tutoring system work very well. But did we have enough of it? I would say we could have done with a lot more. So, I think resourcing a model like that is really, really important if it's going to work or be applied elsewhere.

LECTURER C: I agree with Karen and Linda and I think Linda hit the nail on the head there with the role that Peter played as well, that was really important to kind of shepherding the lost sheep, who are like at the edges of the class, you know, and they were the ones who are most vulnerable to dropping out. And they are your target for your student retention strategy.

LECTURER D: It's difficult for students, I think, to sometimes…like if everything is online and fill out a form like Karen said, that suits some students but not others. And particularly the ones that sometimes are having the most trouble for some reason can't get into…Like today the website was down, I couldn't get in there, I didn't realise I could go into Office 365 until someone told me about 15 minutes later. But I had a student, that girl Karen that didn't submit your CA, but it was because her authenticator APP wasn't working. I had asked her

about it. And she hasn't logged into Moodle all semester. She's been coming to class. You know you have issues like that, and no form is going to help them, because they can't get into the bloody thing in the first place.

LECTURER B: It goes back to what you said about that pastoral role, that role that Peter played, that pastoral one, is very, very important.

LECTURER D: And you do need resource, you do need…. like at the moment, the heads of department there's so coming from top and bottom like you know it's hard…I don't envy, I didn't apply for the job, anyway! So, I don't envy them in their jobs. And I think the tutors are vital and maybe there could be more done in terms of following up on who goes to the tutors. Sometimes it's the good students and not the ones that need it. And students' services. All I'll say is that it's an industry down there. And I think it came up this year, in some of the meetings, sometimes we don't know that there's an issue with a student until just before the exam. So maybe that's something that needs to be looked at, I think more early to let the lecturers know that there is a student with a particular need that we could maybe help. Instead of only finding us at the end of semester.

LECTURER A: Can I can I come in and say something that mightn't be too popular here, and that is sometimes I feel that we might be trying to meet the needs of students too much to the extent that they become helpless almost, it's a learned helplessness. I mean, I am thinking about an email. One of my colleagues got my first your student last week that said I don't know if I did the last assessment for this module. Could you let me know if I did it or not, and if not, could you tell me if I can repeat? And this was after the repeats assessment even had taken place. And I have seen quite a lot of examples, and that was just the icing on the cake. Where it's almost like if they don't get a reminder about an exam they give out to you. They just…. you know what I mean? I'm afraid we're making them into helpless people, if we go too far on some of these things.

LECTURER C: I think you always have a few of those in every year. I used to get those emails, even going back years. You know to me that's not a new thing.

LECTURER A: I feel that there's more, maybe it's this year and there could be possibly many other factors, the fact that they didn't do a leaving cert and all of these other things, do you know what I mean?

I'll cut off here. I know that it's current, but we're focused on a historical evaluation. Are we concluded on the students' supports?

LECTURER D: I don't know if you can stuff in, but you've got like the use of Moodle and putting up the videos and links and all the resources. Where does that?

I think that would be more towards teaching innovation at the time. I know it's probably become the norm.

LECTURER B: Yeah, that's what I would have interpreted that, and that's what I would have meant when I was talking about the teaching innovation at the time yeah.

LECTURER C: I just was going to say about the disabilities and the counselling office. They're massive and probably, maybe not very visible parts of the student support system that are hugely important in retention.

Thank you. I'm going to share some figures with you, some and ask what your view on it is. Can you all see that? So, the first and the first material I have for you is the change in the department over the timeframe and question. And each one of these is a percentage. So, I have the individual years and I also have the three-year weighted average and that's a department level across the department of business and humanities. So, you can see over the timeframe that it went from a non- progression rate of 36% to 12%. What do you think was the primary driver of this change?

LECTURER B: I think the assessment structure had a lot to do with that. That regular, formative.

In your opinion, would there have been changes outside of the creation of the model and the changes that we put that would have accounted for this type of reduction?

LECTURER C: No, I think it's the overall kind of the whole holistic approach that was taken. I think it had a massive impact on retention.

LECTURER A: Yes, Alison, I was trying to come up with a term like that. It was the holistic approach. It's hard to pick something.

LECTURER B: To be a devil's advocate, I would also say that, if my memory serves me correct at that time we didn't have what's the word I'm looking for? We didn't we weren't able to not defer? Pass my compensation. So, it was either you were passing or you weren't. I think the probably was some pressure, maybe as exam board level for students to be brought up during that time, because we didn't have that compensation.

LECTURER A: More so than the previous Karen?

LECTURER B: I just thinking back to 2010, isn't that when that would have all come in?

The progress and carry would have come in as both I think 2007 or 2008. So, there would have been no policy changes during that timeframe, it would have been the same issue with regards to progress and carry for each of those years.

Okay, so we didn't compensation even earlier than this?

There was not, there was progress and carry was the only option that was available throughout this and it was available consistently throughout it. So, there was no compensation at any point during the duration. I want to just go down into some specific programs and just get a quick perspective from you. This is the non-progression rate for each individual programme, again expressed as a percentage. So, you can see, the different colours in blue so higher cert in is blue, BBS honours black, social media marketing digital marketing is in red, business psychology then is in bold, and the business and law. And the blanks are because of the year that a programme would have started. So statistically, the best performing programme in terms of retention was in business psychology. Why, in your view, might that have been the case?

LECTURER D: I think calibre students.

LECTURER A: I think the calibre of students and maybe, if you think about the type of student that would be interested in that perhaps there was always a great team spirit in that group. They seemed to gel. I know that not everyone was always best friends or whatever. But for every year that it ran, it was my favourite group to go into. We always managed to have a bit of fun and everything in it. They were good students; they were more mature than others; I don't know.

Okay, statistically the worst performing programme and was the social media marketing or digital marketing offering. Would you have any views as to why that might be the case?

LECTURER A: I don't know I didn't teach on that.

LECTURER D: Well, I think they thought they were sold a pub, some of them when they went in. So, I think they thought they were going to be the next google straightaway they didn't realise it was going to be business.

LECTURER B: I agree, I think it was not understanding there that this was a business qualification and therefore they would have to meet business modules along the way. Now we did make some changes in the early, after the first year if recall, and the delivery when certain modules were taught and when they encountered them. So, the programme structure was slightly changed to reflect that. I think that was if I recall; it was very heavy on business modules in the first semester in the first years that maybe didn't suit some.

Okay, thank you. Statistically, there was a dramatic improvement and in business and law in the final and which was the 2017 intake. Would you have any insight as to why that might have happened?

LECTURER C: I suppose a lot of things kind of came together that were started in 2015. But you know it took a while to iron out the kinks of them. So, to say the new legal skills module took two years to figure them out, because they were brand new and they were really innovative and they weren't in any of the traditional law degrees in the universities or anything like that. So, to a large extent, we had to kind of construct them as we went along and that was a really interesting process. But probably had a lot of pitfalls to it as well. And then there was the transition over of the course from the big 10 credit modules to the short five credit modules. And I think kind of filtered down through the course years and it would have the most impact, probably in the 2017/2018. So, I think those changes probably were the most significant and really enhanced the student experience. As well as that it took a while to organise from sort of 2015 we were kind of… there's a lot of discussion around improving student experience and funding was made available for lots of things like mooting and stuff like that. So, we would have been told about that and 2015/2016 and started implementation 2016/2017 and 2017/2018. It would really taken off. So, say the mooting would have really kicked off in 2017/ 2018. And that was, I think a really good extracurricular bonding experience for the students and really good because it was built on their subject matter, so we deliberately built the mooting the extra-curricular moot problems around their subject matter during the day, so it was linked into their core study. And it created this kind of like to a social experience or a social learning experience for them. I think, had a huge impact on how much the students enjoy the course and how much they all bonded as a team as well in the course.

Okay, thanks. Why do you think there is such a difference both between programmes and within programmes, on the rate at which students didn't progress? Would you have any views on that?

LECTURER B: Identity might be an issue. You know, I think the digital marketing or the psychology groups, even law, that they have a very specific identity that they see themselves as a cohesive group. Whereas business can be so diverse. And we do still get a lot of students who take the programme almost as a default rather than as a choice, particularly if going to AQA. So, I think that does have an impact. So digital media, digital marketing, psychology, law they're very specific courses that you choose, whereas business might be the default.

LECTURER C: I think Karen is right there's a culture to them, that really we created in the business and law course that wasn't there initially, that we managed to kind of construct through all of the extracurricular like the courts visits and the mooting and all those kinds of things. So, they developed a really strong sense of identity, and I can say Karen is right about that, that's really important in terms of retention.

LECTURER B: And actually, that goes back to what we mentioned earlier, I mentioned earlier, that I think the business group would benefited more from things like field trips, as well as the guest lectures. But that probably confirms that. Because probably the digital marketing and the likes of law who are experiencing those types of things whereas the others weren't.

LECTURER D: We had a similar discussion there recently and just people were saying just about accounting, accounting has an identity whereas business don't. And you do have a difference. When I teach, like one year, I taught six groups together in higher cert business equine, business and law, there were a bunch of them. But the good students, when I say the good students I talk maybe, I don't know it's a crude thing with high points they were able to get by. But the ones that needed to support maybe some of the people coming into the likes of higher cert and business on low points, and for whatever reason they have low points, maybe because there's poor attendance, it's not a measure of ability but they're just not coming to class or they're not engaging. And it is an indicator. I think that they need more help and like you can see the business special business honours dropped 4% there. It seems we are doing better than the higher cert and business.

LECTURER B: Have you looked Owen at AQA about those courses, because I think that's going to be the Higher Cert.

The higher start never went to AQA and over the period. It was significantly lower in points, then the BBS honours, but it didn't go AQA over that period of time.

LECTURER B: Okay, well, I would think it's the points level.

LECTURER D: yeah, I think its points

Okay. And I suppose I have a kind of probing questions follow up on that then, is that, do you believe that the model for example benefited stronger students disproportionately?

LECTURER D: Not necessarily.

LECTURER C: I think it's the other way around nearly.

The next piece I want to share is the rate of early withdraws. So, students who don't progress it's measured between March of first year in March of second year, which is the numbers we've been looking at. In addition to that, there are early withdrawals which happened from September through to March, and these are the numbers for the departmental withdrawals, and the percentage of those withdrawals as well. And what you can see here is a U shape. So, we would have started off with a kind of higher level before it dipped down before it increased again. Would you have any view as to why this particular and U-shaped pattern on the withdrawals emerged?

LECTURER C: Just to be clear, withdrawals are drop-out rates.

Withdrawals or those who drop out between September 1st and March 1st.

LECTURER D: unless you link it to Scribes Bar or something like that

LECTURER C: Causes an uptick in drop outs…

LECTURER D: Yeah, it doesn't it doesn't really work there. Some years are just better than others, I think I don't know.

LECTURER B: Well, if you look at those early years when the level it was falling, remember we were still in recession there at that time.

LECTURER A: Very true.

LECTURER B: Wasn't much opportunities there.

LECTURER C: No options.

LECTURER A: And maybe more mature students in the classes then, I don't know.

LECTURER B: And I can see it rising again. There were more opportunities, say, from year 2015 onwards.

Thank you, I have just two more screen shares that I wish to do with you. This, can you see this? Okay yeah. This relates to student performance in terms of the aggregate total of modules passed. And how I explain what that is, is that if you have 100 students each taking six modules in total, you have 600 modules. The aggregate total of modules passed will be the percentage of those 600 modules that would be passed rather than students okay. So, over the time frame you can see, in terms of the percentage of total aggregate modules passed in year one was 65% and in year 8 was 88%, and you have the three-year weighted average for that as well. My question to you is, why do you think there was an improvement in student performance?

LECTURER A: I think students learn the basic skills of being a student and they can't get to grips with how they're going to be assessed and perhaps they learn the mistakes from first year, where they could have improved. And maybe they're more committed by the time they get into second year, the fact that they go to second year nearing the end then also things like that.

LECTURER B: I think that tutor system as well, probably impacted there, particularly say for Luke's area accounting. I know at the time, certainly in the economics modules it was class size was quite important. So again, the support there around tutoring I think was quite important there.

LECTURER C: I think the LDHE and the improvements to the assessment strategy so it's more linked to the learning outcomes and more innovative and probably better types of assessments that were easier for students to engage with.

LECTURER D: Yeah, definitely, you could look at the model as having an impact here. Whereas in the last stimulus material, I don't think… it was outside the model. But here I think there definitely is the model the student assessed model impact on this. For all the reasons that we spoke about earlier. It's hard to identify one or two aspects.

The final one I'm going to share with you is performance with regards to the autumn repeat exams, okay? So, I'm going to run down through three figures with you here, which all are in bold. So, the first one of the percentages of those who participated in the repeats. So basically, after the summer exam boards are done, you have a certain number of students who are eligible to repeat. The first line of percentages is those who chose to participate in the repeat exams. So, in year one, 71% of those who are eligible to repeat took the repeats. The second one, then, is the percentage of those who chose to take their exams, how many of those became eligible to progress. So again, in the first year, 74% of those who sat the repeat exams were eligible to progress at the end of. The third set then is when both of those are combined. So basically, of those who are eligible to repeat how many of those subsequently became eligible to progress.

LECTURER D: Okay, multiplying the first table, read the second.

It's adding the two together, yeah. So, the question I would have for you is that, in terms of the participation rate in the repeats, the numbers improved significantly in the final two years of the model. With regards to the success rate of those who sat, it improved again significantly in the last three years of the model. Combined together, there was again significant improvement in the last years of the model. Why specifically do you think there was an improvement in the repeat exams?

LECTURER D: I think you'd need to look at the students who had more than three repeats did that number decline. So, if you have students that have four or five repeats in August, I imagine they had very low participation rates. Whereas students would only have to repeat two modules would more likely doing them. And if you have that there, you might see that the number of students who had a high number of modules to repeat lessened as the years went on. Because the model meant that students were passing more of their modules, perhaps. I don't know if that makes sense. That's why I think, maybe it improved, is that students have less to repeat, a less number of modules to repeat. And after that, then it's all down to the tutor during the summer.

Ok thank you. In terms of the model, and again, I know we've covered some ground here already. If there were elements you could add to this e model, what would you add?

LECTURER A: The only thing I can think of is what Alison mentioned earlier, you know just maybe looking at the equality, looking at, I don't know, maybe it's maybe more specifically. Or is it on the student services diversity?

LECTURER D: Are you asking Owen on things that were done, that aren't captured on…

If you if you could improve, what would you be looking to add in? I know we've covered some of this already, and maybe you think we've covered it enough already.

LECTURER B: One thing, I would put more resources into that tutoring function. I think that tutor support function was very important. I would like to see more being put into that particular function. I think the accounting side is probably well; you know well served at this stage in some of the other modules as well, not just accounting. So, for example, management or economics or whatever.

LECTURER D: Perhaps build it into programme design. Should it be built into the programme of design where it's…

LECTURER B: And also timetabled. You know a lot of a tutoring function is appointments kind of based. I would timetable it, have it specifically included.

LECTURER C: I think what Linda mentioned earlier, the pastoral care aspect of the staff role needs to be included explicitly in the model.

And if you could remove elements of this model, what would you remove?

LECTURER B: I'm not sure about that parents evening. I don't know about the value of that. But I don't know enough about it really, I didn't have any experience of it, I'm not sure if that worked well.

LECTURER A: Possibly doesn't have a negative effect, you know.

LECTURER C: Does it infantilise students, bring their parents in? But maybe it's good to have the family on board, you know there's pluses and minuses to it.

LECTURER A: At first year level, some of them can be you know 17 years old and maybe it is a good thing that their parents have an evening to know what's going on.

LECTURER D: It's hard to know if it impacted, really. It may have an impact for some families. Because I know some parents were very interested when you met them, but you couldn't really talk about what was going on. But they were delighted if you knew their child's name, for example. The LDHE community of practice. Why isn't it a lecturer community of practice? I know there was a big emphasis on LDHE because it was such a new module, but it's not such a new module anymore. Ongoing why is it just particular LDHE community of practice I'd question.

LECTURER C: That's a good point. As Linda was saying, we're more like kind of co-actors than teams and maybe more community of practice among the lecturing staff would be something that might enhance the student experience. You might get more coherent experience across programmes.

LECTURER D: If you had a first year community of practice, perhaps.

LECTURER C: Yeah, exactly.

LECTURER B: And one other thing that strikes me as well, I think might be beneficial is, I'm not sure how we do this but to emphasise to students about certain skills or attributes or assessments that they are taking, why that's important not just because they need to an exam this year. But why they might need it in years further down the line? I'm thinking there in particularly of the numeracy, even say business maths that Seamus teaches or the economics that I teach. There can be a tendency to put it in a silo. Got that done. Now, forget about it. I'll never need it again. Particularly the business maths and… just emphasising, you're going to need this second year, you would come across this again in third year in the subject. I'm not sure how to do that, but I'd like to see something like that, first year model.

LECTURER D: And then perhaps resources. We mentioned resources; I think. We can see now what happens when there isn't much resources and they farmed a programme coordinator to lectures and give two hours. I don't think it's going to work that well in terms of…. as a lecturer, you can't bloody ask for anything. I was looking for student names of who dropped out, I couldn't get it, because of GDPR. It's very difficult. Whereas if you had someone that was there in an office, it was their role to look after, we'll say student success first year, whatever it is that they …. so resource it.

LECTURER B: That was my point earlier, that there's someone visible, that there is a genuine open door, that there is a door. We see now what happens when there isn't a door.

LECTURER D: It's really important, it isn't happening at the moment. And as you say, you can see the impacts.

LECTURER C: I think alumni community could be something that would be really impactful for first-year students coming in, if you'd like they are joining a community of people have already graduated and gone before them. And that's not really a thing in our course anyway. There's data kept consistently on graduates and where they go.

Ok thank you. If it's ok with you, I'll move on towards the kind of final batch of questions. How in your view did the faculty administrative staff contribute to the efficacy of the model?

LECTURER A: Well, while we were in the previous question and talking about the door and the no door. In my mind was June, for example, the administrator. And I remember others as well. I think they played a vital role, because we were very lucky with the people that we had in those roles they knew every single student.

LECTURER D: I agree.

Yeah.

LECTURER A: So, they could all come in and they definitely went above and beyond

LECTURER C: yeah, I totally agree

LECTURER A: whatever to look after all those students and to keep us in the loop if they were contacted by a student and all this kind of thing. So, I think that the people there, as opposed to the roles, definitely the people were vital in all of that.

LECTURER D: Perhaps that needs to be there in the in the model. Like we have students' supports there, I don't see faculty administrators in the model. Because you could send off an email to Siobhan, to June, and it changes so much in accounting. But before then, Anne Handy and things were done, and they knew the students and they knew the issues, so perhaps the administrators need to be there somewhere as well, the faculty.

LECTURER B: I would agree with that, and you know I know you want to look back and not at current. But just to explain to you I've had a lot of experiences this week of lack of communication because students are filling in forms. And yet they're not talking to a person. Whereas, as Luke said, if they went into Anne or June, you'd get an email you would hear about it. Whereas now students are filling in forms and I don't hear, I don't know whether they have been granted exemptions or deferrals or repeats or whatever. So that faculty administrative role is quite important, actually.

Okay, thank you for that. How did the level of support from within the wider institute, but outside the faculty, impact on the model? So, in your view, was there support coming from senior management towards it? Was there support from other areas of the college?

LECTURER D: Maybe from learning and teaching. Anytime there was a question or a query, they were always quite helpful.

LECTURER B: Yeah, that department and the student services department, I think certainly the counselling department, I would have felt were quite communicative as well.

LECTURER B: Outside of that, I'm not sure.

LECTURER A: I don't know.

LECTURER B: I think it's hard to know.

Did the largest amount of change to the first-year offering emanate in the faculty the or outside the faculty in your opinion?

LECTURER B: Oh Within.

LECTURER D: Within.

LECTURER A: Sorry Karen, there's something in your background that I really can't hear what's being said.

LECTURER B: Sorry, am I ok now?

LECTURER A: Yeah, yeah.

LECTURER A: Sorry, what was the question again?

Just did the largest amount of change from the first-year offering emanate from within or outside the faculty?

LECTURER A: Oh, definitely within.

LECTURER D: That was very little influence from outside in my view that I could see.

Okay, and how important for the managers in the faculty with the first-year experience and retention rates in your opinion?

LECTURER D: Hugely.

LECTURER A: Hugely, because if that if that factor wasn't there, the rest of it would have fallen apart.

LECTURER D: Yeah.

