



Proceedings from

STAYING POWER

A COLLOQUIUM ON INCREASING RETENTION
RATES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Marino Institute of Education
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National Centre for Guidance in Education
The Department of Education and Science

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Introduction

The transition from post-primary school to further and higher education is a major stage in the lives of many Irish school-leavers. It is a step into the unknown for most of these adolescents. They are expected to form mature decisions about course choices and to adapt to a completely different social and learning environment.

The transition itself is made up of several different steps, not all in a logical sequence, which place multi-dimensional demands on the young people. The first step is the fantasy of being a student on a particular course. The next step is the exploration of all that this entails – course content, entry requirements, points requirements, cost, duration, job prospects etc- all seen from the reference set/framework of a post-primary school pupil. There is also an internal family negotiating process to determine its ability to assist the pupil's plans.

The State intervenes to support the transition process by the provision of guidance counselling hours to each post-primary school. One of the roles of the guidance counsellor is to mediate in the transition by providing a range of services e.g. counselling, information, assessment, advocacy, to prepare the pupil to make the transition. This includes a consideration of alternative courses of action should the fantasy not be realised. The information activities may include learning experiences e.g. talking to staff and students of the desired college and course.

The higher education institutes themselves have a key role to play out the preparation stage through the provision of information and learning experiences for post-primary pupils. They also have a role in induction and on-going support especially in the first year to make the transition as smooth as possible.

It is evident from the results of research on non-completion in higher education that many of the transition steps are not being adequately treated. Recent research on non-completion in the first year of higher education suggests that significant social and economic losses are taking place. This is a matter of concern to the individuals and to their families. It is also a significant concern to the post-primary schools that prepare the young people for the transition, to the higher education institutions which receive the young people, and to the Department of Education and Science that funds both sectors.

Successful transitions for young people can be built on strong co-operation between post-primary schools and higher education institutions and on good practice. The Colloquium, "Staying Power – Increasing Retention Rates in Higher Education", brought together key personnel from post-primary schools, higher education institutes, parent association representatives, trade unions, management bodies, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors, and the Department of Education and Science, to debate issues of co-operation and good practice and to make recommendations for future actions. The National Centre for Guidance in Education facilitated that process as part of its remit as an agency of the Department of Education and Science with responsibility for guidance in education.

The Colloquium produced a richness of suggestions and recommendations at both systems and institutional levels. Readers are strongly encouraged to read beyond the Summary of Issues and Recommendations in order to develop co-operation and good practice in assisting the transition of young people from post-primary to higher education.

John McCarthy, DIRECTOR NCGE, May 2000.

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Colloquium Chairperson:

Ed Riordan, Chairperson, National Centre for Guidance in Education.

Presenters:

Eleanor Ní Bhriain, Principal Officer, Department of Education and Science;
Ann Carpenter, Co-author of *“Non-Completion in Higher Education, A Study of Three Institutes of Technology”*;
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Richard Keane, Guidance Counsellor, St. Aidan’s School, Whitehall;
Dr. Dermot Douglas, Registrar, Institute of Technology, Tallaght.

Chairpersons of Discussion Groups:

Tom Hayden, Associate Dean of Science, Department of Zoology, UCD;
Vincent Lennon, Academic Affairs and Student Services, IT Tallaght;
Tim Lynch, Institute of Guidance Counsellors;
Anne Rafferty, Institute of Guidance Counsellors.

Rapporteurs of Discussion Groups:

Breeda Coyle, Institute of Guidance Counsellors;
Peter Brown, Equality Access Officer, DIT;
Frances Newman, National Youth Information Co-ordinator, Department of Education and Science;
Raymond Dunne, Publisher/Editor *“Applying to College”*.

The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) wishes to acknowledge the permission of the authors of *“Non-Completion in Higher Education, A Study of Three Institutes of Technology”*, Ann Carpenter, Margaret Healy, and Kathleen Lynch, to publish in full the executive summary of the report.

1. SUMMARY OF ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ISSUES

Non-completion

There is significant non-completion by students of higher education studies. Research in the IT sector shows a non-completion rate of 37%. Research in the university sector shows 19% non-completion.

