Student Retention in Higher Education: a Response to O'Dwyer, to Morris and to Connaughton

Mark Russell
Dublin Institute of Technology, mark.russell@dit.ie

Follow this and additional works at: https://arrow.tudublin.ie/level3

Student Retention in Higher Education: a response to O'Dwyer, to Morris and to Connaughton

Mark Russell
Student Retention Officer
Dublin Institute of Technology

Abstract: *This article is a reflective commentary on the research findings of three authors and colleagues in relation to student retention matters in higher education: O'Dwyer, Morris and Connaughton. The key findings from their research are also published in this 2012 edition of Level3. My perspective on the three articles is coloured by a decade of working in the field of student retention in the same organisation as the three authors. A full reading of the three articles is required to contextualise my comments and to gauge the significance of the findings for current retention policies and practices.*

Key words: student retention; persistence; learning styles; time-on-task; student engagement; social and cultural capital

Introduction

When addressing the issue of student retention in higher education it is useful to begin with basic working definitions of student retention and how such definitions influence policies and operational practices. In its simplest form, retention is the successful completion of a programme of study by the student regardless of whether the student completes within the specified timeframe or whether the student switches programmes after commencement. If students leave at any stage before completion of a programme they are deemed not to be 'retained'. When the numbers of 'non-retained' students are regarded as a problem then ways of measuring the problem become necessary, and ways of understanding the dynamics within the problem are sought. The differing metrics used in various studies are indicative of the lack of definition of what exactly student retention and non-retention actually mean.

Whilst it can be difficult to agree a common definition or measure of student retention, the effects of student retention problems are becoming obvious. Performance in assessments, patterns of attendance, and level of withdrawal are issues which academic staff recognise as being of concern and which become proxies for measuring retention as a phenomenon. So, what is *good* student retention? In essences it is when the established norm is that academic staff teach, students attend, students learn, students meet academic standards in assessments and continue to graduation and achievement of their awards. Student retention becomes a 'problem' when registered students fail to attend, do not succeed in assessments and leave with, or without, prior notification.

Researching student retention has not to date produces totally 'useful' and universally applicable solutions. In dealing with student retention as an issue a multi-faceted approach is required. There is merit, therefore in the differing approaches the three authors – O'Dwyer, Morris and Connaghton - took in addressing the overarching issue of how to help their students succeed and to stay until graduation. I am pleased to have been invited to comment on those three studies and on the results of their research from my perspective as student retention officer in a very large third level college where the three authors conducted their research. It is striking how each author's findings point to a different aspect of the retention puzzle and it is challenging to respond to the additional questions posed as a result of their data. The reminder of this article offers my personal analytical comments on the three studies and tries to identify the new questions posed.

Aidan O'Dwyer: *A study of the learning styles of first year engineering students at Dublin Institute of Technology*

Beginning with the study of the learning styles of engineering students by Aidan O'Dwyer, it is evident that this is well researched, methodically tested, accurate piece of longitudinal research. The sample size involved gives confidence in the results, which throw up a surprising finding for students in this particular field of study in relation to curriculum content and links to retention rates, as follows.

Engineering curricula traditionally place considerable emphasis on science, mathematics, technology and professional development. In Ireland the science and mathematics subjects are known to manifest a skill deficit amongst students entering higher education. It is not surprising then that the topic of how best to teach mathematics at second level is currently hotly debated. A large portion of retention issues are reputed to be related to a lack of competence in mathematics: competence that is crucial for engineering. Hence it is not surprising that O'Dwyer's argues that understanding the learning style of engineering students is valuable in assessing whether our higher education teaches material in a way that suits the particular learning styles of student cohorts conditioned by second level pedagogies.

Of the four categories of learning style measured in the O'Dwyer study, it could be argued that the results in three of them favour an engineering approach so that students become professional problem solvers, *id est,* a slightly stronger leaning towards active versus

reflective learning; a preference for facts versus theory; a tendency to learn for sequential learning versus global understanding.   However, the huge proportion of visual style preferences over verbal learners is a dramatic finding. The consequence of this finding is interesting when viewed in terms of engineering education. Firstly, as material is taught in the classroom by a lecturer, the main form of communication is verbal. Secondly, engineering learning material is often numerical in nature, not something that has a large visual impact – perhaps explaining engineers' preference for flowcharts with the visual and the conceptual combined! Furthermore the author goes on to report that the learning style of the students studied had no relationship with their assessment scores and that no change in lecture delivery was noted based on the result of the findings. As there is a recorded output from assessment in current teaching delivery mode, it would be a fascinating exercise to adjust delivery to take account of high visual learning preference, and then follow up with a comparative study of assessment data.

In an era of mass education at third level it si frequently argued that the methods of teaching that served us well heretofore may now need adjustment. This study certainly suggests this could be the case. As a footnote, O'Dwyer mentions an association between lecture attendance and assessment performance. This is an important finding and one so fundamental that it is often overlooked. The basis of the learning contract between the student and the lecturer is that the lecturer will teach the material required and provie as explanation of how to understand it. The student will turn up at to get that information and then endeavour to comprehend what he/she has received. When the fundamentals of this contract are not met, it can have a significant influence on the nature and extent of student retention.

Robert Morris: *Are the study habits of first year engineering students influenced by where they live while attending college?*

The second study by Bob Morris investigates whether independent living away from the family home influences students' study habits and with what consequences for retention. The context of this study as outlined by the author is an eloquent and incisive view of how and why academic staff try to play such an active role in facilitating academic success for their students. A traditionally caring ethos among staff is probably responsible for this attitude and manifests itself in ways beyond the official log of contact hours and contractual obligations. Morris's study is indicative as an account of academic staff doing what they can to support

students to successful graduation and the frustrations that are encountered by staff along the way.