Okay, we've talked a lot about the various different aspects of the first-year provision at that time this afternoon, and thank you very much for it. Was there anything that you expected to talk about or that you want to talk about now that you didn't get the opportunity before we conclude?

LECTURER A: I think we got the opportunity to speak about a lot of things and nothing else has come up for me that I want to add.

LECTURER D: No, I'm surprised how much we talked about, actually.

LECTURER A: Same Luke. I was saying I'll have nothing to say.

The final question that I have to pose and to and there was never a danger that you were going to have nothing to say! Was that I get the impression from this focus group that you feel that the model worked to some extent? Could I ask you to sum up, if that is the case, and why do you think the model worked?

LECTURER B: Yes, I agree it did work, and I think go back to what Linda said earlier, I think, because it was a top-down approach, I felt that was coming from the top, management lead, I suppose.

LECTURER C: Yeah, agree.

LECTURER D: I think it can still empower lecturers or people lower down but it needs to be top down. Otherwise it's lame.

LECTURER C: And I think you know you were saying Luke earlier on. It's not like…it depends on the lecturer because it's not mandatory. But I don't think he can ever make what's done in the classroom mandatory, so it has to be a kind and gentle encouragement. It has to be that way, that's, the only way as a soft model for it. I do think it worked really well and I think it gave students this kind of sense of gathering around something, that there was a sort of an appreciation for the student and that it was very student-centred learning. And that they did feel like they were at the centre of it. And they appreciate that and they get back a lot as a result.

LECTURER A: And to add to that again Alison, I think as a member of staff; it makes your job a little more meaningful because of the fact that you see what's happening; you see what

your part of, you can see the results, you have the support from above, all those things make the job more satisfying.

LECTURER C: Definitely

Okay, with your permission, I will end the recording on both devices at this point. Is that okay with everybody?

Yes.

Yeah

End.

Appendix M: LG2 Focus Group Transcript

Ok, so good evening to you and thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this focus group and just a reminder that the time period in question relates to an 8 period between 2010 and 2019 pre the pandemic. So my opening question to you is that, what is your view with regards to the first year provision of that duration in the department of business and management or the wider faculty of business and hospitality?

LECTURER J: I'm going to ask you to elaborate, Owen, if you don't mind just and.

How important do you think the first year is? How much attention did it get? What's your view on the provision that we gave to first years?

LECTURER H: I may jump in their Owen. I felt during that period of time and we've been delivering the learning and development for higher education module for quite a number of years now; I felt that that was very useful support from the point of view of the first-year students. And that it develops a number of skills for the students, which would support them with the idea of supporting them going forward in their study. For example, we would have looked at within the learning and development module, their presentation skills, their team working skills, working on group research projects. From the point of view of reflection and reflecting on the whole learning experience subsequent to the research projects and working in teams, analysing that whole experience from their own perspectives and also they would have been requested to develop a personal development programme going forward for their studies, reflecting on their achievements to date, i.e. within semester prior to commencing their studies over the course of their studies and then what their projections would be going forward to looking. So looking at short, medium and long-term objectives for their studies also. So I feel from that point of view the learning and development module would have been very useful, and it was a very well thought out module I think that continues to this day. There's even discussions of possibly, if time allows, expanding that particular module further along into other modules and subsequent semesters, because there are certain things that students need to continue developing over the course their studies that they kind of lose after they complete that module in semester one so to continue with through.

Thanks (Lecturer H).

 LECTURER G: Sorry, go on (Lecturer F).

LECTURER F: Thanks (Lecturer F), I think Owen after programmatic review in 2015 when I started, there was a legal skills module introduced into the business and law programme and I think that was a welcome addition to that programme given that it's a big transition from secondary school into higher education and students need that support.

Thanks (Lecturer F).

> LECTURER G: Okay, from my perspective, I think the induction that is provided for first years, that is spearheaded by lectures who are involved with the first years, is very useful for them. Like the transition into college is really a developmental process, they begin their journey as students, and that can be very daunting for students. So that induction really is very, very useful. I think the second point is that in terms of the workload there's careful management of assessments particularly in semester one so as

not to overload the students and I think that's scrutinised by both lectures and indeed management with regard to both the module type, the assessment type, the assessment frequency and also, I think there's a huge emphasis on feedback for students that can kind of, if you like, encourage a growth mindset for early, you know their early process, the early student process. So I think that's two things that really assist in terms of helping students and I think to answer your question, is it important? It is important. It's a very important period. Especially the first six, seven weeks I think are particularly important for students. I think research would tell us that students tend to drop out around week six or week seven.

Thank you (Lecturer F).

LECTURER J: I'm just looking at the timeline here, Owen. I was teaching first year business for 17 years when your time period commences. So, I'm going to look back before it and say, well, what changed over that period. And I would say, there was kind of little enough, I always remember a sort of a caring instinct from the head of faculty and from the heads of department around doing our best by the students. I know that my colleagues, my teaching colleagues at the time I was in an office with three or four of them, and they were all very much, you know focused on supporting the students if the students, you know…there was a scenario that used to happen whereby a certain colleague would get up at a board meeting and say, you know somebody would be below the line and…well now you know there are special circumstances there and we kind of all knew at some point the special circumstance; we came to know what the special circumstances were you know. I would have been aware of the arrival of the LDHE module or the learning to learning whatever it was called initially. I would also be aware of the fact that at some point over that period the great Peter Melinn and…I don't know he's not the late Peter Melinn, but you know certainly the great Peter Melinn was involved a lot of initiatives, even after he retired whereby he was, I would say minding students and getting them at least to make decisions about their future, so that all reflects sort of a caring ethos I would say over the period.

Thank you (Lecturer J), I shared a copy of the student success model with you that was developed over the number of years, and to what extent do you think that that student success model adequately reflects or reflected the first year experience and in the department and the faculty?

LECTURER G: I think it was very comprehensive Owen. I think when you shared it with us; I did look at it, and my first thought that it was extremely comprehensive and I think to answer your question it reflected very much what we did. I'm just wondering if (Lecturer J) ' point about the relational efforts that are made between faculty and student if that's part of it because if it's not just to add that in I can't recall if you have a copy of it, maybe shove it up, and we can have a look at it.

LECTURER H: I can see a copy here (Lecturer F) and it refers to something that you just highlighted, the early intervention for poor performing students. And briefing and for students with failed modules and I agree with you, it very much highlights accurately the train of thought and the process that was undertaken during that period of time. So, you're literally looking at and say yes, it ticks the boxes yeah, and it's, it is a very fair reflection of that yeah.

LECTURER F: Yeah absolutely, it's very comprehensive as (Lecturer F) was saying, and I remember attending one of those talks for the parents of first years were invited in. And I remember meeting parents that night and they were saying that it was their first child to go to college. So they didn't really know what to expect, but they really welcomed that invitation from the College to invite them so that they could understand how to support their child as they went through college.

LECTURER H: I see here Owen the open-door policy on I remember on one occasion you said to me, you saved me; I came, and I knocked on the door at one point. Remember that occasion?

I don't…but…

LECTURER H: There were parents there of you and your face!

I don't but it's happened on many occasions where I got saved.

LECTURER H: I remember it.

What impact do you think the model had on first year provision?

LECTURER J: If I could just come in there Owen, and I know I said in this presentation in CIT, way back in the day before all this began. But my understanding of the process and this might be disappointing, but you know we all play a role and we all have a job to do. So, the fact that I would be doing my job, I wouldn't necessarily know the detail of what other people were doing. And I said particularly true in the case of Peter Melinn, because I used to see Peter from time to time in the canteen with an individual student and it was almost always the same individual student let it be said. You know, I really don't know what other activities we're going on in the background. We know the headline stuff you know, like LEHE module and all that sort of public facing stuff. But I'm quite sure that you and other heads of department would have had individual discussions with students, you know. I'd like to think that some of those individual discussions, and I think it is true to say, some of those individual discussions were oriented more towards getting the students to consider their situation rather than necessarily trying to hold on to the student. I know I've had that discussion with you previously as well you know where you're not just focused on…. in other words, at that conference that I was with I just got the sense that the impetus from people who were at that conference was, at all costs, hold on to as many students as you can. It was always been put forward as an economic model. But I didn't see that come true, in my experience of this student success model. But there's always a danger that you can kind of say work it as a numbers game, you know, where you can, oh we got student retention up from 80% to 90% which is fine up to a point. But you don't really want to go too far north of 90% either because then you're into a situation where you are you saying, well, we almost should be losing some students that that's my personal perspective on it, you know. Maybe not as many as we were but some, because there are always, of course, students who will enrol a course thinking that it's one thing and finding out through it's another. That's my tuppence worth.

LECTURER G: Can I just jump in there and just to say to you, just looking at the model here and I can't share it on the screen. But I do think Owen, just my own personal perspective is that some of the factors of the variables that you have mentioned here

might be more applicable to later years. I think there are variables that are more important for the first years than for other years. For example, the open-door policy would be very important, as (Lecturer F) mentioned the parents evening the kind of stuff in pink, if you like seems to be particularly important for first years. I think and for the guest speakers and the domestic and international field trips, they're probably maybe a little bit more important for other years. That would just be my own opinion.

Okay, thanks (Lecturer F). What actions and our interventions do you consider were the most effective that were introduced as part of the model?

LECTURER F: If I can jump in there I think and that the meeting that students with failed modules was quite significant. I remember one group of students that I was teaching and one morning they were all saying, I've to go out, I've a meeting, I've a meeting. But they come back with a little bit of energy about them knowing that somebody was interested in them and promote a sense of belonging for them. So in my experience, like those students did go on and they did graduate. So I think that was an important initiative.

Okay thanks (Lecturer F).

LECTURER G: I think one of the issues would be feedback. It kind of ties in a little bit with what (Lecturer F) is saying. But it's not alone, it's about the timing of feedback Owen, feedback needs to be given early, it needs to be given privately.…we need to avoid paternalism when we give feedback, feedback needs to be balanced. It also needs to be concrete. So the students know exactly where they succeeded and indeed where they the word there's room for improvement. I think they're kind of reinforcement right from the get go that they can do better, and to give them kind of the confidence and I think somebody has said that earlier to increase their student efficacy that they can do better and how to do that better. So I think that feedback and the emphasis on feedback is really important. And there's one thing I want to say that's maybe not on your graph as well, Owen, is that I have noticed in more recent years that there are huge gender differences in terms of the classroom. While we have consistently seen in our classes and more females than males, what I found is that sometimes it's…this may not even sound right or even be appropriate, but it's sometimes hard to stop the lads from talking. It's more difficult to get the girls to speak up. So there's a distinct gender imbalance in participation, or rather it not in participation, but in vocalisation in semester, particularly in semester one and two of first year. And the kind of strategic efforts that I and others I think would need to try and balance us would be a huge, would try and make a huge effort towards getting those girls to kind of speak up and air their views.

LECTURER H: I feel as well, one of the key and the key supports that were was implemented in that period of time Owen, I'm thinking particularly back to Peter Melinn, a student retention that was his role. And I do remember attending many programme board meetings during that period of time and everyone agreed at them, that you know Peters role had a huge a hugely positive effect on student retention and keeping the lines of communication open with those particular students, particularly the first-year students, those who were borderline cases, those who may or may not have been attending for whatever reason. And it had a hugely positive effect and the feedback at that time with those programme boards was always hugely positive in

support of Peter's work. And continuing on and, to this day, but we're trying our best, Peter did a splendid job.

LECTURER J: Everything that they said, but just to mention PASS, I don't know if PASS was part of your initiative or if we just piggyback on top of what they were doing. But I still think that PASS has huge potential because students will talk to other students about things that they want to talk to staff about regardless of how significant we might see them. There is there's always going to be an age gap, you know.

Okay thanks (Lecturer J). In your view, did the first-year students benefit from the development of this model?

LECTURER G: Yes, I think the numbers speak for themselves. I don't have the numbers to hand, but certainly from memory, our levels of retention have increased significantly. So absolutely and I do think their sense of belonging and their sense of connection with the college with each other, with staff, has all benefited from this model.

LECTURER H: I would concur with Bernadette on that. Yeah, totally a hugely positive effect.

LECTURER J: Yeah, aside from the stats, I wouldn't see it on the ground, if you know what I mean. So aside from the statistics that are reported. I mean again, I always got the sense that right across management and administration that there is a kind of a caring attitude towards students. It's a human characteristic of the college has been around as long as I've been there, maybe a lot longer.

Thanks (Lecturer J). And do you consider that there were any negative consequences associated with the development of the model?

LECTURER J: There was a head of department who used to go around trying to get us to retain individual students. There was one programme where there was an incredibly high retention rate. I guess that's true, and they seem to be a lot of focus and maintaining that higher retention rate. I suppose I do get the sense that there's an optimum level of caring that you should show. One of the things if I have learned anything in education, there's no treatment that suits everybody. There was one particular student and, as I said earlier, I remember seeing Peter maybe four or five or six times down in the canteen. Now my own attitude almost from the start, was look this guy doesn't fit the course and if he wants to go, we should we should wish fair wind and let him go. And I'm not sure that we necessarily serve that student well by mollycoddling might be word my late father would describe what might have happened.

What actions or interventions as part of the model do you consider had little or no positive impact?

LECTURER J: As I said earlier on, we wouldn't necessarily be familiar with all the elements on the model. A lot of that work has been done by yourselves and Siobhan and June, and those people, so we wouldn't know about that.

LECTURER G: I think the issue of guest speakers there, I think it's not so much about guest speakers I think it's about and I don't know if this answers your question, but it's about inciting a passion for the actual course or indeed module that they have. And I

think at some level the lecturers themselves can ignite that sense of passion. I don't think it's necessary to have guest speakers per se in semester one to kind of excite the enthusiasm for the course. Nor do I really think that international or this again is a personal opinion. It mightn't have been borne out by other staff members. I'm not sure about the international trips or the domestic trips in semester one. I think it's more relational, more about getting a sense of your feet under the table, you know, connecting with both staff and other students. And I think it's more about what goes on in the classroom and kind of within TUS, at the beginning. And I think, then, you know, and it can wing out into more kind of greater needs. So I think within your model, there are needs that are greater if you like. And there are outcomes that are more important depending on the developmental phase that the student is in. And I see that semester one year one semester one, is a very different experience to year two semester one. And that's where your domestic trips and your international grips and all of that would be, in my opinion, would be more useful because I find that in year two what happens is that there is that motivation that was driving first years tends to wane a little bit and you need something else, you need a different kind of metal and for year two. And then in year three there's a different experience.

LECTURER J: Sorry Owen, I've got to break a call. I've got a take. I'll be as short as I can.

No problem and come back in whenever you're ready. There's no panic. Thank you (Lecturer J).

LECTURER H: I agree totally with (Lecturer F) there with regard to the needs and requirements of the student cohort in semester one, as opposed to say semester two or three or four. And really, I do agree (Lecturer F) with the idea of giving the students the opportunity and semester one to settle if you like, to break the ice with their classmates which is which is vitally important. And it's only in the last two years since we've been, you know, last year we were delivering remotely and I know we're dealing Owen with 2010 to 2019. But the point I'm trying to make is, it has really come to the fore for me with my first years to the learning and development module how important that face-to-face time is for the students to actually get to communicate with their colleagues, to develop teams to work together on projects. This whole thing of the remote learning and trying to conduct this remotely, just brought to the fore the importance of ice breaking and the importance of developing this rapport amongst classmates and giving them the opportunity to develop really personally as well as from the point of view of their education on campus with their with their student cohort really with the student body. And really, even it has come to the fore now, they're still feeling that sense of isolation because they haven't had that opportunity. So really during that period 2010 to 2019 giving them the opportunity, it's vitally important semester one that they have all of those opportunities and then look at guest speakers and then look at the other facets of their education for semester two and so on. But I think really for the first 12 to 13 weeks those students need the opportunity to settle and to get with the flow of third level, the third level experience and just to enjoy it I think and develop themselves, personally, as well as academically.

Thanks (Lecturer H)

LECTURER E: I apologise, I was late. Just two things I would say about just from the points that have been gone there. The first year, we used to bring in the business of law programme; we used to bring them down to the District Court. And a day out in the

District Court from a bonding and gelling point of view was great because they'd see real-life cases and they'd seen real life law, I suppose, in practice. So from that point of view, I thought it was quite good. The other thing that we had is we have legal maybe legal skills, a legal skills programme, which is a foundation not really an academic subject more practical. And, and I thought that was beneficial, and that was introduced the last programmatic review so there's kind of a legal skills in each. programme year. And then the last thing I suppose over time, when you go into second year and third year you'd have students who would probably do a little bit about moot courting and they're involved in I suppose and legal aid if you want to call it that, as well, which is development for them in year two, year three, maybe four.

Thanks (Lecturer E). The model, as its presented, has three foundation blocks which appear graphically in black, in that it has an underlying principle that it can take four years to bring a student all the way to becoming an independent learner. It's a team-based approach and its management led and driven. Do you think that these are foundation blocks? What's your perspective on them, and to what extent do you think, or do you believe, that it underpins the model?

LECTURER E: I would think if you go from a management point of view, it has to be management led. I was party to a program board recently where that comment was made in relationship to the retention the previous retention policy that has been in being maybe hasn't been as strong in the last year and that maybe we should concentrate a little bit more on retaining the students, particularly in first year because there were so many the missing this year. And that maybe a little bit of emphasis should have been put on trying to retain them earlier and certainly put a stop to the missing classes. The other side of that I suppose if you took the other two basic principles, team based, I mean, at the end of the day it's a liaison between your between your lectures and management. And again I suppose, this is the subject to review after two weeks or three weeks, and also in relation to I suppose taking rolls in classes, and those roles being submitted back to management, so that they can review and pick up where people are I suppose seeping away from the system. So, I suppose they're my thoughts on that.

Thanks (Lecturer E).

LECTURER G: Can I just say something? I think those who boxes; the management led approach, and the team-based approach. I would much rather to have seen a systems based approach. Because I think it's not entirely true to say it's management led, because I think an awful lot of the…it's a system, it's almost like the reflection of what does it say it 'takes a village to bring up a child.' There are PASS leaders, which if you think it's a bottom up initiative, the lectures are to the fore of what happens, they are the frontline workers if you like in the in the classroom. And then, of course, you have management as part and parcel of that system. But for me I'm not quite sure if the language really reflects what's actually happening, I think a systemic or a systems approach would be to me, I don't know, it would be more correct I don't know, I don't know if you guys feel the same.

LECTURER E: I suppose the language, even for a university, might not be the best. You're probably correct in that. In the sense that it should be maybe a little bit more inclusive.

LECTURER F: I think it should, because the lecturers are on the ground and they really do have a lot of the face-to-face interaction with students. And probably are in a position to pick it up quicker when there is a student maybe, maybe disappearing. So, I think a more holistic approach is what's required.

LECTURER H: It's definitely a team-based approach for sure, and going back to retention again and communicating within the team and been able to you know, at the hit of a button send an email and say we need to look at this or this student, is failing to turn up or whatever the case may be. I think we were very good at us during that period of time we're looking at 2010 to 2019, that it was definitely a very successful system in place. It still is, although we are currently dealing with a lot of remote issues. But really, I would agree with the language that (Lecturer F) was highlighting there, this management led and driven. It doesn't sit well with me personally. It sounds maybe a little bit dictatorial, maybe I'm taking it a step too far, but really it is very much a team-based approach that I see it as really in how we look after our students and support them and deliver the course content to them. So really team based approach, as opposed to this management led idea. And as (Lecturer F) said, we really do know the students coming towards the end of semester one we've a very good idea of what's going on.

LECTURER G: Just to add one thing that to that because I think it's important to say. We wouldn't be able to do our job without other facets of the system in place, for example, the disability services do an excellent job and there is a whole kind of suite of people that form part of that system that are fundamental to the running. It's an operation, it's a machine really, and it's more team-based as (Lecturer H) says.

And thank you for that. The model is made up of seven pillars and each pillar has a number of actions and interventions associated with them. I want to go down through each of the of those pillars just to get your perspective of them and I'll highlight what the actions and interventions associated with them all are.

So the first pillar of the module is the habit forming pillar, which was where the students were getting their first assessment either at induction or during their first LDHE class, where there were regular assessments or assessments at regular intervals. And there was an early intervention and for students who failed. What is your perspective on the habit-forming pillar?