Reasons for non-completion

Guidance-related

Lack of information and guidance on course and career options, unclear career aspirations and poor preparation for the course choice were reasons given by some students for non-completion.

Academic-related

Some students reported a lack of facilities and support services in the Institutes to meet course requirements, particularly in terms of libraries, computers, canteens and student support services, including social and sport facilities.

Others complained about poor communication between staff and students.

Poor course choice

Most of students who failed first year examinations and dropped out explained that the course they chose was the only course open to them, given their points rating. Students with low grades in the Leaving Certificate are at most risk of non-completion.

Career change

Some students left the course to take up employment. Others left in order to pursue another course of education/training related to a different career. Others again departed from the course to repeat the Leaving Certificate.

Financial difficulties

Some students had to work part-time in order to sustain themselves. This affected their course attendance and their study. Some from a salaried, professional or skilled manual background were not in receipt of a higher education grant.

Pressure

Some reported that they were over-influenced by their family or friends or school staff in their career decisions. A higher proportion of those who left said that the decision to attend higher education was not really theirs. Peer and/or parental pressure also contributed to making uninformed choices.

Personal

- ❑ 25% left because they failed examinations.
- ❑ Some were not able to cope with the stress created by the transition to the first year of higher education and to a new way of learning. They felt under strain. Some students experienced a form of culture shock; there was a new language to be learned and hidden norms of behaviour and values to be acquired.
- ❑ Some experienced a high level of loneliness and isolation during first year.

Recommendations

Guidance support in post-primary schools

1. There should be more access to guidance and counselling in schools. The guidance counsellor needs to listen to the student to what he/she really has to say. The guidance counsellor should attempt to increase the student's own responsibility for the choices they make, by encouraging the student's active participation in researching course information. The students should develop a career plan following their meeting with the guidance counsellor.
2. The ratio of guidance counsellor to pupils needs to be reduced to 1:250 and guidance standards raised.

Academic support

1. An improved communication structure needs to be developed between management, staff and students in the Institutes. Clear procedures are required for giving students regular feedback on their performance. Academic staff may need training in communication skills. Students should be more involved in the management of decisions that affects their learning.
2. The institutions need to adopt a holistic approach to the student and help the student to develop personally as well as academically.
3. New models for integrated induction and orientation programmes should be developed. This would include elements such as time management, self-management, learning styles, self-directed learning, library/research, note-taking skills.
4. Third level institutions should be encouraged to develop comprehensive student support structures, e.g. to increase the development of personal tutors/students, student peer supports, and study skills programmes.
5. Additional supports should be provided for students who enter third level education without adequate academic skills.

Course transfers

1. Students should be given the facility to repeat/change courses.
2. Structures need to be created to facilitate “stepping back” into the second level system.
3. Early formative evaluation and remediation should be improved in challenging subjects.
4. Facility should be increased for changing an inappropriate course choice within an institution.
5. The third level institutions need to look at partnership arrangements and the development of an integrated system for better transfer opportunities between institutions.
6. It is necessary to establish a standardised tracking system for recording data on student performance across the Institutes as well as exit and withdrawal systems. Students who have dropped out should be contacted and supported as appropriate by the institutions.
7. The guidance service in third level should be extended and its standards improved.

Financial

1. The Institutes should take on the role of “a placement agency”, thus facilitating students to get part-time work, at reasonable hours, in sectors which complement their area of study. Third level institutions have to look at ways of playing a more pro-active role in this matter.
2. Improvements are needed in both the scope and the level of higher education maintenance grants especially for students on low incomes.
3. Extra support should be provided for those studying in areas where the cost of living is high (e.g. Dublin).

Peer support

1. Student Peer Support Systems (“Buddy Systems”) should be developed where trained student peer assistants act as a support to new entrants.
2. The integration of mature students with younger students should be encouraged. They can act as positive role models because they have more confidence to approach and utilise students services.