Caution is recommended by the author in drawing strong inferences from the hypothesis that living away from home contributes to personal autonomy and independent learning. However, the results of the data gathered show evidence of a pattern of behaviour intrinsic to student retention. The data clearly show that those students living away from home are studying formally for more hours and with greater frequency. As active study is the accepted method for learning complex new material and integrating knowledge, these findings are strong indicators of academic success. Presuming that the data given by student respondents as self-declarations are accurate, there is a logical follow-on from this research. The follow-on should test the association of the reported data to assessment performance throughout the students' time in college. It would be expected that assessment performance would indicate an association between time-on-task, independent study, timely submission of assignments and assessment success. Such follow-up data would add greater validity to the findings reported by Morris. This would allow for tests to assess the statistical strength of the findings.

As to the hypothesis of linking living away from home with increased independent learning, there would need to be more research control to include extrinsic influencing factors and more comparison with different types of student cohorts. For example, mature students who are generally living independently, display better learning behaviours than their younger classmates who enter directly from secondary school. Despite a break from study and the lack of practice in important numerical skills, the mature students' greater commitment and motivation seems to enable them generally to succeed academically and at a higher grade achievement than the standard cohort. This also applies to students who have additional early supports to overcome disadvantage and who, like mature students, generally perform at a better-than-average level in assessments.

The Morris study does, however, point to a key retention issue: that commitment to succeed is critical and can be measured in time-on-task. The author may have understated his findings in suggesting that students who live away from home study more. The main finding may be the sporadic approach to study by students and the issue of whether any college can direct students to address this. In his context section, the Morris describes his efforts to get students to submit continuous assessment assignments on time, sometimes without success. Given the

controlled learning environment experienced at second level, one speculates if it is realistic to expect students to adapt to a different, autonomous and independent learning environment in third level? The resolution of this question can often determine the learning career of young students.

Denise Connaughton: *The first year experience: a case study from The National Bakery School*

The third study by Denise Connaughton approaches the research question of high student retention on a new degree programme using a useful methodology: direct feedback from students regarding what factors enabled them to persist and succeed. The research shows the value of hearing the student voice and its possible contradictions of the assumptions of staff regarding the need to provide opportunities to socially and culturally integrate students into college life to ensure retention and success. The model of social and cultural capital that the study uses to assess the student experience is enlightening in that it highlights individual course choice, personal commitment, work-ethic and single-mindedness as key factors in high retention levels. The students did not appear to be disadvantaged in terms of social or educational background and few took advantage of clubs, societies or student support services. In fact, the students seemed instead to want more challenging content, more relevance and more intensity from the programme. This implies a different problem, one that lies in the realms of curriculum design and pedagogies rather than in the realms of retention in so far as they meet the expectations of students who have a very definite career focus. The data indicate a slight gap in the understanding of what was being offered by the programme and what was expected by the students, though there was no evidence of retention problems due to this perceived gap.

 However, the Connaughton research highlights a telling area for the study of student retention. The evaluation of expectation and experience of a programme are classic issues addressed in the work of Tinto. Basing his premise on the work of Durkheim, Tinto argues that the alienation of the individual student from the programme, or from the social or institute community, are root causes of student attrition. In the Connaughton study, hpwever, the student body indicate a slight disenchantment with the content of the curriculum where the student experience is centrally located but not in any way to the extent that it was a retention problem, as the retention rates were higher than average on the programme under

study. So, there is in inherent contradiction here with at least one aspect of Tinto's premise. Nor were students dependent on the social community of the college or of the cohort. For virtually all students, their family, their networks of friends outside college and their part-time work contexts were the main sources of personal and social supports and of their individual identities. The academic programme for most was the means of gaining a qualification to continue in a definite career pathway – a finding somewhat at variance with Tinto.

So what is new in the three retention studies?

The O'Dwyer, Morris and Connaughton studies add to our knowledge of the first year student experience in third level. There are a number of important findings to be understood. For instance, the value of the student voice being heard is evident in the Connaughton study where the students were invited to identify their experiences directly in relation to the value of formal social and personal supports in the Department. The student voice, when heard in constructive reviews like this, adds greatly to informing the decision-making of programme and curriculum designers. The Connaughton study also confirms that students who are in their choice programme are likely to persist and to be supported by social and cultural capital outside of college. It also confirms that students in their choice programme require fewer academic and personal interventions by college services.

In the Morris article, the study habits of students give a useful insight into how the best efforts of academic staff on a programme can be confounded by the non-participation of students, by non-attendance, and non-submission of assignments. Even without its location-based axis, its central theme of time-on-task or work ethic and the absence thereof is a theme that deserves more attention from a retention perspective. As student retention officer I have long ago come to the opinion that a baseline requirement of students doing the academic work required of them is of such obvious importance, that it should be a cornerstone of retention reviews.

The O'Dwyer study addresses a fascinating contradiction between accepted theory related to student learning styles and the actual patterns of assessment success. The findings suggest that learning styles do not actually matter as a key variant in retention rates since teaching

styles need to satisfy the student body as an entirety without individualisation, and that learning styles cannot be proven to predict academic success.

These three studies, conducted by lecturers with extensive teaching experience, support the need for more real-world, contextual research where the local reality leads to sustainable pedagogical practices and to more locally-informed retention initiatives.