LECTURER H: If I may jump in there with the learning and development in mind in semester one. We've kind of changed the format of the assignments. Since we went remote, we'll say 18 months ago or thereabouts. But back in that other timeframe from 2010 to 2019, we would have started immediately with a personal development plan, and I think it's an excellent idea. It worked very well for us. It meant the students for want of a better phrase 'hit the ground running'. They had an assignment to complete within the first 14 days of setting foot on campus. So it made the students aware of the fact that we meant business and that they were expected to step up and organise themselves and deliver their first assignment within the first 14 days. And that stood to them very well from the outset and they became aware then you know, we mean business, there are deadlines there for a reason and the deadlines need to be matched. So I think it served us very well.

Thanks (Lecturer H).

LECTURER F: I think it's very, very important, because I think when a student starts college it's a time of a new environment, new experience and the new freedom. And I think having an assignment to do it's an opportunity to shape the pattern and to get into the habit of study and reach and deadlines. It can be too easy to enjoy the freedom!

Thank you (Lecturer F). The second pillar is the student esteem pillar and the facets on that would be student induction, the briefing for students with failed modules and the lunch for the high performing students. Do you have any views on the student esteem pillar?

LECTURER G: I'm not sure if I like the lunch for the high performing students. It's something that I did have an issue with when I saw your model, and I hope you don't mind me saying that. I think it's too early to dichotomise students according to very early assessments into high performing and low-performing or middle performing or something. And even as a student myself, I wouldn't like to not be included in a lunch as a performer. I think I just would have an issue with it. I'm just putting it out there. I think it's really important in terms of retention that we have an inclusive policy; we work hard in every other way, and I just think lunch for high performers just doesn't sit with me at all.

LECTURER E: The other thing that I think when you talk about esteem, there are an awful lot of students, I won't say an awful…but there are a percentage of students in first year that are very unsure of themselves when they get in the first year. And they come to certainly the first set of exams and there's a fair bit of anx around that. And again if you're dividing it, rewarding them and by lunches or you're making a division between, on the basis of 13 weeks' work or maybe less, I don't think that's quite right. And the other thing that I would say is, one of the big things is when they do come in, is just to get them, encourage them just to get through the exams. I mean, first of exams, I always said just lads, get your 40 first and then work up and make sure you get through your first year and stay within the system. So when we talk about esteem, one of the things I would say, for first years, anyway in particular is just encouragement more so, encourage them to succeed, encourage them to I suppose focus on getting through first year, that's what they're supposed to do to stay within the system.

LECTURER G: Yea, I would have a lunch for GRIT. For students how showed GRIT, students who kept going in the face of kind of difficulties that's who I would have the lunch for.

Sorry, can I ask, would the students who weren't invited to lunch know that there were students invited to lunch?

LECTURER H: They probably would.

LECTURER J: That's a question to Owen there. I mean, was it a public thing? Was there a list of names?

Yeah, the students, it would be based on the end of their first year performance and for non award years. So certain students who were doing the ladder would get

graduations and other students then who got first class honours in a non- award year. So it would only be at the end of first year, and it would be maybe November of second year that it would happen. And some students would be aware, I mean we wouldn't publish it anyway, but there will be photographs and stuff. So yeah, there would have been an awareness. I'm not sure how much to be quite honest with you.

LECTURER J: I just wonder, Owen, for something like student esteem really, you can poke around in the dark, but there's actually very little we know about, at any at any level, forgetting about the college or education. The esteem of young people is an international issue. It's been around as long as man has been on the planet. So in other words, what I'm questioning is whether, like I have no doubt that you put a lot of time and others put a lot of time into figuring out- well student esteem is an important thing and self-evident. But how you would put interventions in place to help with students' esteem, I just you know, maybe I'm misunderstanding the term student esteem, but I think I know what it means, I think I knew what it meant when I was at that stage; you know. And based on what (Lecturer E) said there just as it were, mirror that. That when I went to college, my first semester was a very difficult one, because I was in a strange place and I just didn't know how good I was. And that was the biggest thing leaning on my mind. And there was there was one particular student who was up at the at the end of every lecture cow-towing with the lecturers and all the rest and we were saying Jesus he must be very good. And he flunked almost all his exams, you know. So that's the problem and certainly at the first-year level is knowing you sit. It's not so much knowing that you're at the top of the class, but knowing that you're not at the bottom.

LECTURER H: Yeah that's a very good point (Lecturer J) I agree with you 100%. I think instead of this lunch for high achievers and maybe a team building day going to 'zip it' or somewhere like that might be more beneficial just to get them to bond together as a group, get them to break ice develop their own confidence. Because you know, there is a serious issue with self-esteem, I think, amongst a certain cohort of students and I think this kind of idea of almost streaming them within the first 12, 13 weeks and I will be against that, personally. I think there are other ways of rewarding them and developing their self-esteem.

LECTURER F: It could discourage rather than encourage. Like a student might feel was I not good enough, you know my results are not good enough.

Okay, thank you, the student experience pillar, which is the team building event and guest speakers and international and domestic field trips. To what extent do you believe that is important in terms of a facet of the model?

LECTURER G: I think team building is really important Owen. I think you're talking about building sort of a sense of belonging in the classroom. Is that what you mean by team building?

Team building event, a bespoke team building event that used to take place in the arena for first-year students.

LECTURER G: I think all of those are very good, because they kind of gel a class, and I think, you know as (Lecturer J) said; you find your feet. It's not just an academic experience, it's a social experience and the two whether we want to acknowledge it or like it, the two are very interlinked, if you're not happy socially or you know you won't

be happy academically if you're not getting on in the classroom. Unfortunately, despite our efforts there still is a lot of bullying going on in third level as there isn't second level So I think all of those events are really important, I would I would support the team building absolutely yeah.

LECTURER J: (Lecturer F) so just go in there. You're absolutely right about bullying. Well, bullying is a particular, defined in a particular way you know, well maybe we haven't all been in a situation. But I've in a situation where there might be 60, 70 students in the class. And somebody says something and sniggering going on in the background, aside from the fact that it drives me daft. That's something that needs to be managed. It's part of team building but it's teaching respect as much as anything else.

LECTURER E: And I think maybe (Lecturer F) comes into this as well. I think, because we have smaller numbers in the law programme, it is probably easier for us to do the team building, like some of these students went off and they organised law ball which is a big thing for them and for the law students. We had days out in prisons, we've had days out to the to the four courts, we've had days out and to the local court. I think those type days, from a law student's point of view, have been very, very beneficial. And I think even the rapport between the student and the lecturer, you get to see a side of the student that you don't necessarily see inside in the classroom; you see them outside the classroom and that's a huge part nowadays in relation to people being recruited into law firms and all the rest of it. So I think it from a team building point of view I think those kinds of things for our subject had been hugely beneficial. You often hear about the bigger firms now and they organise team building events where there's loads to drink involved to see how students are going to conduct themselves. So again, these types of events they are practical in nature, but you get a good feel for what the character is like and what the student is like. So I think it's beneficial from a student experience but it's also hugely beneficial from a lecturing experience, just to get to see the overall package and particularly if you are asking write a CV for someone, at the end of three or four years, you get an insight into the students and what they're like, not just academically but socially and how they interact with the group.

Thanks (Lecturer E) and the next pillar is the role of the academic staff. And that was the deployment of key staff into first year, the provision of feedback, teaching and learning qualifications, LDHE community of practice, teaching innovation, and teamwork at programme board level. How important do you think the role of the academic staff was in the role of this model?

LECTURER G: Pivotal. You know, it's almost hard to quantify how important the role of the academic staff is. They are the linchpin in the system, so I think they are pivotal in terms of retention. I think these kind of key areas, teaching and learning qualifications and teamwork and deployment of kind of key staff who might be particularly skilled with first years or, I'm not quite sure what the criteria were there. But I do think having key staff who are familiar with the first-year experience yeah definitely really pivotal.

LECTURER H: I think Owen what's interesting there, and that pillar is the provision of feedback on first assessment or any of those assessments in a timely manner and is extremely important for the students. Up until that point, I would imagine they wouldn't have gotten very much feedback at the early stages of the semester and I think that the earlier the feedback, the better. Because it really does pave the way for more successful assignment completion, for better grades down the line. And it helps with

their confidence to if they have a one to one with you or really essentially you dealing with the team, say it was a team project and giving feedback on that in a timely manner. You know, it gives them the opportunity to reflect on how they worked on the assignment. Do you think this grade is fair? And you know and just give them that little bit of confidence in their own work, too. So, I think it's absolutely vital that we do continue to follow this idea of giving feedback in a timely manner to the students at that stage.

Thanks (Lecturer H).

LECTURER E: Depends. I suppose the interpretation you put on retention. I mean, there's retention to stay in the programme. But there's also from a lecturer point of view, well, can you retain their interest in your subject? So therefore the lecturer is so important in that aspect of things, well can they sow some kind of seed, this is a subject that I would like to do in the longer term, this is it an area if it's criminal law, can you instil, they are going to change the world with criminal law and go down the route in later life in that area, and particularly in first year I think that's really, really important. And there' are a lot of subjects, I suppose, from a legal perspective and there' are a lot of subjects which look like paint drying -contract and the like. But there are certain subjects I certainly think lend themselves to retaining students in a law program and tort, criminal a couple of more of them like that, are very, very good, particularly in first year or the early years of a law programme.

LECTURER F: I think that connection with a lecturer is very important and that sense of trust, knowing that the lecture is available and as approachable and that they can go to your lecturer if they have a problem and that's very important in first year. Particularly in that first semester when it's a setting in phase.

LECTURER J: If I could just say, I think the lecturers are clearly an important part of it. I'm interested in that box that says deployment of key staff in first year. I don't know how you decided on that or what kind of textbook or what sort of analysis you use on your staff to decide which ones were deployed in first year? I'm being serious in the sense of that's your prerogative as a manager to assign staff based on in each year…you know you're putting staff in there for particular reasons, you know. But again, it's not like, to my mind at least that's not something that's just good management that's not a kind of a programme or retention. I'd like to think that the college would always put the most appropriate staff teaching first years and second and third years and fourth years. So the point I'm making is, I think there's nobody who would say yeah well, the role of academic staff is important and retention it's just to what extent you can sort of have a master plan and say well now, I'm going to move this chess piece here because of that. It's not, it's just it's just management, you just make a judgment call about me and about (Lecturer F) and about whoever and say that will do. And somebody else better comes along next year and say, well, we'll switch that around. Am I not right about that? Sorry now Owen, I know we're not supposed to be asking your questions.

I mean (Lecturer J) you're right. It was managerial prerogative based on who to choose to deploy in that particular area. The deployment within first year would have changed and we would have done that deliberately. I won't get into the length of it now, because it would take too long. But you are, you are right, the academic staff wouldn't necessarily have been aware of it happening at the time. Is there anything else you'd like to discuss on the role of the academic staff before we move on?

LECTURER G: Just I was just going to make the point (Lecturer J) that I think some I think genuinely there are probably some staff who are more interested in kind of the journey of the first-year students than others. Or I think might have more of an interest or a stronger I'm not sure how to put that, but I think some are extremely committed to the kind of difficulties that maybe some of the first years might experience. Where other staff might have maybe more of a desire to work with maybe later years for different reasons. So, I do think some staff might be more attuned maybe to the particular difficulties first years might have.

LECTURER J: I kind of make two comments that was what I was saying, was the first thing I was trying to say, the first point I was trying to get across. That's not a system, it's not like as if Owen can pull down a spreadsheet and say oh (Lecturer F) 's score is 5 on this and she scored seven and that that's not the way it works. Owen makes a judgment call, as every manager does in education and in other areas. When Owen was in the army, he was making the same calls based on his perspective of staff in terms of strengths and weaknesses. I would also say that there is a place for having, how do I put I, staff who drive students by not understanding, you know I mean I certainly had had lecturers in college who drove us daft at a time because they drove us hard and then the other staff who we thought as soft touches maybe to some extent, you know. So I think the ideal education to my to my way of thinking, is a mix of the two, you want staff, did you get on well with as a student? But you also need staff to challenge you and to drive you on and maybe it's no harm at all for students to say no, I don't like him, you know I didn't get on with him, that's not a bad thing to be said about you, as a teacher, that's my view.

Thanks (Lecturer J).

LECTURER E: One of the things there Owen as well is the teaching and learning unit would have been kind of been pushed along this period, the reference period 2010 to 2019? And they would have been developing, I think lecturers probably have benefited from that period of development over that period of time as well in their delivery of lectures to students. So, I think there was a learning curve in the period that you're talking about which would lend itself to probably maybe better lecturing and or maybe more insightful lecturing and maybe better lecturers and that would impact somewhat on delivery of lectures and ultimately retention.

Okay, thank you (Lecturer E). The next pillar is on programme design and that would have been for programmes developed during the period or on all programme design as part of programmatic review 2015. And part of that was Moodle VLE analytics, the graduate attributes and the assessment strategies and calendar of assessments. Where would you rate that in terms of importance of the model?

LECTURER G: I think calendar of assessments. I only got two out of the four there, Owen.

Sorry, I'll repeat them (Lecturer F), the Moodle VLE analytics, the graduate attributes, the assessment strategy, and the calendar of assessments.

LECTURER G: Okay, I think the graduate attributes are one of the things that stood out for me as well; I think. You know to be able to articulate that to the students, I think, is great, where will you be in terms of 4 years and it helped to kind of, if you like, provide a

model or a goal for both the lecturer and also for the for the student in terms of their attributes, and it was something that they could work for. So I think it's it was a very good goal orientation kind of motivational tool. The calendar of assessments and the assessment strategy, I think they're absolutely fundamental. The calendar of assessments and I can't remember the time period that they were given out. But hopefully they were given out in September. My memory now of evades me because I think it is crucial for students to be able to kind of set their own kind of small goals. And it's all part of that kind of, if you like, habit forming, growth mindset, it all fed into the idea of becoming, if you like this, this learner. And the assessment strategy yeah, I think all of that was really, really good and fundamental for the retention of students.

Thanks (Lecturer F). Anyone else looking to come in there? Okay, the final pillar then was the one on students support, which would have been the tutors, and the pass system, the HOD emeritus which was the role Peter Melinn took in retention. Motivational techniques, open door policy, the student services department, the parents' evening, the head of department interviews with students who failed first year modules. What is your perspective on the students support pillar?

LECTURER F: I think I was talking about some of that earlier, Owen. And I was saying that, and it was quite effective. We'll say the interviews with students who fail modules. I think it was an encouragement to the students as it showed that someone was interested in them and was interested in their progress and their future development. And I talked about the parents' evening earlier, I think, parents really appreciated it. It gave them an understanding of what this journey, this four-year journey, was going to be like for their son or daughter.

Ok does anyone else want to come in on that? Okay, I'm now going to share some information on the screen with you. Hopefully you'll be able to see it. Can you all see that?

Yeah.

Okay, so that gives the non-progression rate for the eight academic years were under consideration. And my first question is that the departmental non-progression rate fell from 36% to 12% in that time rate. In your view, were there other factors or reasons outside of the model for this reduction?

LECTURER F: I wonder and I'm raising a question really rather than answering your question, Owen. But I wonder did any of the changes that were made in the programmatic review of 2015 were they really have an effect and having an impact and those years 2016/17 and 2017/18?

2015 will certainly have been the first year after the programmatic review that we would have been delivering the newly formed programs.

LECTURER J: It's an interesting set of numbers Owen, so the 36 would appear to be to be an outlier by any standard. I'd like to know what the previous year was, whether it was up there, whether that was just a particular bad year. But then it goes down 24, 22, 22 and then it comes up again to 27, 24. So clearly there were other things going on. It wasn't as if this was a smooth improvement year on year. There was, what's the word?

Upsets, maybe upsets is the wrong word, but certainly there was movement along the way, like that 27 there is the second highest number in the progression.

LECTURER E: I'm only throwing this out there now. If you talk 2010, 2008, 2009, 2010, we were in the middle of a recession. There were people probably coming to college. There were people coming to college that probably should never come to college. But there were there were trying to make up. So that figure of 36%, you could be right, is an outlier and maybe that's why and maybe as you come along as you come along then, the economy starts picking up. So that probably has an effect on retention figures. It will be interesting, there's also been a reduction, I think, in the number of mature students come to college and it would be interesting to see and the retention figures in relation to them.

LECTURER H: I think there's economic factors at play there then.

LECTURER E: Yeah. I'm just throwing it out there maybe that…

LECTURER J: I have a distinct memory and Owen will probably remember as well, and you might all remember. There was one year there, but I don't think it was 2010 2011 I think it was later that than. Where there were students who literally didn't have food on the table. Like the hardship fund was just gone because it all been spent. And that was a reality, so a lot of people did fall out of college because they literally didn't have the money to put diesel in the car you get to college. But, as I say, I don't think that was 2010, 2011 but, as I get older, my memory!

LECTURER E: Well (Lecturer J) I'm smiling at some of the things that have been said here, and I missed them back and say, oh yeah, I remember that! When you say when you said them!

LECTURER G: Sorry, just one thing Owen, you ask the question, is there anything missing? And just kind of thinking about what everyone else has said with regard to economic factors. That's something that I would have felt strongly from the class as well. And I'm just wondering, Have you any insight in from your model and your research with regard to structuring the timetable per week and whether there was any changes in the timetable for first-year students? And whether that, if you like, in any ways impacted retention. Because I know just a small thing but it's related to economic troubles for students, is that sometimes students fall out of the system simply because they need to work. And it becomes a kind of, if you like, what's the word where it builds? It becomes more problematic where students are missing, more and more days and they're falling behind in their academic work because they're missing more days, because they have to work. And then they eventually fall out of the system. So I'm just wondering if there was any structuring of the timetables, so that students could be off maybe earlier in the evening or where they're dedicated days when they weren't in, and if that could have made any difference to the numbers we're seeing on the screen?

It wasn't deliberately planned that way, anyway. But, so I don't know is the answer to that particular question. I just, I want to move down the screen if I can small bit here if it will let me. So, I just want to put up some figures to do with individual programs and how the programs faired over the time period. So, I've done them in different colours, so hopefully you can pick them up. So, for example, the first row there the higher certificate in business and blue, that's the non-progression rate for each of the

years. The BBS level 8 is next. SMM/DM is social media marketing /digital marketing, business psychology and business and law. And just if I can ask and just a couple of questions about it. Firstly, statistically, the best performing programme in terms of retention was business psychology. Do you have any views as to why that might have been the case?

LECTURER G: I lectured on the business psychology programme, and I mean all I can say is that we genuinely practiced, There was a very small staff cohort in that, over that programme, I think it was only about three or four of us in the beginning. So there was a dedicated, if you like, staff team to the first-years and I think we genuinely really tried very hard to do everything we've just talked about for the last hour. I can't say above that, I'd love to say there was a magic formula, but everything we've talked about, we really lived it with the business psychology students. And we kept a very, very close eye on retention and we really went for the preventative approach, as opposed to the curative.

LECTURER J: Can I just poke these numbers a little bit? I would suggest that perhaps entry points; not the minimum entry points to a programme, but the entry points of the students who entered the problem would have a sizable effect. In fact, I'm pretty sure the literature supports that. That high points courses have much lower attrition rates than low point courses. And I mean there's a logic to that as well, I think that will go a long way to explain the higher cert in business programme. Even though there are high point students and the higher business programme. There are a lot of not high students. Have you looked at it, Owen, or is that part of your analysis?

Yeah, I have looked at that yet, and I mean the points total is definitely a key player in it, no doubt about it. Statistically, the worst performing programme was the social media marketing and digital marketing. Would you have any view as to why that might be the case?

LECTURER J: The program might have been miss-sold, I think.

Thanks (Lecturer J). Statistically, was a dramatic improvement in terms of student retention in the business and law program and in the year 8. Would you have any perspective as to why that might have happened?

LECTURER F: I think that some of the changes that were made in the programmatic review, whereby the 10 credit modules were split into two fives, and delivered you know we'll say Tort was delivered as Tort 1 and Tort 2. I think those type of changes helped the students, because I think, the law modules 10 credits in 12 weeks was overwhelming for some students.

Thank you.

LECTURER E: I think the programmatic changes as well in relation to legal skills. I think the other thing it began to do is, instead of it being all theory, that some of it became practical and became more alive for them. So, and it was interesting, they set off themselves; we were doing I think legal skills three and the students would off themselves and they set up an assessment for mediation, where it got a accredited outside. So maybe those changes, maybe encouraged the students to do other things outside the law program that was accredited and they saw practical applications that

they did that they could use in the workplace. So, I think those changes might have helped.