Information

1. Prospectuses should be improved. They should not be written solely by academics. The language used should be clear, simple, and concise everyday English. They could be better structured, better indexed and be more attractive and readable from a second level pupil's perspective.
2. Information on course content should be provided on the Internet. Novel approaches like virtual college tours and video conferencing between students will also help.
3. A dedicated telephone line should be provided for all guidance counsellors to facilitate immediate and direct access to third level sources of information.
4. The prospectuses should be delivered much earlier to second level schools.
5. Pre-course briefings should be provided to pupils – between course offer and acceptance.
6. Students in Dublin in particular need to be encouraged to seriously consider course options outside of Dublin.
7. A more basic knowledge about college life should be provided to prospective students (e.g., how to live away from home).

Parents

1. The role of the parents in guidance should be increased by their participation in careers days, encouraging and assisting their children for the choices they make without over influencing them.
2. Meetings to inform students and parents should be organised by parents associations in consultation with the guidance counsellor and principal in the school.
3. Parents should be kept well informed of college application procedures.

Facilities

Campus accommodation should be developed and offered at an affordable rate.

Personal

Drop-out needs to be redefined in terms of re-direction. Not every drop-out is a failure. Failure should also be viewed as a good experience even if it costs.

2. Colloquium Programme

- 9.30 – 10.00 a.m. Opening Address: Eleanor Ní Bhriain, Department of Education and Science,
- Summary of the findings of *“Non-Completion in Higher Education: A Study of First Year Students in Three Institutes of Technology”*, Anne Carpenter, IT Carlow.
- 10.45 – 11.30 a.m. Information, Guidance and Support for Transition to Higher Education – Perspectives of:
- Parents,
 - Union of Students in Ireland,
 - Registrars / Directors,
 - Guidance Counsellor,
 - Student Counsellor.
- Followed by a Plenary Discussion.
- 11.45 – 1.00 p.m. Discussion Groups
1. Defining best practice in preparing post-primary pupils for higher education.
 2. Defining best practice for receiving and supporting students in higher education.
 3. Defining best practice in support materials and methods of dissemination produced by higher education institutions.
 4. Tracking and evaluation.
- 2.00 – 3.00 p.m. Presentation of Discussion Group Reports.
- 3.00 – 3.45 p.m. Plenary Discussion and Planning of Future Collaborative Action.
- 3.45 – 4.00 p.m. Close of Colloquium - Joan Walshe, Department of Education and Science.

3. Opening Address

Eleanor Ní Bhriain, Principal Officer, Department of Education and Science.

Ladies and Gentlemen. Firstly, allow me to welcome you all to today's conference entitled "Staying Power". The fact that there is such a broad attendance here today reflects the widespread interest that there is in the issue of improving the chances of completing Higher Education. The issue of retention/attrition/ completion and non-completion and dropout has been headlined in a variety of contexts both national and international over the last number years. The concern is coming from a number of interests – students, parents, institutions, government departments, employers and various other interest groups. This reflects a concern from all sides that wrong choices or inability to complete a course for whatever reason imposes a cost (and I do not mean just a financial aspect when I talk of cost) on all aspects of society.

- ❑ For the student, there is the disappointment/feelings of failure/possibly loss of opportunity/cost;
- ❑ For the parent or other support of the student, there is the anxiety/disappointment and the cost (financial and otherwise) of support in a difficult time;
- ❑ For the teachers/lecturers, there is the worry about course choices/failure aspects/ genuine concern costs;
- ❑ For the institution, there is the organisational/financial/quality reputation/support costs;
- ❑ For the state, there is the financial and other costs;
- ❑ For the employment sector, there are the lost workers/the decrease in skills output;
- ❑ For society, there is the amalgam of all the costs and the effect on people's lives.

In terms of the state cost, it should be noted that the Colleges Section of the Department allocates a current Budget of almost £200 million to the Institutes of Technology. This is exclusive of student support grants, grants for Capital works and development and miscellaneous activity.

While we do not wish to go overboard (and we recognise that sometimes it is necessary to change direction in order to proceed positively in life), it is obvious that there are causes for concern, which must and should be addressed.