Okay, thanks (Lecturer E). I'm going to share a different document with you now. Okay, so in addition to those students that we lose, we also lose a number of early withdrawals and which are students who withdraw between September and March first year and that's the figures there in front of you, along with the withdrawal rate, which is the third line. The curve is very much a u shape, so whereas there is the odd outlier, it was higher at the start, and it dipped quite low in years 3, 4 and 5, before rising again. Would you have any view as to why the early withdrawals improved in the middle years under evaluation here and raised again and towards the final years?

LECTURER J: Are there not two dates associated with student withdrawals, Owen? Is there not an October date and March date?

No there, there is an October date where the students can withdraw and come back the following year without…but…. but that's not in terms of how it is measured by the HEA, that doesn't feature. So, would you have any perspective as to why this might have happened?

LECTURER J: It may just be knowledge. Student knowledge around being able to withdraw. I think if you leave after the first weeks; you have to pay half fees the following year. Is that correct, Owen?

Yeah, I think up until I think March you pay half fees and then if you do the full year well, subject to full fees.

LECTURER J: I just wonder whether knowledge of this detail mightn't be evenly distributed across. The numbers aren't huge; the numbers are nines and sixes and fours; you know so. Even though percentage wise that sounds like a lot, but it's not really there is a huge difference from year to year, I would contend. It's still definitely within the margin of error.

LECTURER E: I think there's just there's an attrition rate, there must be an attrition rate every year that they're going to go on a matter what, no matter what precautions you put in place, or no matter what you do, there's just a minimum level that is there all the time that people are going to withdraw for whatever reason.

Okay, thank you and the next set I want to show you. Hopefully, I can get it all on the screen. I'll have to move it down a small bit. I'll show you the first two boxes first and I'll ask you just to look at them and the figures in bold. There's three tables here to do with the autumn sitting. The first table gives you the student participation rate, so what that is, is those who are eligible to repeat the numbers who opted to repeat. The second one is of those who chose to repeat how many of them became eligible to progress. And then the final one which I'm bringing in to view now, is where you combine the two, which is that those who were eligible to sit their repeat exams, how many of them went on to progress. And, and there was quite a considerable improvement in the numbers in the final two years under evaluation. So the first ones, which were the percentage who chose to participate, went over 80 for the first time and retained there for the two years. Likewise, those who became eligible to progress of those who sat also was over 80. And overall and those who were eligible

to progress was at 65 and 71%. So there was quite a considerable improvement based on that. Would you have any view as to why more students might have succeeded in their repeat exams and those years?

LECTURER G: I mean, I can't think of anything to hand. I suppose my question is they seem low to me, even though you're talking about 81% and 82%. My question is, why aren't, you know they're in their 90s? How do they compare to, I know this is a different question and I'm asking you a question in response to your question, but how do they compare nationally? I would have imagined that you know we'd have at least 90% nine out of 10 students who are eligible to repeat to actually take their repeats. I'm a bit dismayed by the figures, really. I have no answer. I'm sorry Owen.

That's fine, does anyone have a perspective on it?

LECTURER J: I'm just looking at the numbers there and again the numbers when you actually look at the individuals, not at the percentages. They don't sound as if there's that much going on. If you look at the say look at the bottom table, eligible to progress, so there's 70 in 2011, down to 36 up to 37, up to 39 down 28. So, it could just be as it were, the margin of error on these things. But that's, the only thing I can suggest. I'm not aware of any major shifts in student performance or shouldn't attitude or at that level.

LECTURER H: Yeah I think you know what (Lecturer F) said there, how does it compare with other institutions, you know, is there anything unusual about maybe there isn't anything unusual about those statistics at all? I can't think of anything that might cause an upswing in the last two years.

LECTURER J: Was there any change in the availability of tutors over the summer I'm just wondering?

There wasn't there wasn't, there wasn't a change in the availability of tutors, no. Both Joe Keogh Brendan McClarney would have been available every summer and in equal measure.

LECTURER G: I always wonder, Owen, just say to you, I always wonder about having exams situated in the middle of the summer, where students now are to a large extent dependent on their own kind of finances to put themselves through college. So I just wonder if some of this is not down to lack of availability on students, the student just isn't available to sit the exam. And a point (Lecturer J) made earlier, maybe has more knowledge about the system at this point and knows that perhaps they can carry certain subjects over to the next year and takes if you like, a conscious decision, maybe to that and stay working. So it's not an answer, but maybe a hypothesis, or something.

Okay, thanks everyone. The final set of numbers, before we entered the final phase of it, is, this is the aggregate performance in terms of modules past. And basically, what this shows is that if there are 100 students each doing six modules, there is a total of 600 modules that are attempted. And this percentage would be the number of that 600, the notional 600, that would have been passed. So, these are the total percentage of modules passed within the Department of Business and Management over that timeframe. And you can see quite clearly that there is a steady improvement in the numbers, both in terms of the actual raw figures and the three year waited

average. I suppose my question is, why do you think there was an improvement in student performance over that timeframe?

LECTURER J: Do these figures relate just the first year, Owen?

Sorry yes (Lecturer J).

LECTURER H: Would it relate to possibly the students' supports that have been in place and improve the outcome, really? All of the different supports the tutors, the mentors and, I suppose, the team-based approach that we employ within the department. The idea of supporting the student across the board. And I know that I certainly said to my first year is you know you don't want to be back here in August repeating examinations to make sure you get your material covered in a timely fashion and submit your continuous assessments on time and get your work done so maybe it's to do with that, who knows?

LECTURER J: Just to poke these numbers again, just a small bit, and this is more for me than anything else. So you're saying the 65% there 2010/ 2011 represents the total number of modules past yeah and.

Yes.

LECTURER J: So, it's the number of students in first year business multiplied by the number of modules that they competed in that year?

Yes, yeah.

LECTURER J: Okay, and that number of students is not the number who started it's the number who actually sat the exams. So, excluding withdrawals are gone out of it, is that correct?

Withdrawals would be gone out of it, the early withdrawals only. Then those who weren't retained would be included in those numbers.

LECTURER J: Sure yeah, but yeah, in a strange sick kind of a way, if your withdrawals increased your numbers on this graph would improve?

That's true, is it true? I'll have to think that one, maybe not,

LECTURER J: I know I don't really know what the significance of that is.

Okay, so does anyone else want to comment on the increase in student performance?

LECTURER J: On that graph there that's the first table you have shown us, where there's a kind of steady increase from left to right, I think.

LECTURER G: Something is going on in 2015, that's a very interesting year because there seems to be a lot of if you like, a stark contrast between students who are passing, students who are failing and dropping out, That 2015 whatever was happening in that year was a programme review? I can't remember. But something was happening in that year and that's that caused, if you like I suppose almost a curve linear effect in some of

the earlier and graphs and an improvement in this particular graph. So that year is a is an interesting year and I have no idea I can't remember.

Yeah, in fairness, it's five or six years ago. Thanks everyone and so the final set of questions, then. Do you believe that the long term and ability of students, both for their remaining time in college and subsequently and we're enhanced and by their first-year experience and the changes that were made to it?

LECTURER E: I think overall, I think you'd have to say the change, the vast majority of changes would have would have to impact on the retention figures. I mean, you're putting in student supports; you are putting in tutor supports, you're putting in your changing programmatic…. programmatic review. You're making changes to modernise the programme. All with, I suppose, the objective of retaining more students and attracting more students to your college. So I suppose it goes without saying that that is the case. If I was a devil's advocate, then I would say, well there there's huge amounts of changes, but then it seems to be easier to get through the system. So is there an audit to see? Are the students better than they were back in 2010? So, there's, on the graph you've shown us or the tables you've shown us, more and more students are getting through. The argument would be, all of these things are very positive. But I wonder if it was audited and said, well is the student from 2002 a better student and then the students come out in 2019 and that would be I…I think that will be an interesting thing to look at.

Okay, thanks (Lecturer E).

LECTURER J: And in support for (Lecturer E) said there, I would say the statistics that you presented clearly show that there has been an improvement. The proof for me would be, what's happened to second year and third year and fourth year retention? One of the things that happened in another faculty that I'm involved in, there was one particular programme where first year results very poor and they decided to redesign the course to make for first year easier, to increase retention. And all that they found what happened was that more students got through first year and subsequently failed in second and third year that was net effect if you like.

LECTURER G: I think it's important. I think what we're doing here is we're not actually saying we're making first year easier academically, so that it's just a walk in the park. Because I think that would be dismissive of the academic kind of quality that we put into first year. But what I would see is, there's tangible evidence from business psychology that students who came in who were on a course that wasn't accredited but grew their confidence. The retention figures are there. They are now down in Ul. I have spoken with a number of them who contacted me through LinkedIn. And they are now qualifying for master's in organisational psychology with a view to doing a PhD would probably be finished before I'm finished! So, I think you set the scene in first year and you provide a kind of a culture of learning that really just gives them the confidence to keep going on their journey. And that's what I see as being the model of success that Owen has put his heart and soul into. That's really where I see it, that it's not about AIT or TUS now …it's about how they keep going, and they have the confidence to keep going and realise their dreams and their goals. That's what I see.

Okay, thanks (Lecturer F). The next question, how do you think the faculty administrative staff contributed to the student success model?

LECTURER H: I think they contributed hugely and continue to contribute hugely. You mentioned there, the open-door policy not just with regards to the head of department, I mean the admin staff have an open-door policy. It's been a pleasure. It's always a pleasure to work with them. They deal with matters in a timely fashion and really do have the students' well being at the heart of their day-to-day lives also. I really do think that they're instrumental really in keeping things keeping things flowing and keeping the lines of communication open and they're hugely important, really important.

Thanks (Lecturer H). How did the level of support from within the wider Institute, but outside the faculty, impact on the model?

LECTURER G: It's fundamental the disability services that I mentioned earlier are absolutely pivotal for students who need that level of support. And, they work in tandem with lecturers and which students. So, for some students, it's the key to retention that they have those services there.

LECTURER H: I would agree with you (Lecturer F) on that and also the library has been a great support I find to the students. Particularly you know when they start the research projects and first year and I say, you know we'd organise sessions within the library; you know and they schedule them in a timely fashion for us and the students, you know, develop the confidence to actually go in to the library. I mean, for many first years, it's a huge step to actually go into the library. And they're incredibly shy, I mean you nearly need to bring them in with you, break the ice and let them go about their research, so I mean the library has been a huge assistance for my particular module in supporting students starting off with their research from day one. And also counselling service has played a huge role also for our students. And I know students come to me and I have a counselling appointment and the very open about and it's a great support to them also. So yeah, absolutely a lot of great supports there.

Thank you for that. In your view, did the largest amount of change to the first- year offering emanate from inside or outside the faculty?

LECTURER G: Depends on how you define faculty. I mean, are disability services part of the faculty as well? It's a red herring.

Okay, how important were the managers in the faculty to driving the first-year experience and retention rates in your opinion?

LECTURER J: Like I've been saying, from the start, managers manage. That's what they do, and that's what we expect them to do. That's what they do. In your in your original slide that you sent out to us there, there was that thing of management driven teamwork based. So I would say, it has to be a management role, that's what…as Ambi once said to me, I teach management I don't do it! No, I mean, that's what management is by any standard.

LECTURER E: I was always more afraid of Siobhan and June than ever I was of you, Owen! You know what I mean? So that puts it in perspective!

LECTURER G: Do you know what if they're not behind you, though, you can't, you know, it doesn't work. If management aren't supportive of what's happening, it doesn't work yeah.

LECTURER F: Everyone has to be interest in it to keep the momentum.

LECTURER G: Yeah, and you were instrumental Owen in it. I don't think all managers or similar, but you know I think you were very instrumental in the success of the business Psych anyhow.

LECTURER H: Yeah it is really important, and being able to give that support to your staff and to let them know that they are doing a good job or they're not doing a good job, as the case may be, keeping the lines of communication open in that way that's really, really important.

Thank you everyone. Was there anything about the first-year experience that you expected to talk about or would like to add now as we conclude this session?

LECTURER F: I think one thing we mightn't have addressed Owen, was that the diversity of the student population. That our student population is quite diverse and is becoming more diverse. And that's from a social and cultural perspective.

LECTURER G: Yeah, I'd really support that and I think staff might need some training and in that how to handle diversity in the classroom.

Level of diversity. Is that if this model was to be implemented again or evolve that an element of diversity would have to come into it and continue to enhance it?

Well, like the internationalisation aspect, isn't that true? That's the buzzword of the moment.

Okay, so does anyone else wish to add anything at this point, and I can stop recording?

End

Appendix N: AG 1 Focus Group Transcript

Okay, thank you very much for participation in this focus group and, if I can pose the first question, and to you. In relation to the time period in question, which would have been the first-year intake from 2010 to the first-year intake 2018. How would you describe the first-year experience in the department of business and management?

ADMINISTRATOR A: I suppose they didn't get a lot of communication. I suppose in 2010 we probably didn't need them as much. Certainly, the first-years that got an induction into class. Because of the Semester, I think it was a kind of, give you an induction into class, 12 weeks out the other side. We only really looked at students, I suppose when they failed exams, we never did an awful lot in semester one for the students that were good attenders, or you know they popped in ad hoc they had a problem. And I suppose that's the problem. We probably only saw students when they had a problem, not when everything was all right. So we never really found what we were doing good. We found out when a student wasn't happy with a lecturer or didn't get enough notes or had the wrong course manual, maybe something like that. And so I suppose we did improve it then when we started to engage a bit more with students. The only other thing I think is that we probably engaged with students more in semester two than we ever did in semester one. And maybe because we called them in the semester after their exams and realized, there was a lot of students with a lot of problems that we weren't aware of. Maybe with the call-ins, I suppose I don't think we did call-ins that highlighted that probably a bit more than…you know there's nothing you could do about the exam being failed, but certainly you could point them in the right direction for semester two. We always have better results with semester two then, particularly for first-years.

Okay, thank you.

ADMINISTRATOR B: I would also suggest that the years where we gave the first-years as a leader that that was useful, you know that we had…I clearly remember when Karen was involved with the first-years; you know that there was a handle on attendances and we were able to pick up there. In relation to the students' experience with us, as Siobhan has said, they really didn't come to see us unless there was an issue they were reluctant.

Okay, I'll move on to the next question. I shared a copy with you of the student success model that was developed over a number of years. My first question is to what extent do you think that the student success model adequately reflects the first-year experience in the department and the wider faculty?

ADMINISTRATOR B: I'm going to be honest, I don't recall seeing that model, did you…and i'm not saying you didn't share it with me, but maybe I just didn't know.

ADMINISTRATOR A: Is that the EYFE model?

Yes.
Was that in your email?

Yes.

Sorry now, I'm not prepared for that! And I can't even open it now because of my issues with the with that…

Ok, the question I have for you is to what extent does the student success model adequately reflect the first-year experience and in the department of business and management over the time frame, or the wider faculty?

ADMINISTRATOR A: I think that's exactly what we did

ADMINISTRATOR C: Yes, going back that was a very good mapping all the activities and when you see them you realized how much was done. From the first day they come in the connection, you know. We are not involved in induction. There has been no sort of team building days. We just haven't been able to organize them, we have tried different ones. Trips are limited, they're not none, but are limited, so yeah, this will be very, very indicative of what was happening on the ground and just the extent of it really even surprises me. You know how much was done.

ADMINISTRATOR A: And I think probably because we weren't involved…like we kind of know where…what we did on the ground, like the organising the high achievers and the call-ins and all that sort of thing. I suppose we kind of organized the bad things rather than the good. Apart from the high achievers, I suppose. But there was a lot done from the lecturers as well. I suppose that we weren't, I suppose it's the joining of all those dots that we all know what's going on is probably what was missing when you look at that.

Okay, and what impact do you think the model had on first-year provision in the department?

ADMINISTRATOR C: I presume it would help retention because any intervention is going to, you know, sometimes it just needs a small intervention. But I suppose the main thing is the bonding of the students and forming groups early. And that's in contrast to where we are now. The second years now don't know each other, you know that's the contrast, but all these different activities from the very beginning, actually would create a good environment for the students. And definitely I mean the one thing i'd say is the open door, like the open door policy that was always there. Like we're nearly preventing students now from …. You know that's just it's just the contrast, but that's what's happening on the ground now is we don't really want calling. It's Covid related but definitely the open door and the openness and I don't think someone would be gone without some intervention, you know, somebody would notice and intervene, be it from the office or the lecturers or yourselves, not many would slip through the net I'd say based on this model. Would be my thinking, really.

ADMINISTRATOR B: I also think that they it helped with the student results. They strove to be better; you know that, because they were being monitored in first-year, it gave them that drive for a second, third and fourth and even masters afterwards. So, I think you know from an impact point of view that really did help.

ADMINISTRATOR A: I'd agree with you there and I think some of it was because they came from a leaving cert where everything was monitored. And then they came into third level where it's kind of come in, if you like, or don't come in, if you like. They kind of…I think this kind of

interaction kind of gave them a safety net that they felt that they somebody was watching them rather than you know when you kind of feel like you're left on your own, you kind of don't know whether you're going to go one direction or the other. At least if you have these interventions there, you're kind of saying yeah you're doing the right thing, are maybe you should look come this way. I think it did give them a little bit of confidence to, like you say, move on in second and third year. We weren't monitoring them minutely, but we were there in the background, keeping an eye. So if you failed two exams, come on in, have a chat, see what's going on, rather than saying you have a whole year, and if you fail six exams, it's your problem, not ours.

Thank you, and moving on to the next question. What actions or interventions do you consider were the most effective that were introduced as part of this model? And perhaps if you want to identify maybe three or there is no limit and there's no lower limit. But it's just a suggestion. So the actions and interventions that you considered were the most effective that were introduced.

ADMINISTRATOR B: I'd say the call-ins. I know we've mentioned already, but I think call-ins were very important in semester one. And I also think, for the high achievers that they recognition in non-award years was very useful. I suppose if I was to pick a third one, I might I might pull on the briefing for students with failed modules because they actually got to meet a couple of key people in the faculty you know, along with meeting the head of department, there were seeing one or more of us and you know that they were made to feel that they could come and talk to anybody. I think that the fact that we did with the other faculties shows them that they weren't alone. So, they'd be my three key things.

ADMINISTRATOR A: Certainly, the first two I'd be agreement with Administrator B. I think the parents' evening is very helpful as well, certainly for parents that had a child starting college for the first-year. And you know they were a kind of…they knew what was happening was we were standing for early on in the year. And maybe that kind of spurred them on to keep an eye on the student as well.

ADMINISTRATOR C: I'm in agreement with the girls on the first two. I think the student point of view of the team building side just you know, we're not alone, particularly for the larger groups, you know the first two definitely. I mean the intervention that someone cares and then the fact that all isn't lost; you know you actually can do this, and you know, even if you fail every module in semester one there's still a chance you can get through this year. So, I think they are key.

ADMINISTRATOR A: I think the tutor probably is key, as well the amount of the amount of work. Certainly, you know we always had a tutor, but it was a kind of I think the group tutors and now the tutors go into class and say I'm here I'm doing the lesson on this. And you know they're flat out. It's a full-time job now, at this stage, for a tutor. I think it's certainly need.

ADMINISTRATOR C: Are they the student leaders Administrator A?

ADMINISTRATOR A: No, I'm talking about the tutors the accounting and maths tutors.

ADMINISTRATOR B: But also the selection of the of the other staff, you know who were the group leaders, you know, they were key yeah yeah.

ADMINISTRATOR C: And some of them just took the role on without being…you know…now it's hours on the timetable, but some would just take the role of naturally you know.

ADMINISTRATOR A: But you know really what the key was, was Peter.

ADMINISTRATOR C: Oh yeah.

ADMINISTRATOR A: If you want to go down here. You know, because while all those things were done, a lot of it was fed into him and then he hauled that student aside if there was something. You know, everybody kind of fed in there.

ADMINISTRATOR B: He certainly helped with the follow up, actually, didn't he?

ADMINISTRATOR A: If the tutors had a problem, or the lecturer had a problem or the students had a problem, you know, he then could go to the heads of department whenever it needed to be. It was a kind of focal point for I suppose to close the loop on all that.

What actions or interventions in the model do you consider had either little or no positive impact on students or student retention?

ADMINISTRATOR C: For me, probably the student services. And I know they do the induction but…that's just you know…they do the induction. But then they kind of disengage unless the student has disability. Probably the only one, to be honest. I mean, everything there has its role, but to know that would…I don't think we link in the way we probably should to this area. And partly because data protection different reasons, but the link has got weaker. The link in that we would have has got weaker, that's my opinion you know.

ADMINISTRATOR A: I don't think there's any negative there. I mean, I think everything, no matter what you do it, it helps.