In issuing invitations to the colloquium, the objective has been to allow an input from the many who are connected to this cycle of development in the lives of students, while keeping the colloquium small enough to allow extensive discussion during the group sessions.

Looking generally at the issue of completion/non completion at this level of education you will be aware of statistics published showing levels of approximately 15%-35% across the sector internationally. Looking at the Irish situation, the Higher Education Authority carried out a study in 1994, which indicated a completion rate of 81% across the university sector. The Universities claim that this is in line with trends internationally. The Authority has commissioned the Educational Research Centre, Drumcondra, to undertake a further detailed study in this area and it is currently nearing completion.¹

¹ Report commissioned by the HEA is funded by the HEA

The Institutes of Technology have also commissioned a similar report at the request of the Minister for Education and Science from the Educational Research Centre (ERC). A further study is being undertaken by DIT in conjunction with the ERC. The Department is funding these projects.

The Minister has earmarked £1.5 million pounds specifically to address the issue of non-completion of courses in the technological sector in 1999 and 2000, of which £0.5 is to be spent in 1999. This funding will support and complement the programmes already in place and will have regard to the recommendations of the National Committee on Retention. This committee was established by the Council of Directors of the Institutes of Technology, in relation to the funding of action projects/ programmes both short and long term based on best practice. In addition, the Minister has indicated to the Institutes of Technology that £8 of the students' services charge is to be dedicated to projects linked to access and completion/non-completion. A computerised Management Information System is currently being developed. This system is part of the on-going work of establishing modern financial and administrative systems for the Institutes of Technology. The project has the aim of supporting the efficient and effective administration of the institutes and providing both the Institutes and my Department with timely and accurate management information for a variety of purposes. This new system will provide enhanced information on completion and non-completion. The results of projects on completion and non-completion will be fed into this system.

A study conducted by three Institutes of Technology showed a non-completion rate among first years across the Institutes of Technology of approximately 37%. The study, which Ann Carpenter will discuss in greater detail later on, showed that there is a wide range of social, personal, academic, institutional and financial factors mediating retention viz.:

- ❑ Failure in examination. This can reflect many factors, including the basic ability of students, attendance and commitment, resources and support structures, entry standards, teaching methods and quality. These issues become more critical as the percentage of the age cohort securing places in third level education increases.
- ❑ Motivation often related to the course preference secured by the student.
- ❑ Departure to another institution shortly after registration.
- ❑ Departure from college to repeat the Leaving Certificate.
- ❑ Personal reasons.

Another substantial factor is poor course choice by students, which means that expectation does not marry with course experience. Frequently, students are not fully aware of the academic demands of certain courses or of the amount of independent study required. On a personal level, students may find it hard to adjust from a situation where they know each member of their school class, to a much larger institution, often in conjunction with leaving home for the first time. The topic we are working on here today, is the issue in relation to poor preparation and course choice. It is, I stress, one of a range of initiatives across the technological sector to deal with the issue of completion/non-completion.

Arising from the findings of the study and the Institutes' concern about this issue, a meeting was held in the Department with representatives of the Institutes, the National Centre for Guidance in Education, the Post-primary Inspectorate and the Higher Education (Colleges) Section of the Department, with a view to taking some positive action.

One of the outcomes of that meeting is today's colloquium. During the course of the day we will examine the potential for improving the process of communication and information between the Third Level and Second Level sectors of our education system, and between all the parties involved from information centres to students, to institutions etc.

There is a wealth of data available now in beautifully produced prospectuses from every Institute. I have found myself over the Christmas Holidays on occasion trying to help students work through some of this data in order to make proper course choices. The task is never an easy one and I feel that if it is so difficult for me who has a familiarity with courses, then how much more so must it be for students and parents? Hopefully after today, we will be able to take steps to make it easier.

As I have already indicated, the Minister is very concerned about this issue and has allocated significant funding for initiatives. Today's meeting will result in a report, which will be given to him as well as to all of the participants.

Thank you again for setting aside the time to participate in this important colloquium.

4. Presentation: A Summary of the Findings of “Non-Completion in Higher Education: A Study of First Year Students in Three Institutes of Technology”, Anne Carpenter, IT Carlow.

This summary is reprinted from *“Non-Completion in Higher Education: A Study of First Year Students in Three Institutes of Technology”*, with kind permission of Anne Carpenter.

The aim of this study was to examine patterns of non-completion among first year students in the three participating Institutes of Technology (I.T. Carlow, Dundalk I.T. and I.T. Tralee). The research focused on student perspectives on their College experience. Given the time and resources available, it was not possible to examine the wide range of institutional, labour market, and policy considerations which also impact on non-completion rates (Tinto, 1987, 1993; Bean, 1980; Ozga et al., 1998). These would require a separate research investigation.

4.1 Key Findings

The study compared the experiences of students who did not complete with those who passed. The survey population comprised students who enrolled for the first time in the 1996/97 academic year. A total of 1,526 students completed questionnaires of whom 1,119 had transferred to second year while 407 had failed or left. The overall response rate was 56%.

No single factor explains the average 37% non-completion rate among first year students across the Institutes. A range of academic, social, personal, financial and institution-specific variables seem to contribute to early leaving and/or failure. The principal social and personal factors associated with non-completion were low grades in the Leaving Certificate examination; unclear career aspirations; lack of information and guidance on course and career options; unsuitable course choices; difficulties with some or all of the subjects taken, and financial and work-related problems. The principal institutional factors were lack of facilities and support services in the Institutes to meet course requirements; and poor communication between staff and students.

The principal reason given by students themselves for leaving was their desire to pursue a different career; almost all of those who had left were pursuing other occupational and educational goals.

Both the pattern of non-completion, and the stated reasons for it, are in line with those found in other countries for comparable colleges and courses (Astin, 1975, 1984; Berger and Braxton, 1998; Cabrera et al., 1992; Johnes, 1990; Moortgat et al., 1996; OECD, 1997; Pascarella and Terezini, 1980; Tinto, 1993).

4.2 A Profile of Students who did not complete First Year

The students who did not complete first year were similar to those who passed in a number of ways. They tended to be alike in terms of age, gender, schooling experience, in the guidance received prior to entry, and in their generally positive view of the Institute they had attended.

The early leavers were more likely to claim however, that they were poorly prepared for college entry and that the course they entered was not one of their first two choices; over two fifths said it was the only course open to them given their points rating. They were also more likely than those who passed to have entered on low average Leaving Certificate points, particularly in mathematics, and to have experienced difficulties with course demands in their first year. In addition, they were more likely to have had financial difficulties while in College, to have worked part-time, to come from a salaried, professional or skilled manual background, and not to be in receipt of a grant.

Students who did not complete were also more likely to be critical of College teaching and of the procedures in place for staff-student communication. They needed greater support and guidance in their work than was provided.

The principal reason students gave for leaving was that they had chosen the wrong course and wished to pursue a different career; failing examinations was the second most commonly cited reason for leaving, followed by course difficulties; 90% of those who had left were either working or studying, or both, at the time of the survey.

4.3 The Rate of Non-Completion

The estimated non-completion rate across the three Institutes was 37%. Although most students (47%) left during, or at the end of the third term having failed at least part of their first year examination, a sizeable minority (36%) left in the first and second term before taking examinations (a further 17% did not specify when they had left). The highest rate of leaving/failure was in Engineering while the lowest rate was in Science.

4.4 Academic Background

The academic profile of those who left and those who passed was similar in several respects. However, the students who did not complete tended to be drawn disproportionately from those who had a particularly low Leaving Certificate Grade Point Average score at entry (between 100 and 195 points).

The overall standard of mathematics in the survey population was quite low: only 8% of first year students had taken Higher Level Mathematics in the Leaving Certificate compared with 20% nationally in 1996/7. Those who failed or left were especially likely however to have got a low grade in Leaving Certificate Mathematics.

4.5 Social Background

Neither the socio-economic nor the gender background of those who left or failed differed greatly from those who passed. Students from professional, salaried and skilled manual backgrounds were significantly more likely to leave however than those from semi and unskilled manual, and farming backgrounds. Female, and younger students, were also slightly more likely to leave than male students and mature students, although the differences here were not significant.