ADMINISTRATOR B: If I were to pick one I suppose I might pick pass and it might seem a strange one to pick but certainly, for the first-years I think, their reluctance to get involved in the pass programme you know. So, I said that that was the one that had little or no impact. You know their habits had changed by second year and that became more engaging. But you nearly had to follow them. The girls in support services had to follow them to get them to engage.

Do you consider that there were any negative consequences for students with the development of this model?

ADMINISTRATOR C: Well, definitely no.

ADMINISTRATOR B: No, no.

ADMINISTRATOR C: No, absolutely not. Categorically not.

Okay, and I just want to kind of talk in a bit of detail about the components of the model themselves. And the first thing is to say that the model and has three foundation blocks in

that, it was a team-based approach, management lead and driven with the underlying principle that it takes four years to bring a student all the way to fully becoming an independent learner. Do you consider that these foundation blocks, could I get your perspective on the foundation blocks, and do you think that they underpin the model?

ADMINISTRATOR B: I would agree that it was a team-based approach and that it certainly was led by the management. Any faculty in any college or university could look at this and say we're going to try this because it will work. It's proven to work. The period from first to fourth here is inclusive for the student and it has…the model lends itself to adapt from the first-year…inexperienced third level students right up to then them having that experience in fourth year.

ADMINISTRATOR C: I also think it does support the years one to four. There are different places where they fit in, I suppose you know. But the early intervention builds and then by hopefully by the end I think you know that the ones we retain do follow through then they have the habit forming, they have all the attributes really that we want to graduate. So, I think it's proven to work through the four years. But I suppose it's the emphasis of the early years that gives it's the success that it's had.

Okay, and I'll move on to the pillars and the individual actions were interventions. So, the habit-forming pillar is the first pillar, and there were three components to that which was the first assessment would be time-consuming and easy to achieve high marks and that first assessment was given at either induction or during their first class of LDHE. The assessments were at regular intervals during the early phase of the program and was an early intervention for poor performing students. What is your perspective on this pillar?

ADMINISTRATOR A: I think the LDHE has got a little bit out of hand. I think they have too much assessment in it now. I know, it's overwhelmed them a bit at the at the time, I think. Certainly, it has overwhelmed them now and I'm not sure you know…I think it's they had they had a lot of assessment; I know what we were trying to achieve was to try and say, it was the transition from second level to third level that they learned how to how to interact with this straight away. I think they were a bit overwhelmed with it, I think, maybe one assessment and one big assessment, rather than a whole lot of little assessments. Because I think once you get into the third and fourth week of that, they were under pressure from everywhere else as well. I don't know if it was a success. I know what we were trying to achieve. I don't know if it achieved that.

ADMINISTRATOR B: It got them to hit the ground running. We could see at the end of the semester, that it was easily marked, because quite a lot of students were getting grades higher than 80 and even 90% in that module they were struggling and in other key subject areas, and maybe only getting 50% or 40% you know. I know it had a purpose, and it achieved to a certain extent, but…like sometimes, if I think back and if I consider what they're saying today, it's taken up too much time. That's the key thing that's coming from the student.

ADMINISTRATOR C: I think it's a purpose, and I think the hitting the ground running as Administrator B said, is the most important thing, getting that the very first day, but I think it is over assessed. And it will be similar in Engineering with those types of modules we're not called the same thing, and maybe it's time to look at renaming it as well.

ADMINISTRATOR B: You know, for a five-credit module for it to take up as much time as it does, I think it needs to be revisited.

ADMINISTRATOR C: And it's probably the number of assessments, more than the actual assessment itself because students don't look and say that's 10% they see an assessment. I know even my own in fourth year, will still look at it as an assessment and not look at the credits are the 10% or 20% and probably give everything the same. So there could be a 30% in accounting and the 10% here and they give it the same amount of time. There should be…I don't know. I think that the girls are right. And we see the same in Engineering, and even though the modules aren't called that, similar things that there's a huge pressure on them in those particular modules. Now they're called different things for us, there's communications type thing. But it's the same outcomes, really. But maybe over assessed. But they do, for the very first day, yeah, to get them to know you're going to be working when you get there. That's a good thing that's a good part of it.

Okay, thank you, the second pillar is the student esteem pillar and components of that will be the student induction, the briefing for the students would fail modules and the lunch for high performers. What's your views on the student esteem pillar?

ADMINISTRATOR B: I think this is very good for the student esteem. All three items mentioned the induction, the briefing, the lunch. They all give them a sense of purpose, you know. The induction, I suppose, is one area where we feel we can always improve on. No matter what you do at induction, there's always something more that we can do. But it's good. The briefing for those after exams it's very important, and then the high achievers yeah gives them, you know, a sense of being recognized.

ADMINISTRATOR C: I think they're very good as well. The only thing I'd say is, I think the induction there's so much information imparted; they forgotten a lot of it. They could do with nearly a mini induction for first-years now, sort of week six or seven to make them aware of the other thing. I suppose what we find I don't know with first-years is the not aware really of things like the exam supports. What happens if they are going to fail modules? They are unlikely to be submitting, say extenuating circumstances forms where you get in all the other years. So much of the induction, it's so much condensed, and I just think something to follow up. But I think the other things are positive attributes and the briefings have tidied up the briefings for exams are much tighter and tidier and you know, very well delivered by the heads of department and the faculty people are always there. I think they've improved a lot, they've condensed a bit, haven't they and they are just better delivered?

ADMINISTRATOR A: I think you're right, I mean it's very good, but it's an awful lot of information, if you could have a reinforcement maybe around October thing you know, just even for exam stuff. But it's it's finding the time to fit those things in this issue is.

ADMINISTRATOR C: A lot miss it, any late comers miss it. And there's nothing for them. They are left to their own devices and they are the ones, maybe fall through the cracks. But just a mini-thing, even a recording or an option to go into something that is the key things you need to know for the rest of the semester.

ADMINISTRATOR A: I think the student union does the late arrivals. But theirs is a student union perspective and probably what we want to get across is a different thing. And while they're getting a bit of an induction, they're probably not getting the same as people who come in on the first-round offer.

Okay, thank you. The student experience pillar is made up of three things which would be the team building event, guest speakers, and the international or domestic field trips. What's your view of the student experience pillar?

ADMINISTRATOR A: I agree this is good, very good as well, certainly for the first-years that team building thing. As Administrator C said before, it's the one way they get to know each other and make friends, probably for life after it. And the trips, I know they're kind of curtailed a bit now, but yet definitely, certainly for international students, it's a brilliant experience for them.

ADMINISTRATOR C: It's all positive here, even though we really tried with the team building, but the team building one, I think, where the lecturers get involved is a great fun day. And we're still doing the guest speakers and some field trips- more limited. But to have a guest speaker for every group early on in the year just gives them a flavor. Where you use the past graduates and stuff like that, that's when it really becomes, I think they need to be close to their own age, to keep it close to their own age in terms of maybe some of the guest speaker someone that's gone over five years, or whatever works very well. I think it's all positive about their student experience. It's fallen by the wayside a bit. It's very difficult to implement most of those at the minute. But we shouldn't lose sight of them when we can get back to doing it normally.

ADMINISTRATOR B: Just to say on the team building event. The positives are a great, but I think it's too little, it's a one-day event, instead if it maybe being three half days, it would give them a chance to build a better rapport are longer rapport with each other and with the staff.

The next pillar that I want to talk about is the role of the academic staff, and this has been the deployment of key staff in first-year, the provision of feedback on the first assessment in a timely manner. The teaching and learning qualifications, the LDHE community of practice, teaching innovation and teamwork at programme board level. What are your views on this particular pillar?

ADMINISTRATOR B: The academic staff are crucial to the whole first-year experience, and I think that deployment of key personnel in that first-year is critical, and it has had a huge impact on improving student experience. The teaching and learning qualifications are becoming more evident, as we move through that period, the different practices that have been developed are commented on by the students. And then that provision of the feedback on the first assessment, at an early stage, allows then for the other supports if they're required to be offered. Teamwork is critical.

ADMINISTRATOR C: The academic staff engagement, you know that's the biggest thing and they all have a role to play. I suppose the learning and teaching really has come into evidence when we've had to flip things and, hopefully, some people will then maybe adapt the way they teach to the new environment. I mean, there are modules where it doesn't have to be a final exam and stuff I would say. Some people insist on going back to that model. You know that we've learned a lot and I suppose, post pandemic, but that those qualifications should lead them to

look at things differently, really. And the LDHE still has a role to play, you know they're all…but the academic is …. everybody is critical, but they are as critical as anyone, because they're the day-to-day interface with the student body, you know, they are the main interface day today.

ADMINISTRATOR A: I would say the feedback maybe is a bit slow. And a lot of it has to do with GDPR issues too, to find out whether a student needs a support, who's providing the support, because it's coming from different angles, I suppose. So sometimes the staff aren't aware of a student needing specific supports, because they're only getting a list in November, December. So that kind of feedback from maybe the student services and even I suppose if a lecturer did find student…like sometimes you'd hear them at programme, saying is there a difficulty there? I don't know there is, but I feel there is. And I suppose they don't know what to do about that, and unless we get a list to say somebody has been given supports where we kind of lose out on that student for too long.

The next pillar is Programme Design. And as part of programme design, we have Moodle VLE analytics. We had developing graduate attributes, and we had the assessment strategy and calendar of assessments. What's your view of the programme design pillar?

ADMINISTRATOR A: I think staff are all was fairly…you know, when you see programme boards they're always very enthusiastic about looking at how to change and what would be better and how they can improve the course. Or how the students are finding it. There are so many changes, even in the middle of a programmatic review. I think they do take care to figure out that. I think the calendar of assessments is kind of a work in progress. Certainly, I don't know in ours. I know we used to try and get a calendar of assessments put in. But to be honest I don't know how well that was ever followed by them, whether it's kind of leaves people chained. If they have to have an assessment of week six and they haven't the stuff covered, then they don't know what to do. Because somebody else will have an exam week seven. I know that there's pros and cons to it. It does tie you up and if you have a calendar, a very rigid calendar of assessment. But at the same time, you can't have a student doing six subjects, modules or assessments in a week either so. I don't know how you know; you start off the beginning of the year, but then somebody goes out sick for three weeks and then you're tied, you have maybe have nobody for first two weeks to teach them. I think it needs to be looked at how that works, maybe more efficiently.

ADMINISTRATOR C: Yeah, I sort of agree with Siobhan there, I mean the assessment calendar is a great idea in principle, what tends to happen is everything gets moved back a couple of weeks, and the students will still complain of heavy workload towards the end when it's coming up to their exams. Now the lecturers are doing it in the best interest of the students to give them the flexibility. But just…you can't be too rigid. I suppose overall, I'd say students are still over assessed. If you look at most modules, they are still over assessed. There's too many. And they might only be small ones, like the LDHE that we talked about earlier, but if they see six assessments, and it would be feedback we get a lot from…maybe not so much in business, but it's something we certainly see in engineering, over assessment is a big issue. But I think that the lecturers certainly in business are very proactive in terms of making sure the programme is up to date. And much as the changes are a pain from a quality point of view, I think it's very important from the student point of view that are getting the most up-to-date information. I wouldn't see that my own faculty. Programmes that haven't been touched for seven years and that's not

good, that's not good for the student, and not good for whoever is teaching it. I don't know, yes assessment calendar is very important to have it, I think, to have something to draw a line in the sand, at least. Yeah and the lecturers are doing a good job there, I would say.

Thank you for that, and the final pillar has a lot of actions and interventions, which is the students support pillar. And included in this would be the use of motivational techniques, interviews with students who failed first-year modules. The HOD emeritus, which was the role that Peter Melinn went into. Pass tutors, AIT connect, an open-door policy, parents' evening, and the student services department.
So, as you can see, it's quite an extensive and large amount of actions and interventions. What would your perspective on the students' supports pillar be?

ADMINISTRATOR B: The students supports have been instrumental in us holding on to those…you know, retaining those students and helping them to achieve better results. As mentioned previously, you know Peter's role was critical and I think it was probably one of the key appointments in supporting that pillar. I actually think that it's one area that others would benefit from adopting. Other faculties I mean, you know and, as mentioned before, even other colleges. That open-door policy, parents' evening, we have mentioned these things before. They are all of benefit to the first-year student.

ADMINISTRATOR A: I think it's excellent as well, I think. There might be other things we can add, but certainly wouldn't be taking away any of those groupings there.

And if there were things that you could add to that pillar, what might they be?

ADMINISTRATOR A: I think you see your first-year student that failed. And maybe we should be seeing that first-year again at the end of the year, or maybe before semester two or maybe Easter just to reiterate. We see them we see them after semester one. But maybe if they pass semester two maybe we should be saying congratulations, well done, you know, or you know a little bit of interaction with them, just to build them up either before semester two exams and say look, is everything all right? Dependent on what the issue was at the time, but some of them are saying you know I had a personal issue or whatever. And maybe there's some way to tie the loop on that because if they pass semester two, we kind of let them off again. Maybe we should be talking to them after semester two, if it was only a phone call or whatever and say, you know well done. I know it was a hard year for you, but look where you are now.

ADMINISTRATOR C: And the other areas, the withdrawals, I mean you know those withdrawals, the exit, some form an exit interview. It's hard enough to get the form signed, to be honest these days. That's the truth now for us. But to find out what really, what's really behind it. And can we try and capture them back to a different programme maybe next year? Which is in some cases is the case, they are just on the wrong thing. But I suppose that feeds into all of this, because, you know, it feeds into the careers office and the heads of department; you know. But that's one area I'd say that we're not…it's just hard to…like you're just trying to beat the clock in terms of getting them out, so they don't have the fees to pay, and then half the time they can't get off quick enough to be honest. But I just think small, even a phone interview just to find out okay what's really the motivation, you might find out a bit of information there. But, overall, the tutors have increased like there's a tutor now up in engineering for programming. I think she's only on small hours. But that's an area where they were highlighting was a problem. We have

the maths; we have the science and we have the business tutor. They're full on. And we have very good people in all those roles. And I think people are, well not all students are aware, I think, make them aware is important as well but they utilised very well. That'd be the only area, just the ones that are going or failing and going, or just disappearing off the face of the earth, the follow up there, but it's a full-time job, following up as well.

ADMINISTRATOR A: My understanding is we had that we didn't sign off the withdrawal forms until they spoke to the heads of department. That used to be what we used to do.

ADMINISTRATOR C: But at the moment it's kind of make sure they get out, not liable for the fee. That's my experience might not be in business.

ADMINISTRATOR A: Well, it is now…all we are getting is a copy of a withdrawal form we're not actually seeing the student at all. In 2018, that's what we would have done is, you know, call them in first. They came with the form to be signed by the head of department. Now they just send them…to the registration department and you never see the student or it probably is something that needs to be tightened up on or have some type of procedure on.

Okay, thank you. Anything else on student supports before I move on. No, Okay, thank you. Now i'm going to share some material with you from the quantitative component of of the dissertation and just to get your views on it. So firstly, what you're seeing on the screen at the moment is the non-progression rate and the three-year weighted average for the department and business and management over the timeframe under evaluation. So, the first column is the raw non-progression rate. And the second column is the three-year weighted average. And my question to you is that, do you consider that the reduction in the non-progression rate arose largely as a result of the model or were there different broader things at play?

ADMINISTRATOR C: Do you have the percentages, Owen?

They are the percentages.

ADMINISTRATOR B: I think the reduction is largely based on the model, you know there's no way we would have seen that reduction if some of those supports hadn't been introduced. And a no brainer for me to the model worked.

ADMINISTRATOR C: It's a great result, that's what I would say, and it has to be sure there's no other explanation, nothing else, no other major parameters have changed the time.

Okay, and I have some specific questions just relating to the programmes that were in the department. So, I've color coded these and again, these are all percentages. So that's the non-progression rate per programme, so I programme level. So, the first column in blue is the higher certificate in business. The bachelor's of honors degree. SMMDM is social media marketing, digital marketing. Business psychology and business and law. And I have some kind of general questions about individual programmes that I'd like your perspective on. The first of which is that, statistically, the best performing programme in terms of student retention was the programme in business psychology. Why in your view was that the case?

ADMINISTRATOR A: I think the student knew what they wanted to do on that course. And they were interested in the course for a start. I think with the higher cert business, kids take it on because they don't know really, some of them know what they want, they want to do business. But others take a general programme and see where they go from it. But I think with psychology, if that's where you're into, you're going to have that slightly higher engagement with it. You might struggle with it, but you will work harder with it.

ADMINISTRATOR B: I think the profile, though, also came into question there, you know. They were high-achieving students; they were high achievers in their leaving cert and they continued when in their degree.

ADMINISTRATOR C: I'd say the specific courses. I think when they are specific; I think I agree with Administrator A there, and the fact they are level 8 students as well. They are coming in with a higher level. And I'm drawing a comparison now. But I do think coming in with a higher leaving cert level. But it's probably the psychology that brought them in here rather than the business, to be honest. I don't know because I didn't interview them. But I'd say psychology that was the draw there as much as the business or maybe the combination.

Okay, and statistically, the worst performing and programme was the offering in social media marketing or digital marketing. Have you any ideas as to why that might have been the worst performing one?

ADMINISTRATOR C: That shocks me, actually! But probably they had a different perception of what it was going to be.

ADMINISTRATOR B: I agree, I think they thought that there wouldn't be as many business elements, so they hadn't maybe researched their choice of course correctly coming in.

Statistically, there was a dramatic improvement in the business and law programme. Would you have any idea as to why this might have occurred?

ADMINISTRATOR B: I think there were key people involved, yeah, the lecturing team there, you know, became a unit that strove to deliver at a high level, and then to not…not babysit or mind them, but to monitor the students. And I think that probably had some influence on it.

ADMINISTRATOR A: I think they made their expectations of that programme very clear, the lecturers early on and that.

ADMINISTRATOR C: I think back around then they would have done the Law Society, the mini courts and that. I think the activities might have helped the retention. Because you would have expected business and law to be in line with psychology, I would have expected business and law figures to be in line with psychology. Because again it's a very specific. So, it would be interesting to see as the data goes on, if you go on to 2019, 2020 and 2021 of those figures continuing, you'd expect they would.

And why do you think there is such a difference kind of both between programmes and within programmes based on…because you can see there's quite a wide array of numbers there?

ADMINISTRATOR C: I'd expect a difference between the levels, levels 8 and levels 6, to be. And I suppose maybe content as well, you know and whoever's involved in it; you know teaching in the early days. But I'd expect the difference to be between the levels. I would have expected level six to be higher than levels 7 or levels 8. That would be what you'd expect.

And the natural follow on question to that then is that, do you believe that the model disproportionately benefited stronger students?

ADMINISTRATOR C: Probably. But it shouldn't, it should benefit the weaker students, the interventions should…it's hard to know because it's too early, you have only two years. I'd expect it to actually help the weaker students, longer term. That's where you get the big benefits.

ADMINISTRATOR B: I think when you consider the caliber of the students, in the Higher Cert, sometimes we had some very high-achieving students, and they came in on high points.: But then we had some who were at the very low end of the scale. I think that might contribute to some of the difference; you know, between the higher cert and, for instance, the psychology programme.

ADMINISTRATOR A: And I think there was one year there were the higher cert came in and we all knew, I mean it was just an atrocious year for that particular group everyone knew you before they did their exams the failure rate was going to be huge. I presume that's the 15/16 there with the 39%. But we kind of knew that from early on. That particular group of students was very weak.

Thank you, I will move on to the next screen share that I want to show you. And again, these are expressed in percentages. But this is the rate of student withdrawal. So, these would have been withdrawals between September and March. And basically, what you'll see is that it's almost a u shape, in that it was high at the start. It really went low and in years and three, four and five, before raising kind of steeply again. And my question is, do you have any insight as to why the numbers might have reduced for those middle years and increased again?

ADMINISTRATOR C: I'd say they increased because the interventions, people work out that it's not for them, and whenever. And maybe in those middle years we weren't actually monitoring it as closely. So, even though it looks like a negative, it actually could be a positive, because you're actually getting them out of the system by interventions, you're getting them out with the system, and maybe giving them an opportunity to do something different. That's what I would think, but you'd expect to be higher if you are intervening, because there's some engagement with them, whereas before you mightn't have found out to the end of the year, they might never withdraw.

ADMINISTRATOR A: I would say that I'd say the low is probably that four, I just can't see that only for 4% of withdrawals on that year alone. I kind of wonder, if you looked at the exam broadsheets, what that percentage would tell you. That's obviously official withdrawals there.

ADMINISTRATOR B: The economic climate, though, might have had something to do with it as well. The need to work.

ADMINISTRATOR C: I think it's very difficult to get the official withdrawal figures. You need to put exam stats over it. There are so many that don't, but when you are intervening, they might be more likely to withdraw. That because you have intervened and you've had some discussion with them, you might find out that there are problems and they are better off withdrawing, coming back another year, coming or coming back and doing something different. If you don't have any intervention, they will continue on.

Thank you, and the next piece I want to put up to you is to do with the autumn repeats. Sorry, I want to try and get this bigger on the screen. So basically, there are three percentages here that I want you to look at and they are the ones in bold at each table. And, and the first one is the percentage of students who opted to participate in repeat exams. So, there were those who were eligible to take the repeats in August and basically the first line is those who chose to show up and sit it. The second set, then, is that of those who did sit it the percentage who became eligible to progress on the second year. And then the final one is really a combination of those two numbers which is of those who are eligible to sit what percentage subsequently progressed on to the next year. Have I explained the three percentages okay to you?

So, you can see there in terms of the percentage who participated, that there was a significant increase towards the end and of the duration. There was a similar increase in the last three years in terms of the student performance of those who did sit. And when you see the combined one, then you can see a substantial increase in the latter years again of the students' performance in the autumn repeats. And I suppose my question to you is that, why do you think that this happened, why do you think there was an increase in performance in the autumn exams towards the end of the timeframe?

ADMINISTRATOR B: The tutors, in my opinion, that support that they got from the tutors was instrumental.

ADMINISTRATOR C: And then, this figure kind of explains previous ones, the higher participation the repeat exams in the latter years were with the higher withdrawals. You know the ones that stayed wanted to stay and then the lower fingers show that probably a lot of those that weren't captured before on the withdrawals were gone. Anyway, but the performance is very, very good to see that increase in performance in the repeat sessions it's really good and it's probably to do with the interventions really all the interventions.

ADMINISTRATOR A: I think one of one of those years towards the latter end, we contacted the students that had failed to see were they going to repeat as well. We kind of I know one year Peter rang all the students that had failed. So, it kind of felt like we were saying to them, you know we know you failed here and now, so you know don't forget there's a repeat on here and a lot of them and it kind of bears out what he to us that yes, we are going to repeat.: So, you know that intervention may have worked there too.

ADMINISTRATOR C: Another thing that came in there, maybe, as well as the carry, I can't remember what year it came in.

No, the carry was consistent throughout.

ADMINISTRATOR C: Okay, that's fine, yeah.

Okay, thank you and the final one, then, is to do with student performance. So basically, this is…this is the last material I will be sharing with you. Can you see that? This is the percentage of aggregate total modules past. So basically, and what this number is, is that, for example, if you had 100 students studying, taking six modules each. In total, there are 600 modules. This would be the percentage of those 600 modules that would be passed. So, you can see that over the timeframe in question that the aggregate number of modules past went from 65% to 88%. Why do you think that happened?

ADMINISTRATOR A: I'd say the same thing again, and I think if you looked at it's probably financial accounting with a lot of the students that were failing modules. I think you know the tutors pulled many of those through over the summer.

Sorry, these autumn repeats, this is in total.

ADMINISTRATOR A: This is summer?

No, this is summer, autumn the whole academic year.

ADMINISTRATOR A: Well I'd still say the same thing, I think it's the tutors with the modules that students didn't like to …we had Bernard for the Chinese students, he always did tutor for accounting. Brendan mostly did accounting. I still think it was the students' support that they got brought that figure up. I think you know that there was more put on during the year, more tutorials, more support there for them.

ADMINISTRATOR C: See that in the figures…the maths or whatever the subjects are that they failed. I'd say that they're most likely to be the one, you know, with the supports there. Which are year round, they are not academic year. So that would have helped a lot through. And maybe the type of repeat exams, some cases I don't know, but yeah it's a good indicator to get more through in the repeats.

ADMINISTRATOR A: I know Brendan McLarney would have done tutorials during the year for accounting, which probably at the start to 2010 it was basically one-on-one lectures with…he took on a bigger role there, towards the end of that. Sort of meeting with the lecturers and saying…covering what they had covered in class, he did as it as a tutorial on a weekly basis, you know, for students that were falling behind.

My next question and we're coming towards the end of it now, just is in relation to students who achieve their 60 credits in first-year are eligible to progress on and choose not to positive attrition in lots of ways, is what it could be called. Have you any idea as to why students might make that decision?

ADMINISTRATOR B: Just change of mind. I think it was the case in a lot of them. That whilst they were able to engage with the modules and pass them successfully, they didn't particularly like the course maybe and to change their minds and we're going to do something else. And again, I think some of it was for personal reasons, you know, maybe money, illness, they contributed.

ADMINISTRATOR C: Same, the two biggest ones are the financial and then the change of mind - go somewhere else. And some of them will see the year out, rather than withdraw halfway through the year. Particularly going back because you know the economy wasn't as strong in terms of employment, if we go back to those years that you are looking at. Whereas now if a student opted out in October, they'd find a job, then would keep going to the following academic year, which is what a lot do, they actually take up a place in the do a new CAO. So, I'd say they are the two main reasons, if you actually analyze the withdrawal forms. And sometimes, health, personal reasons, family ill or you know carers. There is such an array of things, but the two strongest ones would be what Administrator B is saying there and financial would have been a factor.

During the development of this model over the 8 years. What level of support do you believe came from outside the faculty? So, in the form of the likes of student services and say, senior management?

ADMINISTRATOR A: God, I'm not sure a lot, really!

ADMINISTRATOR C: I think kind of the same.

ADMINISTRATOR A: I think we instigated it and then, if you looked for help, maybe, but I don't think they told us how to do it.

ADMINISTRATOR C: I'm not sure that they are in tune with it. I'm not sure like, look, it's like everything we come in to our job. But I'm not sure they are as in tune with it as maybe they should be. And I mean in the student services side. I don't about senior management as much at all, if they are in tune either really. Because if they were probably would be adapted across all faculties and even though I know you presented Owen to our faculty and people want to do it. It kind of doesn't fit into the calendar. We are doing it ad hoc, there's bits and pieces of it being adopted. But if he actually adopted the full model, I think you'd have much higher success rates; you know.

ADMINISTRATOR A: I think we only look at this or management only looks at this from a monetary point of view. How many can claim? I don't think they're looking at from a student's point of view. You look at it at the end of the year at senior management and say, oh, that's very bad that you have this number of failing or whatever, and the same when you're trying to withdraw people. But I don't think it's built into the curriculum, it's not built into the student experience from a management perspective.

ADMINISTRATOR C: I do think our new registrar has a different view of it. I mean, when we're in the boards and someone's gone, she's really keen that they come off that broadsheet early on. So maybe there's an appetite or an opportunity now to gel it. We have new people in lots of the roles.

ADMINISTRATOR A: I suppose looking at it at that time of the year is too late.

ADMINISTRATOR C: It's too late. But I'm just saying…at least then…even still then, it's not too late to take them off. Whereas really you need to be doing it so much earlier exactly. But it's the appetite to do it, I suppose, is the first thing.

ADMINISTRATOR A: Like if you have to withdraw like we said earlier, if you have to wait for students fill up that form to officially withdraw somebody, even though the lecturer well tell you he has gone at the end of then there is no appetite then if they won't be withdrawn based on our say-so.

Okay, and my final question is the broadest one possible in that. In advance of this morning and in relation to first your provision in particularly the Department of Business and Management. Was there anything that you would have expected to have talked about that we haven't spoken about? Or is there anything else that you would like to add before we formally conclude?

ADMINISTRATOR A: I think we covered most of what I expected we'd be covering.

Okay, so, with your permission, I will turn off both recordings.

End.

Appendix O: SGG1 Focus Group Transcript

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this focus group this evening, and the first question I would like to pose to you is how would you describe your first-year experience in Athlone IT and the Department of Business and Management?

FORMER STUDENT C: I would say, welcoming to start off with. I don't know if everyone would feel the same. I'd say a very good introduction to begin with.

FORMER STUDENT D: I would say exactly the same like within a few weeks being in AIT, I felt like I've been that for years. I really didn't expect to get the level of welcoming and just general kind of…the culture was very open, so you just turned up and I felt like I'd been an AIT student for a long time.

FORMER STUDENT A: I was the exact same absolutely loved it. I felt at home straightaway. The one thing I notice it went in straightaway, is that everyone calls each other by first name, which was very friendly and welcoming as well. So, I felt at home literally from the very beginning, absolutely loved it, very welcoming as well.

In your opinion, what was the most challenging aspect of first year in college for you?

FORMER STUDENT E: Not knowing people in your class, completely different, different set up versus school. You got put in a seat. You didn't get the pick who you sat beside or in college. It was down to yourself to make your own friends. Definitely challenging. And being in the same building, probably a couple of thousand people versus a few hundred.

FORMER STUDENT D: For me, it was the finance side of things. I was expected to get Susi straight away, and I didn't get it for several months, and so, trying to find ways of paying for the first few months of college without having a job was really difficult. So, for me, the finance side of things was much tougher.

FORMER STUDENT F: I got cut off, so I don't know if I missed out on the first part. Sorry. I agree with what everyone is saying; I think the introduction was fantastic and there was a lot of support, especially for lower-income families or anything like that, you know. Everything was quite laid out in the college of supports available. And that definitely supported me in my first year as well, so I would agree.

FORMER STUDENT A: The thing that I found hard was when I started was trying to find the rooms. Because everything was lettered and then there was a number after it as well, and it was hard finding where the C block was, or the B block was, and then having to find the number on top of that as well. So, for me, I think, finding where I was meant to go and behind time was the hardest part for me in the very beginning.

FORMER STUDENT C: I would even say in final year, I still struggle.

FORMER STUDENT A: Definitely.

FORMER STUDENT B: I find one thing, probably the main thing that I struggle with in first Year is just going from working full time, well going from being in school to working full time. I took a year out before going to college. And then going back to trying to study and work as well, at the weekends and things like that. Just kind of trying to find the time to do assignments and at the weekend, or in the evening when you might be working like I thought was a struggle, but they got there in the end.

FORMER STUDENT A: And actually, just another thing that I found difficult at the very beginning was trying to figure out how to reference documents or reference reports or any sort of assignments that we had to upload. And just trying to figure out how, what the difference between each of the references meant or how to do them properly. I think that was another struggle that I had in the very beginning, thinking back.

FORMER STUDENT C: I'd really agree with Megan there on that and just going from like leaving cert doing everything on paper to then having a computer and doing everything on the computer was a huge jump for me. I wouldn't have been very tech savvy going in as a first year.

Anyone wants more coming on a challenging aspect or willing move on? What was the best part of being a first-year student?

FORMER STUDENT F: I suppose the new personalities, I came straight from school, so you have you know your friends that you've been friends with for the last five years, and then you have this diverse group of people with similar or dissimilar interests, and you know you work together on group projects. There are funny introductions, ice breakers, things like that. I suppose, like just the integration of that and learning something new.

FORMER STUDENT B: I think the freedom as well that you get, like from going from school to college like not having to put up your hand to ask a question or even just getting up and walking out if you need to take phone calls or go to the toilet or anything like that it is a big step up. Just it felt very different, but like it was great, it was just nice to know that, like you're there for yourself, you're not really there because you're being forced to be like you're there because you made yourself go.

FORMER STUDENT A: I definitely agree with that, as well, and it's very hard to pick one or two things I loved about AIT, absolutely loved it. I think getting to meet loads of new people was a big thing because I think everyone coming from leaving cert, because everyone was studying they didn't mix as much in sixth year, so it was nice go into first year in college and meet new people. Get to know them as well from all around the country, which I thought was really nice. And then just having the freedom like you mentioned already having the freedom to have your own schedule. And then being able to plan your own day. You could go to the canteen and again meet other people, or maybe go student union and have a fun event to go to and then, at the same time, an hour later, you could be in class. So, it was very different, yeah, brilliant.

FORMER STUDENT F: I think, as well, the smaller class sizes for me were definitely a bonus. It definitely allowed me in first year to gain confidence with you know speaking out if I was unsure of a subject, or you know, if I knew I was going to fail an exam you know or something like that I knew I could just actually speak to my lecturer. Or they would see that I wasn't engaged within the class. Where it was probably more similar school like that, but I do know from friends that

have gone to the bigger colleges were they are in a lecture hall, full of 300 people or however many does be in them, that you just don't get that same attention or tutorials or anything like that to help each towards the goal of getting the degree. So, I did find good as well in first year.

FORMER STUDENT D: Exactly the same like for me, I had…there was a learning aspect that I really enjoyed as well as finally studying something that was quite passionate about. And I knew going into it that I would enjoy it, but I didn't quite realize how much I'd enjoy learning everything that we learned on the course. So that would be on top of what everybody else has said. The learning aspect was brilliant learning new things, and just the way that we learnt, it was brilliant.

Okay, and in advance of the focus group, I shared a copy of the student success model that was developed over a number of years. To what extent were you familiar with the actions of the model? And was there any aspect of the first year and any aspect of the model that you feel had a positive impact in first year on either you or your classmates?

FORMER STUDENT D: I wouldn't say necessarily just just first year, that I could see a lot of the outcomes follow the four years that I was in AIT. So, when I was reading that I was reading that was quite taken aback at how much planning it clearly gone in behind the scenes that I have no idea that it was happening. But it is specifically to first year. I don't need just kind of add as the Olivia said, like just being able to approach the lecturers at any point if you're stuck on something. I remember when I was in first year one of the nights before one of my Christmas exams. I had got one of my lecturer's numbers beforehand and I rang her up because I was paranoid; I was going to fail the exam. And I wanted to ask like what the story was with the marking system of like the continuous assessment. This was a call at like nine o'clock at night, and she took it and and she didn't mind it at all. So just I really felt that the level of support from the lecturers in first year was something else that I could approach them about anything, regardless of whether it was about the course or not, they were always helpful.

Thank you.

FORMER STUDENT A: Kind of the same I recognize them, as I was reading through them, but didn't realize that they were already set in the background. I didn't realize that it was already laid out for us or planned out, that I just thought they naturally happened, which they did. But I didn't realize there was a structure in the background, as well, which was it was very good to know, good to see.

Okay, anyone else, want to come in before we move on? Okay, within that model there's a large number of actions or interventions and were there any of those actions or interventions in your opinion, that would have had a negative effect on either you are your classmates to your knowledge?

FORMER STUDENT C: I'm just having a look at the model again.

FORMER STUDENT F: I think maybe I was never affected by it, but the point on teaching innovation and teaching techniques. I think if a lecturer did not upskill on that constantly, which I feel like a lot did in AIT, I have no complaints in that front. But if they read off the same

presentation they did for years, or anything like that, it can it can find…well, sometimes it may have happened. But they you disengage within the class. So, teaching techniques, I think it's definitely very important for students and lecturers as well to have more engagement and kind of an understanding of the subjects. Because everyone learns in a different way, some are crammers, some are slow and steady or some are visual learners, some like to draw things out and draw diagrams out. But I think that point maybe of how they teach is has a great impact on the student.

FORMER STUDENT C: I definitely found as well, like, I agree with that. The teaching styles of like a lecturer were to read off the slides or if the lecturer was just read off the slides but also give it to their own work experience and apply it in that way. That would be kind of a more engaging class than it would be if there was like…I found definitely the smaller classes were more engaging. So even from a first-year perspective, if the smaller the classes nearly the more engaged the students would nearly be.

FORMER STUDENT F: Because you can't look down at your phone!

And the model itself had three foundation blocks, which was that there was an underlying principle that we had that it took four years for you all to become fully independent learners as opposed to one day. And that the other two foundation blocks were that we very much at a team-based approach. And that it was management, led and driven. I suppose my question to you would any of that have been remotely apparent to you when you were in first year?

FORMER STUDENT D: Definitely the teamwork side of things. By team working, you mean like the group projects that we would have done.

No, actually it's teamwork from a staff perspective that we were working together with a view to the first year, providing the first-year experience.

FORMER STUDENT C: I remember first year, when I was in first year business psychology, all the lectures and all the different years of business psychology met for coffee morning. That was really, really good and helpful. It's how I met some of the people and I'm connected with them still, who did the course in the years above, so that was really good.

FORMER STUDENT A: I can't remember having events like that, with all the lecturers like there could have been, but I don't remember having one. But it sounds like something that would have been good to have. I remember, we spoke to the lecturers that we had and we got to meet the remaining lecturers that maybe…say my friends did another module and we got to meet them all, eventually. But I don't think there was a day where we all met in one.

FORMER STUDENT F: No, I don't I didn't have one of those either. But I do. I think it was touched on earlier on. Once you know kind of a personal on the side of a lecturer or you heard where they may have worked years ago, and how they got to where they are now. It adds a personal element to it, and definitely makes them more likable, should I say. Or like it makes you definitely more engaged again, so I agree that an event like that would be really good. Because you know when you come from school as well, you automatically have a thing like oh my God my teacher like I can't speak out and you know. Because in school like you have to put your

hand up to go to the toilet or anything like that. So, to kind of make it more personable would have been definitely less scary for first year, obviously by fourth you know that's not the case.

Okay, anyone else want to come in at this point on it? No, okay. And the model is made up of seven pillars and what I wanted to do is, I want to go down through the seven pillars and I'll briefly explain the actions and interventions that were associated with them. And after we go through each pillar, I'd invite you to comment on them based on either your own experience or experience that you were aware that your classmates might have had. So, the first thing was the habit-forming pillar. And the elements of this were that many of you would have got your first assignment either at induction or in your first LDHE class. And in the first semester, in particular, there would have been assessments regular and often. And for students who would have done poorly in some of these early assessments, there would have been an early intervention, which would usually have been that the student would have been flagged and a meeting would have been set up very early on with the head of department. They are the three actions of interventions associated with it. Would any of you have any comments that you'd like to make on that pillar?

FORMER STUDENT F: I never seen that as an intervention, if someone was struggling with learning at the start. I think when I came in; I did not know how to structure to study for an assessment or do an assignment. I didn't really know how to structure either. So, I remember after not doing that well in my first assessment, because I studied the entirety of what we'd studied up to a point, instead of just what the assessment was on. And then an assignment. I completely waffled - way too much. And there was a comment made, and I reassessed it. And it was fine. I did well in that. But I remember the assessment, learning from that myself. But there was never an intervention to stop. Because I think it's hard to monitor that, it's hard to know if someone is struggling, if they don't say.

FORMER STUDENT C: I think in first year, it was always made, well for me I remember in LDHE very clear how to do well. And, and then there was always opportunity to put in a draft and then feedback on that, and then you know you'd feel better than submitting your final one. And you learn it.

FORMER STUDENT A: With the LDHE, I think that was a very good module to have because you were looking forward to that every week. I think we had it two or three times a week, so you were looking forward to that class, then so that you could ask questions on what is the proper way to reference documents, I know I said already, but that's what I experienced in the very beginning. I think between say me and my classmates, we kind of bounced off each other and then figured it out eventually, we asked the lecturers to. But when you don't know them in the very beginning, you don't know whether to go up and approach them in the canteen because you don't know them yet. Or if they even remember you that are in your class at the very beginning. So, it's kind of, you knew that the LDHE class was nearly a place to ask the questions and that was the right time to ask them. I think I think to answer the question, sorry I don't even know if I'm answering the question! I think that was the best example of when kind of students went to lecturers, but I don't remember seeing that as an intervention coming in to anybody.

Thank you.

FORMER STUDENT B: I think it would be a good opportunity anyway, like that I wouldn't have had that experience either of there being any intervention. But I suppose you're kind of getting set up from the get go when you're getting an assignment on day one. Like I remember, I think we were only maybe 10 or 15 minutes into class and we got our first assignment, because I remember leaving the class going. What's that? But it was good, because I suppose it just kind of throws you in straight away. And then you kind of know well okay, well, I have to actually apply myself from day one. I suppose, given that given that you're being put in that position from day one, I suppose it just gives the opportunity to get that feedback from the start, rather than kind of getting maybe three or four weeks down the line, you get your first assignment then, and then you don't know where you are like.

FORMER STUDENT D: I'll jump in. Our class is relatively close to one another and I don't ever remember that happening with any of us. It sounds like a great idea. I think it would have worked with all of us. But definitely I don't have any experience with that in our class.

Okay, anyone else, want to come in.

FORMER STUDENT C: I think just from personal experience, like I wouldn't say I had an intervention, but I did quite badly on a computer exam in first year, I think I failed it. And the lecturer, like okay, you just have to step up your game for this next one to pass this part of the module. And then in that way she would not really intervene, but like put extra kind of attention on how I was getting on then ahead of the next exam because they had to do quite well to pass. So, wouldn't say it was a major intervention, but definitely kept an extra eye on me and that was good.

FORMER STUDENT F: I actually used to miss a certain morning class on Thursday morning for taxation. And one of the lecturers made a comment one day, slagging me. And I was so embarrassed, so I didn't miss many. So, you can call that an intervention. But it worked sometimes, not all of the mornings, but some of the mornings it worked.

Okay, thank you. The next pillar was the student esteem pillar, in that, and there was the structured induction. There was a lunch for high achievers and there was also briefing sessions for students who failed modules. Would any of you have attended any of those events or would you have any knowledge of your classmates who did and would you have any opinion on them?

FORMER STUDENT B: I thought they were brilliant. I really did. I had experience with it as well as a good few of my classmates, particularly the lunch. And I remember at the end of every kind of summer I was like, yeah, I hope I get first just so I can go to the lunch; I know it's a weird thing. But I distinctly remember thinking that when I was reading the thing yesterday. So that's my two cents on that.

FORMER STUDENT B: Yeah, we were the same. As soon as we hear, there was a reward for higher achievers, we were like definitely. You kind of apply yourself. That's it more just, oh there might be something out of this.

FORMER STUDENT F: When did this come in? It wasn't there when I was there! I agree with the lunch for high achievers. I got a first one year, but anyway it probably wasn't there. I'm definitely

older - an oldie! I think that's a really good idea, and as long as you know I think if someone gets a one one, it clearly distinguishes that you are a high achiever. But as long as that is kind of communicated correctly, so that no one else feels like they're left out. And then, similarly with a chat of someone failing, is it to scold them? Or is it to you know, give them a kind of map of how to get off from that point or how to support them? But I have had friends who have had those chats, and from my knowledge, they've always been positive. And they've kind of given them a guideline of how to, you know, get out of the cycle of failing the exams are not turning off for them, or something like that.

FORMER STUDENT A: I agree as well, the lunch was brilliant because I got an invitation in the post and I was absolutely delighted with myself! I know that sounds really silly, but I was absolutely delighted opening it up and then getting to go to the lunch as well. It was nice to attend the lunch because when you're in college, you only really mix with the lecturers, whereas the lunch he got to mix with even the people who are higher up, I think Owen yourself you were there that day as well. But there were a lot of people in the lunch that you could talk to that you mightn't get a chance to talk to before. So, I thought that was nice as well, because it kind of, it makes everyone then kind of get to know everybody, so I like that part of it.

FORMER STUDENT C: I definitely agree with that, like I wouldn't have known the Head or like any other higher up people. But when you went up, and you got your certificate or whatever at the lunch, you would have like, you met them for really the first time, when really we probably should be meeting them before that. But just to touch on like the two different like those who went to the lunch and then someone who like failed. I kind of felt like it was a pity to just put them into distinct groups. Like maybe the people who were doing well could help the people, there could be a combined thing. Where, like the people who did well, could be combined with those who passed and help others in your course. As opposed to the two distinct groups, that's how I felt on that.

FORMER STUDENT A: I actually agree with that part as well. Because I remember every year, the people who wanted it attended that talk had to leave in the middle of a class that we had to go. So, everybody knew who they were. And I remember that some of the people on my course actually didn't go to the class, because they didn't want people to know they were attending the talk after. So, and I thought that was kind of not the best thing, having it at a time the classes are on. But I know that can't suit everybody, but that was just something that I remember.

Thank you, and the student experience pillar, so that would have been a team building event, the incorporation of guest speakers into first year and field trips. Did any of you have any positive experiences in those regards or would you have any comments on that pillar?

FORMER STUDENT E: Guest speakers are definitely good because they are people that have founded businesses. We done…the majority of us done business degrees, career paths we want to follow. I remember Channel McCoy was in. She just kept getting pushed back, pushed back, pushed back and she just kept fighting, fighting, fighting. And eventually, one of the biggest pharmaceutical, probably the biggest indigenous pharmaceutical company in Ireland. Definitely great to hear her story and other people like her that know everything about business, telling us how our degree would matter and everything like that.

FORMER STUDENT F: I actually didn't have much of that. And I think it would kind of…you had no idea what you wanted to do after college. I was definitely one of those because you didn't get to kind of speak to people in different industries. And that would have definitely kind of led your thought process towards a certain type of company. Whereas I leveraged off my lecturers to kind of see where they thought I might be suited. But I don't think I went on a field trip in college either. But I know work experience was brought in, or that you would spend a couple months of your degree working in a business and that wasn't there when I was there. But I definitely would see the benefit of that. So, I don't know if that if that helps.

FORMER STUDENT A: I'm the same. I can't remember any guest speakers. I know the lecturers themselves talked through their own history of their own story of how they got to where they were. I don't remember having any guest speakers in unless there was an event. Or actually sorry, I just remembered one. There was a man who came in, in one of our banking modules. And he was giving a talk on how you save properly and the best way to kind of manage what you earn, what you have. And I think that's the only guest speaker I remember having and I don't think I went on any field trips as part of my course.

FORMER STUDENT D: I remember doing all three, to be honest. But they were all great experiences. We had we had two different versions of like the field trip and meeting up. I think Kerry had mentioned earlier on. At the beginning of each year, we'd have a meet and greet of all the other business psychology students and any lecturers that were involved at the time. And then we also went on a trip to Arigna mines, which was awesome. For me, I remember thinking this is mental, but actually it was amazing; it was it was a really good experience to kind of get to know everybody a bit better. But to see a kind of like a different side to everyone, as well it's very cool. And then the third thing I can't remember, it was all the guest speakers. We had quite a few guest speakers to be fair. Usually they were friends or contacts that the lecturers had had. But they were brilliant, as everybody had kind of said to see inside of a field that we might not normally have had exposure to. It was great to see a different angle of careers and things that we might go down the path of.

FORMER STUDENT C: I think the guest speakers as well, really influenced like what you might like to do in the future, and like almost like to encourage like more of them to happen. I think a lot for our course was personal contacts through our lecturers, but like imagine how many contacts everyone in the college could have and what everyone could hear in the business faculty.

Anyone else want to come in on the student experience better? Okay, so the next pillar is the role of the academic staff, and that would be the lecturers. And part of it was that there was a deployment of key staff into first year. Lecturers giving feedback to students, teamwork between the lecturers, innovation and teaching. The learning and development for higher education community of practice. That many lecturers under took teaching and learning qualifications. How important do you think a pillar that was and how important were the lecturers to your first-year experience?

FORMER STUDENT B: I think the collaboration between lecturers for us, anyway, was great because you could tell that they were, not that you could tell, we knew that they were working with each other, even from setting assignments that you know generally we'd have, we'd be asked have you many assignments on say x week. Now they might come to us and ask us. But

they might also discuss it with each other and it might have actually been second year. I could be wrong. But I know we had a couple of modules that kind of interacted, so they were kind of similar. It might have been first year i'm not really sure. But basically, there was kind of, they linked in and set, you know, joint assignments, rather than having two similar assignments happening side by side. I think that that way it was just good to see that, like the lecturers working together in that sense, just to make it a better experience for us. And to make it a bit of an easier experience rather than having to repeat work like.

FORMER STUDENT C: I remember for LDHE we had to do a presentation, and they were teaching us like Prezi. I don't have any of you did that? But we had a marketing module alongside that, and we had to do a presentation in that. So as opposed to do in two different presentations, we have to use like Prezi in our marketing presentation and then we're scored. We had one assignment, as opposed to two. But they're kind of combined, so that was good.

FORMER STUDENT A: I think it's a very important pillar. I have a similar experience as well, where the lecturers you could tell were communicating between each other. Because they always knew what other like assignments, we had and other projects in other modules and they always overlapped a little bit as well. So, if we were doing a topic in one lecture they'd say oh there's a few tips of what you can put into your project if you're doing that for this lecturer. And they always gave kind of hints and tips and pointers of what would be good to add in and kind of the most important things to focus on. Which I always thought was nice as well, because they were all helping us, but helping everyone at the same time.

FORMER STUDENT F: I definitely found for some of the accounting modules there was a lot of support during times of exams or when, especially in our first two years anyway of learning how to do it, there was a lot tutor support. And that that for myself maintained throughout my four years. So yeah, that was definitely helpful. I think they realized that students' kind of struggle more on the accounting side. And for that I actually then went on to do the bachelor's in accounting, because of that support. So that was definitely a positive thing with them intertwining kind of - the two.

Okay, anyone else, want to come in before we go on?

FORMER STUDENT D: I just wanted to mention about the feedback, because with a lot of our lecturers, that was a core thing. We do like a first draft of as an assignment and then they would give us feedback on that. That was a massive part of first year. I felt that they were always willing to kind of go over something a few times to make sure that we absolutely had it. And even there was a few times with the whole referencing side of things that several of us are a bit weak at that. And so, you could tell that several of them of lecturers had spoken to one another in that one of them would teach it this way, and then we might have another class then on how to reference. But it was taught a slightly different way, but eventually it kind of stuck and worked for us, but that was that was a good on as well.

FORMER STUDENT F: I told you about Neil's toolbox, I don't know…that's what I used.

FORMER STUDENT C: Never heard of that.

FORMER STUDENT A: Me neither.

FORMER STUDENT F: It's still there. Look it up. Saves me a lot of time.

FORMER STUDENT A: I agree with the feedback prior to I always got feedback and everything I always did, which was brilliant. And there was one lecturer I had. Now this wasn't in first year, this was towards the end. But there was one lecturer that we had he used to always say to us, do a draft, give it to me, I'll correct it, do a second draft. And you could have 8 drafts before you have it submitted properly and within the deadline. But it was brilliant because you're constantly getting feedback of how to do it properly. And then, when it comes to the next project, you remember all the tips from last time, so you know how to do it right, this time. So, I thought that was always good, because that was a help as well.

FORMER STUDENT C: Especially as a first year, because the first time you do something you think Oh, this is great, I have my lovely assignment on a lovely word document, and then you go and submit it and get like 40% and then you're like what! And then you resubmit it and it really pushes you like, you'd be kind of annoyed, at the first, like when you get your feedback initially. I remember getting it back and being like, how did I get so low? So, I actually went to one of the lecturer's offices and was like what happened here like? And he was really good with feedback and stuff and I really just put my head down and for the week before the assignment and the grade went up significantly, so that was really good. And it's stuff he said, and I learned from there, apply it, stuck with me for other things in my final year and stuff.

Okay, thanks everyone. The next pillar is the programme design pillar. Included in that would have been graduate attributes. A clear assessment strategy and a calendar of assessments and also some learning analytics. Would you have been aware of things like graduate attributes and would you have had? Would you have been given a programme level, a calendar of assessments every year, and knowledge of what the assessment strategy was?

FORMER STUDENT F: No. I don't think I had that I, we had some sort of idea on dates, but definitely not a breakdown, not in first year, maybe towards the end there was bit more of a breakdown. But that definitely would have helped towards kind of knowing how to structure your studying, because when the exam season kicks in and you're sitting in the library, you sit there yourself and go: what way am I going to do this; you know. So, it will be, like that is a good idea to kind of structure that so that student knows, at least, like the onus is on them.

FORMER STUDENT D: I think it's done quite subtlety, I can see elements of it, but we weren't told explicitly. This is what your assessment is trying to achieve, and this is when you'll be doing in yada yada. You'd be given dates at certain points, but not in the form of a calendar. As the years went on, particularly in fourth year, it was made a lot more clear why we had done specific things throughout the course and that they taught us to behave in or do things in a specific way, but not in first year.

FORMER STUDENT A: I wasn't aware that there were graduate attributes in what we were doing. I wasn't aware of that part. But I was given a booklet at the start of every year of every individual module. And within the booklet it had the layout of the topics that were going to be covered. And then there was a list of books that you can reference or look back on to get points from. So, there's a list of those as well. And then there was a course breakdown, I think, was included it as well just what the objectives of the module were and what the outcomes that you

should know when you've finished the module. I think it was a three or four-page booklet that we got.

Course manual, we called it.

FORMER STUDENT A: Yes, the course manual, that's the one.

FORMER STUDENT B: We would have got the same, and like that, so say, for example, if there are two assessments or two interim assessments to be done, you'd have the breakdown of a 5 and 15% or whatever. But I think it depended then on the lecturer, like some of them would say from day one kind of say, okay well we'll try to aim to have this one in week five and the next one in week eight or nine, you know. But it did depend. Sometimes it was just kind of you are told on maybe week three that you have an assessment next week, you know. But like I suppose knowing, having that booklet and having the breakdown of when or not sorry not when, but that's what's there like, we kind of knew in advance that they were coming. It wasn't like a surprise; it was just kind of a case of finding out when?

Okay, anything else on the programme design pillar?

FORMER STUDENT C: I remember getting the learning outcomes of some modules and then, like the required readings and stuff and I think, as a first year, they kind of just went over my head a lot. But then I think as the final year or your third year, as you got older, they became, they stuck with you more; you paid more attention to them. I don't know about you, but I found with some of the learning outcomes, at the end of the module at the end of the teaching period, the lecturer would go through, and say this will be very, very important, and this will not be as important. Trying to give key hints, they kind of refer back. So it, I wouldn't say it was referenced throughout the whole module but definitely at the start, and then, when your exam season is coming up, it would have referenced.

FORMER STUDENT F: I think as well, it's such a good idea to not tell people what they're going to be examined on, but to give that indication, I think. Any of the modules that I did with a lecturer basically told you what was coming up or definitely what to focus on or what exam papers to focus on. A lot of the times, if they gave you five exact exam papers, you end up covering most of the course, anyway. But it made you more excited about studying for that exam because you're like if I do these I'm going to you know I'm going to pass the exam. And then you ended up covering every material, anyway.

FORMER STUDENT C: I definitely think as well as more focused learning, knowing what like is really important here, instead of waste learning. If you've really focused on the learning, I'll think about some of the modules where the learning was quite focused now, and I'll remember those key bits and those key questions that kept coming up, coming up. And then there was like some learning outcomes of modules which were never examined, or like never and you just kind of forget about them. I wouldn't say wasted learning material, because you do still remember it. But definitely to carry on as a graduate now, like the key learning material was really good.

FORMER STUDENT A: Would the subject choices fall under this category?

As in the elective choices?

Yes.

I mean, on the programme design is would yeah. But I mean the elective choices were always there and wouldn't really have changed or evolved much over the period.

FORMER STUDENT A: I was just going to say that getting a chance to do all of those individual subjects was good, so that you a flavour of what it was going to be before you chose. And that all I want to say, I wasn't sure.

Perfect, no everything can be put on the table. Okay, so the final pillar, then, is, and it's quite a lengthy pillar, is the student supports pillar. Again, you might not be familiar with all of these actions or interventions. The first one was the AIT connect, which was a central kind of seven-week induction programme run by student services. The student tutors who would have been Brendan McCLarney in accounting and Joe Keogh was the maths tutor. There were the interviews with the head of department. So, for a student who would have failed modules either a Christmas or later on in June, they got a one-to-one meeting with the head of department. The pass system which I don't know if you were familiar with peer support. It's where a student from second year would act as a support to first years. And there was a parents' evening for parents of first-year students. Use of motivational techniques, the HOD emeritus, which was when Peter Melinn retired from lecturing and became a student advisor or retention figure. The open-door policy, which again speaks for itself. And the entire student services department. So, it's quite it's quite a considerable pillar. Would you have been familiar with elements of that pillar and, by all means, if you need to open the model in front of you, please do. Would he have been familiar with elements of this particular pillar? And would you have any perspective on it, either from your own view or from your recollection of those of your classmates?

FORMER STUDENT F: I absolutely got so much support from Peter, he was a fantastic, one of the best resources, probably in my time studying he was just so funny. He didn't take teaching so seriously, but it was one of the highest marks I got. I think within the college definitely up there any way due to him, his way of teaching was fantastic. And his support was also great. He always had a student's back and he always definitely looked for a solution, even in your personal circumstances, to kind of help you through. So like someone like him is an absolute must I think for students and to know that someone like that is there to kind of guide you through. College is hard sometimes, and you know as a student you have things going on at home as well. Like to have some there, an advocate to kind of help you manage your studies and what you need to do is always good. And coming from a lecturing background, so I found him fantastic.

FORMER STUDENT D: I didn't have any direct experience with a lot of this. But I remember a lot of classmates telling me that they were using some of these resources, and it really, really helped them, particularly with more maths orientated subjects.

FORMER STUDENT A: I wouldn't be familiar with it myself, and I think the parents' meeting in first year, I remember that. But the rest I heard through friends and who attended some of the supports. And I remember seeing them on the notice boards as well around the College. And there was a room of computers as well, besides the bathrooms I remember. I was walking past it and seeing people always in there, when I was going by. So, I remember seeing them and

hearing about them. There is actually some on the list that I wasn't even aware of being honest. But yeah, I recognize most of them.

FORMER STUDENT B: I wouldn't recall ever hearing of a lot of them, to be honest. But that the PASS module is the criticism that I would have, like most of our class, didn't find it useful at all. I don't know; it wasn't very engaging, I think; I suppose it depends on the way it was run. Because a lot of the, well from day one, we were told, this is not compulsory. You don't have to be here. So, the next class, naturally enough, there was only about five of us. So, I suppose that was probably wasn't the best incentive. I say, maybe, maybe not to necessarily make it compulsory but not make it known from the get go that you don't have to be here, because people are going to take that you know free hour to do whatever. Because then, as a result of the smaller class sizes, a lot of us just kind of ended, sure look, we can't really do much here. We don't have many questions for sure if you want to just kind of crack on with your work or go to the library or do whatever you want so. Yeah, that probably is one criticism I'd have. But aside from not the rest of the supports sound really good, but I wouldn't have much experience with them.

FORMER STUDENT F: I just thought within my time anyway, there were definitely a lot of supports there. I think a lot of people didn't take them as well, because they're like as sure it will be grand. So definitely I think an emphasis on how they can benefit the students, maybe even a presentation at the start of first year to kind of let students know. And because a lot of the time when I always availed of any support, educationally definitely to get on. But I know a lot of my friends, I don't need that, it's fine, I'm not failing. And they kind of association of people struggling. Whereas I think if it's known from the start that it's just to enable you further would be more than an incentive.

FORMER STUDENT C: The only one I kind of remembered was hearing of the tutors and, like that for maths, like Lawrence and Olivia already said. I heard of people using the tutors for maths particularly. But I didn't really hear any of the others. I think, maybe Dayna was saying there earlier, there's one class and first year, I think that was not compulsory and I can't even remember it because I definitely didn't go, and it was probably one of these supports.

FORMER STUDENT F: I know we used to have a class to meet with past students or not past students, sorry, second years. I think that's what you mean, yeah…I never went either because they didn't want to be there as much as you didn't sometimes.

FORMER STUDENT B: I think everybody could tell that because it was like, guys, you don't have to be here, by the way, like and we were all kind of like right.

FORMER STUDENT F: You'd have found me at the coffee dock!

FORMER STUDENT C: I suppose if it was made like it was it was integrated into people's class times, people would engage with it more, like what Oliva said there, if there was a presentation of, like if we understood what the college we're trying to do to us back here, maybe we would have taken it more on board. But as a first year, you know there's so much other things going on; you don't, really.

Can I ask just a couple of probing questions around it? Did any of you have family members who would have attended any of the parents' evenings and would you have got any feedback from them?

FORMER STUDENT F: No.

FORMER STUDENT B: Can't remember.

FORMER STUDENT A: Yeah, my parents went to the parents' evening in first year. I can't actually remember I think, oh, I remember, there was a presentation, I think it was in the culinary arts block. I remember going upstairs and showing my parents, showing them around and they were really impressed with the College. And then we went up to the room, and they actually got to meet my college friends, then as well. Which is kind of similar to secondary school, which was nice to bring into college, got to meet them. I remember at the end there was a big slide of the potential companies that you could work for it. And I remember coming out if it and mam and dad were like, look at all those different places, you could end up at the end. I remember that it was it was a nice evening. I remember it spoke through the whole entire what the course was going to be and the amount of different modules there was going to be that you had lots of choices as well. Because, I did the bachelor of business, so we had…it wasn't specific to accounting or to marketing or sales. So, it was a good informative evening that you got to see what you're going to get today and experienced everything.

Thank you and did you find that, I mean was the open-door policy, was that an accurate description of your time spent in the department? Did you feel that doors were open to you?

FORMER STUDENT B: Yeah, definitely.

FORMER STUDENT C: Definitely.

I'm getting a sense for me that you all are nodding your heads and agreeing with that. Would I be right on that?

Yeah.

FORMER STUDENT D: Even with you as well, Owen, I remember coming to you and people above lecturers as such, with issues that we might have had with either lecturers or the scheduling of certain classes and things like that. And the door was always open with you guys as well, so it wasn't just with lecturers.

FORMER STUDENT C: I think that's unlike a lot of other colleges. I don't know if you've heard other people.

FORMER STUDENT A: Yeah. Yes, also felt that there was never a problem for you, never like a nuisance or never in the way. I never felt like you're kind of bothering anybody. It was a nice environment that you just felt you could go to anybody about anything with what I feel was good.

FORMER STUDENT C: And no one really got left behind. Because I remember as a first there was one girl who just wasn't coming in at all, or whatever, and the lecturer would reach out to her frequently and we would all reach out. So, it was everyone was making an effort. Whereas in a much bigger college and a bigger class size like that person could have just easily got lost like.

And the only other one, I want to cover and is the student interviews with the head of department who students who might have failed modules. Were any of you familiar with any students who attended those meetings, are if you attended them yourself, would you have any comments on them?

FORMER STUDENT E: I personally attended it. Definitely it puts you in the right direction. You were told, when the work you had to put in, if you wanted to perform, you were kind of told what you put into it is what you're going to get out of it. So, it was definitely an eye opener they could have just let it be, say nothing. And left doing your own thing, you might not be as motivated. But at least you're kind of put in the right direction. And then, as well you're told, if you have problems you're told the person to go to, like tutor wise. So maybe if you have to do extra classes, do work, touch in with the lecturer, have work corrected even if it was over the summertime and you still needed help. So, it was definitely good help, put you in the right direction.

Anybody else.

FORMER STUDENT C: I just like to say, just outside business that faculty, the door was always open in departments like HR, the finance kind of side of things. It wasn't just the lectures and those in your department. I remember going to HR and interviewing the HR manager at the time for a project in which was in AIT, which was kind of cool like to have, that they were open to us visiting the HR department there. And then likewise people in the fees and when you're doing things over that side, you know, no door was never closed in your face when you reach out for help.

Okay. Thank you for that. So we're finished with the pillars. If I was to ask you to advise on how the first year experienced could be improved. What advice would you offer?

FORMER STUDENT E: I think there should be a lot more encouragement of this would be to your benefit than you don't have to be here, like this isn't mandatory for. But once students hear that it's kind of like, I don't have to be here, so. But they should probably sit you down for that first hour, make you do it, just say, this is why this would benefit you. The Pass, personally I didn't do it and it probably would have been better doing it, meeting people the year ahead of you. Their experience on how they did. So, things like that.

FORMER STUDENT C: I think definitely I agree with Jamie there, like throwing people into the deep end straightaway, when you come out of school or whatever you're not very, I wouldn't say a lot of us were very grown up in first year, if they were a bit lenient on whether you did the work or not, and that there was room to mess around and not really think about why you're doing this degree and where you are headed in the future. There was just no guidance there. If there was actual guidance for career wise and stuff from day one, that made us grow up a lot quicker than we did. Well, just from me personally, I think that definitely would be great for any first-year student.

FORMER STUDENT A: I was just going to say, maybe like an APP with a map in it. Or I think kind of more explanation at the very beginning when you start. Because I know that when I got my Christmas results, that's then when I figured out the grading system that was in colleges. I didn't actually realize when I started college because I'm the eldest. So, I didn't realize that everything you do counts and then your summer and your Christmas are combined. I didn't actually realize that until after Christmas. I suppose, maybe kind of more in the beginning, so that people know about it and then kind of kind of prepare for it. I think that's probably the only thing I can think of. Or maybe the day trips out, or more events to mix with your home class to get to know them all. Because, when you're meeting up, going to class, you're in class, so you don't get to chat to them and to get to know them much because you're learning. So, I suppose maybe, and like an event or maybe an hour or two in a week, just something that everyone could go to, to kind of mingle between each other.

FORMER STUDENT C: I think having graduates of the actual course we do in into speak to the class is a huge benefit as well. It's kind of inspiring to see, I remember we had a few the girls I don't know where they're from, a company in Athlone anyway. They're doing quite well. And they came in and that was really good. I don't know Lawrence, if you remember?

FORMER STUDENT D: Was it Teleflex?

FORMER STUDENT C: Yes, that was it.

FORMER STUDENT D: Funnily enough, I was desperate to work for Teleflex after watching that. I was like, these guys are amazing, right? And then my sister got a job with them! Her boyfriend got a job with them, who was actually on my business psychology course as well. And he's still working for today. It's crazy. I'm sure a huge portion of that was from that talk.

FORMER STUDENT C: That's actually one of grads…. like I don't know if you knew Shane Nugent, he was, I shouldn't probably be mentioning names here. He was the year above. But even meeting him that coffee morning, he helped me get my role now in the ESB. So like them, kind of connections are really, really important from a first year kind of…and throughout the college degree meeting graduates and people have finished. It can be quite inspiring for someone just studying this stuff.

Okay, thank you. Can I just ask a question regarding the administrative team in the faculty who would have been Siobhan, June and Anne for the overwhelming majority of you? Did you have any experience of and dealing with them and how would you describe that experience, if you did? You may not have.

FORMER STUDENT F: I did quite a bit. I know I worked alongside them for a year. But I thought they were so supportive with queries. Or sometimes like if you were scared to approach a lecturer, or you didn't know how to go about getting the likes of scripts. I know, like when started to apply for jobs, you know you needed your college scripts. No one tells you to keep those in and they come in the post. So yeah so, they were really supportive with any queries. I never felt ignored or anything like that, or fobbed off, you know.

FORMER STUDENT C: I had experiences during the summer with scripts. And it was funny that it was during the summer. I wasn't expecting to get a reply from that department, but they were very quick in getting back to me, and there was no issue, so no complaints.

Just a couple of very specific questions. When it came to the dropout rates first year. The drop off rate was significantly lower in business psychology than any other programme. Would you have any explanation or any anything that you want to offer as to why that might be the case?

FORMER STUDENT A: Yeah, there were, I think, eight or nine people in my course who dropped out before Christmas. Which is really high number, and most of them just picked a business course because they had to pick something for the CAO points. And I remember…I'm actually still talk to some of them. And they've ended up in completely different jobs other than business. I think that was the main reason and they just, because they weren't…because business wasn't for them. They weren't engaged from the very beginning and I think they thought it was more like school, rather than a fun enjoyment learning. Because I know myself, I was definitely on the right course because I love what I do. And I loved college. So, comparing someone who knows they're in the right place, compared to someone who's just there to be somewhere, I think that's probably what influenced them to leave.

So course selection would be kind of what you're saying?

FORMER STUDENT A: Well, yeah, that's from my experience from the people who were in my course. It was down to the…they liked subjects in secondary school. And because they liked them and secondary school, they thought they had an idea of what it would be like in college. And they put it down on their CAO just because they thought it'd be something they'd like and then that's why they selected them I think yeah.

FORMER STUDENT C: I think to decrease that rate as well. It would be like if somebody wasn't enjoying business, they completed the first year, and then they could move into a different kind of section. After having that kind of flexibility would probably decrease the rates there, but to speak on behalf of business psychology I would say, like we're all pretty much a family, there is…like we had the chats in a lot of the first 15 minutes of our lectures and people stayed on even after lectures to just talk about just with the lecturers about random things, like it could be nothing to do with course work. But it was it was a brilliant course.

FORMER STUDENT D: It was not great for the old keeping people first year. A few people dropped out. But I think for the vast majority of them, it was personal reasons it wasn't anything to do with the course that they picked the wrong course or anything like that.

FORMER STUDENT B: From our side of things as well, it was definitely course selection. Our course had a huge dropout rate. I think we started with around 21 or 22 and by the end, like by fourth year, I think there were only 13 of us left. And that was with two that had kind of repeated fourth year. So really there were only 11 of the original group left in the group. But from their own admission, it was all completely down to not taking the right subject. A lot of them came back to AIT to different degrees. But I think a lot of it from the law side of things like a lot of people thought, oh this is the law, this is great, this is like suits or something on telly. But when they started doing it in real life, there's all this case studies or case law to going back years, and years, and years, and all this stuff that you actually have to learn, that it's not just

getting up in the courtroom and talking. That's kind of where people realized, oh hang on, this is not for me. So yeah, I can definitely agree with Megan. It's definitely of course selection from my point of view, anyway.

FORMER STUDENT A: I think a way to reduce, I don't know this probably is completely off topic. But a way to reduce the dropout rate might be, I know in Sligo IT, they, if you. So the best way to explain it is they give you a certain timeframe of your course and then, if you don't think it's for you, you can swap into something else. But you can continue on. You don't have to start from scratch again next year. You continue on the year you're in. So, it might kind of encourage people to try something and then at least they know they have the security of not having to stick to it, if it's not for them, yeah.

FORMER STUDENT C: Or even like career guidance, or something in first year, if someone thinks they're in the wrong spot. I mean, it's a huge decision for someone, especially coming out of leaving cert. I mean, I don't know. I don't think people are given a lot of guidance in general, so it's only natural to have that dropout rate.

FORMER STUDENT F: I think as well, from my point of view, I was definitely one of those people who didn't know what they wanted to do in school. And then I chose the higher cert business, which was the two-year programme of business and that definitely was not as daunting as choosing a four-year programme. And then I was able to add on just a one-year level seven and then another one-year level 8 in accounting, so that really benefited me personally. And then what I didn't know was I actually started to work in accounting and absolutely hated it. But I loved studying it. So, I basically left to be an auditor and hated it and now I'm working in a very established company in kind of HR business operations with no HR degree. But everything that I had done this far had brought me to a point, so I think telling students that like if you are in a course that is not for you or you know if you do see it through, you are not going to be limited to working in an audit firm for the rest of your life. You can change, and there are decisions you can make within your career rather than college that can benefit you as well. I think not like putting the ceiling on it. Just because you're in business doesn't mean you to be a businesswoman or businessman the rest of your days.

FORMER STUDENT C: I think I really agree with what you said there Olivia, because there are so many people who just do a degree and they think have to stick in that field, and they don't. I think we were told if you stick with the three years of business psychology, but come out with level seven certificate. And anybody who is thinking maybe drop out, be like just stick with it and it for another few months because I get this qualification.

FORMER STUDENT F: 100%, and I've had friends that they wanted that… like when I joined AIT, it was an IT. but that was the benefit of going to an IT at the time, was that you could do the two years and add on as you went along. Whereas if you went to university, you had to four-year programme or three-year programme in business and my cousin dropped out from that because she said, I can't take this for four years. Whereas like you know, if she had the two years and I'm done. And if you hate it, then you can move on. And then usually people just stay because you make friends and relationships and you actually like I'm not that bad at this, you know, that I thought I was.

We're coming towards the end. I have just the final few questions here. Over the years, and particularly from kind of maybe 2016, 2017 on. The repeat performance of first years in the autumn exams them significantly improved. Would any of you have any insight as to why more students started passing in the autumn exams?

FORMER STUDENT F: I think one getting a fright from failing. The exams are coming close to failing. I think in college as well, the distraction of going out and like it's obviously the fun part of going to college and especially within your first year. But I don't think anyone tells you how hard it is to manage a lecture when you're hungover! Or studying for an exam and how important it is to find that balance without sounding like you're lecturing them or telling like an 18, 19-year-old, don't go out while you are in college! Of course go out, but here's how to manage it, or here's a past student how they managed it and how they had the kind of nightlife study balance. Because I never failed, an example, I did defer one, and I found that during the summer I did have just more time to focus and less distractions of like people asked me to go out or like you know things like that, you had more kind of focus time study. So, from my point of view, I definitely did better when I deferred that time.

FORMER STUDENT C: I think with autumn, you'd be like it's the start…you've just started a new semester, and you know when you start something new, you put your all into it, so that could explain why results were better then.

FORMER STUDENT A: I think people probably realized that they like what they're doing, especially if it's second, third, or fourth year. You're picking the electives that you know you've already tested and first year, and you know you like. So, I think because it's what you've chosen to do; you want to do well in it. So, I think that's it and, like you mentioned already, I think, setting yourself up well in the first semester leads yourself doing extremely well, then in second semester, I think it's a combination of both.

FORMER STUDENT F: Sorry, I took that up for them as repeat exams, sorry.

Yes, the autumn exams was part…of what the question was, so you are not wrong no.

The second last question I have is how do you feel the first year prepared you for the rest of your studies?

FORMER STUDENT F: I was just going to say that you know where you went wrong in first year. Like that I think the pillars of teaching was how to learn. They kick in at some point within first year and second year. I definitely leveraged what I did wrong. And also, you build up buddies in the library and you see the way they take notes. And what I found in first year was, if I seen someone do really well, I asked them how did you get 70% in that, and you know, once you swapped notes with peers and stuff like that, that's when I started to kind of learn how I learned. So, by second year, then you have a better grasp of what works for you and what doesn't.

FORMER STUDENT D: Yeah, first year for me with the proper foundation, it really gave us the tools and everything that we needed to make sure that we succeeded going forward.

FORMER STUDENT C: I think even second year as well, I was still building those foundations! I'm still not done, probably!

FORMER STUDENT A: I'm the same. I think first year was probably the stepping stone, and it was the way you figured everything out. And learned how to use the library or learned how to book a room. And kind of figured out what your routine is and what works for you. And I think first year is what then prepared me for a second year. Because I knew what it was doing when I went to the second year straightway then. You know, it was I wasn't kind of waiting to figure out then in second year, I kind of knew what I was doing and where I was going. So, I think it was a very helpful step in first year.

FORMER STUDENT B: I agree with that. We kind of like that in second year, everyone thought it was a massive step up in terms of the study and the workload and everything. But because we were already well equipped in knowing how to study and knowing what to do, and like that, having your structure already in place, it did make it a lot easier, so it was it was a good stepping stone.

FORMER STUDENT C: Yeah, definitely agree. After first year, everything was a huge stepping stone. You had the basics, but really second year was huge.

We've discussed quite a lot of your memories from the first year and I really appreciate it, because it is a long time for you all since then. Was there any aspect of your time in first year that you would have either expected, hoped or wanted to talk about tonight, that you haven't been given the opportunity and that you'd like to raise at this point?

FORMER STUDENT B: No, I don't think so.

I'm seeing people nodding, so will they take that as an all round?

Yeah

Yes.

I suppose my final question, absolute final question is that, based on your first year experience, were you glad that you enrolled in the programme that you enrolled on?

FORMER STUDENT F: Yeah.

FORMER STUDENT B: Definitely.

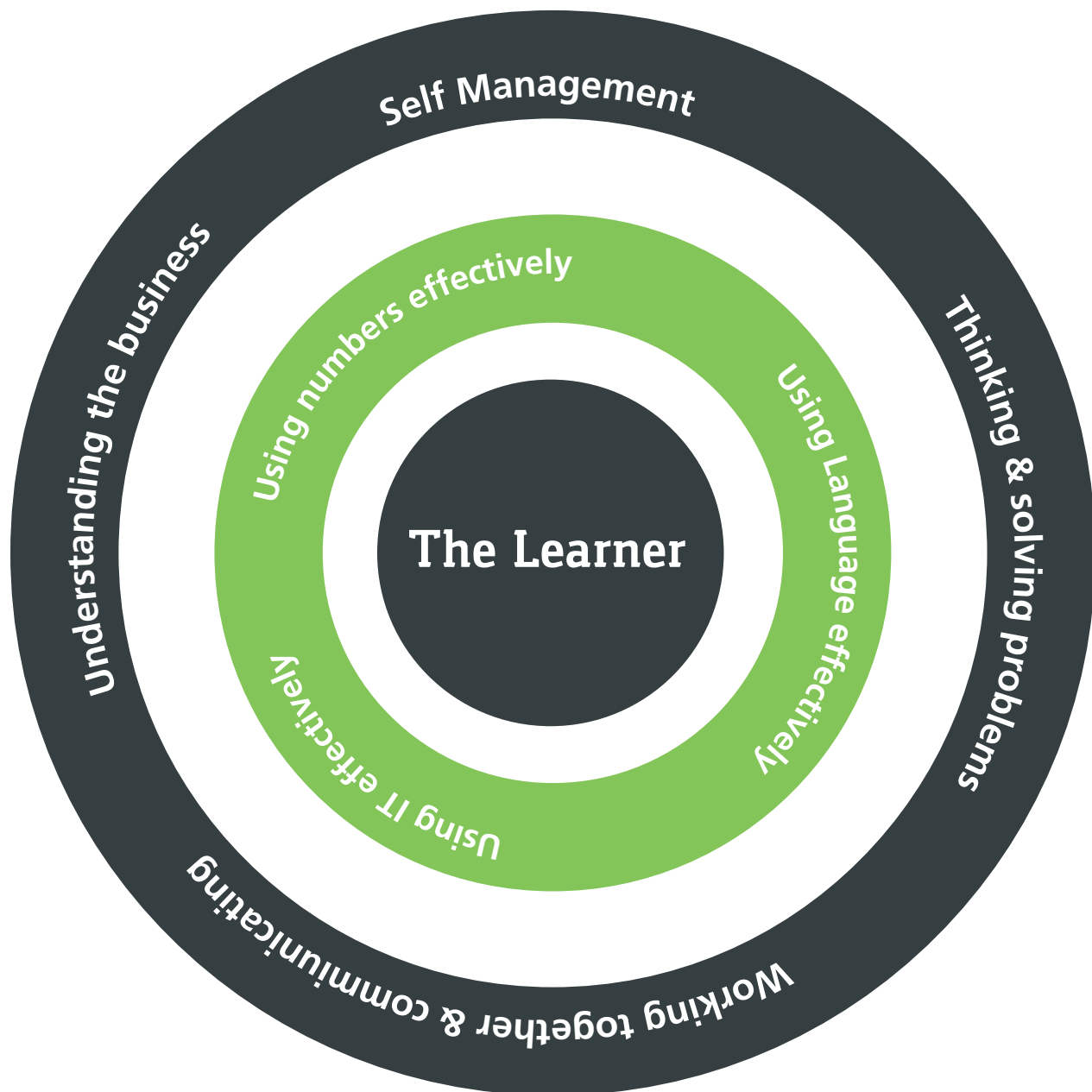FORMER STUDENT A: Yes.

FORMER STUDENT E: 100%

Is that unanimous amongst you?

FORMER STUDENT A: 100%.

So, with your permission, I will conclude the evening and will cease recording. Is that OK, with you?

End

Business School Graduate Competences

The Learner

Self Management

Understanding the business

Thinking & solving problems

Using numbers effectively

Using Language effectively

Using IT effectively

Working together & communicating

Underpinned by a proactive/positive approach

Appendix Q: Focus Groups Questions

What is your view with regard to first year provision in the Department of Business & Management or wider Faculty of Business & Hospitality?

I shared a copy with you of the student success model that was developed over a number of years.

> To what extent does the Student Success Model adequately reflect the first year experience in the Faculty of Business & Hospitality?

> What is your view on this model?

What impact do you think the model had on first year provision in the Department of Business & Management or wider Faculty of Business & Hospitality, during and after it was developed?

What actions or interventions do you consider to me the most effective that were introduced as part of the model?

Did the introduction of the model benefit the students?

Do you consider that there were any negative consequences associated with the development of the model?

What actions or interventions do you consider to have had little or no positive impact?

The model has 3 foundation blocks. What is your perspective of these foundation blocks and to what extent do you think these foundation blocks underpin the model?

The model is made up of 7 pillars what is your perspective of the

- a. Habit forming pillar?
- b. Student Esteem pillar?
- c. Student experience pillar?
- d. Role of academic staff pillar?
- e. Programme Design pillar?
- f. Student Supports pillar?

If the clock was turned back to February 2013, what might you advise about what could have been done differently in developing the model?

Do you believe the long term opportunities business and hospitality graduates were enhanced by the changes that were made to the first year experience?

If you could add elements to the model what would you insert?

If you had to remove elements of the model what would you take away?

Did any group of students benefit to a greater extent that others in the roll out of the model?

How did the academic/ Management/ Administrative staff contribute to the efficacy of the model?

How did the level of support from within the wider institute but outside the faculty impact on the model?

Did the largest amount of change emanate from within or outside the faculty?