4.6 Financial Circumstances

Although only a minority of those surveyed said they experienced serious financial difficulties while in college, a majority (71%) said they experienced at least some financial difficulty. Those who did not complete were more likely to experience severe financial difficulties than those who passed; they were also slightly less likely to be in receipt of a grant, and more likely to be working. In addition, they tended to work longer hours, and they claimed that working interfered with their studies more so than those who passed.

4.7 Aspirations and Preparation for College

While most students claimed that school had not prepared them well, students who failed or left were especially critical of their preparation. In addition, a higher proportion of those who left (18% compared with 6%) said that the decision to attend college was not really their own.

4.8 Course Interest and Commitment

Students who did not complete first year were less likely to name their course as their first or second CAO choice (58%) by comparison with those who passed (74%). A large minority of those who did not complete (42%) said that the course they chose was the only one open to them, while 30% of those who passed first year were in this position. Students who left were also more likely to say they were undecided about their future occupational intentions when entering college than those who passed.

4.9 Pre-college Guidance

Just over half of all students said they received formal guidance about their choice of course and college. There were no significant differences between those who passed and left in this regard. Students claimed that it was their family which influenced them most in their career decisions, followed by their friends. Only 12% named school staff as having a significant impact on their course choices; this was as true for students who left or failed as for those who passed.

4.10 Experience of College

One of the principal findings from the study was that the majority of students who Failed/Left (73%), as well as those who Passed (62%), expressed positive views about their Institutes.

Students who Failed/Left were more likely however, to have experienced difficulties with some of all of the subjects on their courses (63%) than those who Passed (49%). This appeared to be related to the fact that a significant number of students were not aware in advance of the precise academic requirements of the course they were undertaking.

Students who left or failed were also more critical of teaching in the Institutes. Their principal suggestion for enhancing the quality of life at college was for improved contact between students, lecturers and tutors. Students who did not complete said they needed more guidance, support and feedback on their performance than what was provided.

Improved services were also called for in all the Institutes, particularly in terms of libraries, computers, canteens, and student support services, including social and sports facilities.

4.11 Stated Reasons for Leaving

The principal reason why students said they left was because they wished to pursue a different career: almost half of those who left stated this as a major reason for leaving. One quarter said they left because they failed examinations, while just over one fifth cited having difficulties with the course as a significant push factor. Other negative influences included personal problems, lack of money and feeling isolated.

Students' feelings about not completing first year were not entirely negative. While feelings of disappointment or frustration were common among those who did not complete, this was balanced off in most cases by a strong feeling of relief: more of those who left or failed, expressed positive feelings about leaving (64%) than negative feelings (54%). The extent to which students felt content with their decision to leave was evident from the claim by 59% of them that no intervention by others would have altered their decision. A number did state however, that if there were better support services in the Institutes, this might have encouraged them to stay.

4.12 Current Status of Those Who Did Not Complete

The great majority (90%) of those who left without completing first year or after failing examinations were pursuing other occupational and educational goals; just 8% were unemployed. Over half (52%) were working, with most being in full-time employment, while one quarter were pursuing education or training in other colleges (most commonly at Post Leaving Certificate level, but also in other Institutes of Technology, Private Colleges and Universities); a further 14% were working and studying simultaneously, mostly as apprentices.

4.13 Issues Arising

This study examined student perspectives on their college experience and their reasons for leaving. In line with trends in international research (Astin et al., 1987; Bean, 1980; Berger and Braxton, 1998; Bourner and Hamed, 1987; Cabrera et al., 1992; Johnes, 1990; McLaughlin et al., 1998; Moortgat et al., 1996; Nora, 1992; Tinto, 1993). The study indicates that there are many interacting factors which influence non-completion, consequently, any policy response needs to be multifaceted. In addition, there are other institutional, labour market and policy considerations which impact on non-completion rates which were not within the scope of this study. These would also have to be taken into account in developing a comprehensive response to non-completion.

Notwithstanding the above, the research suggests that there are a number of issues which need to be addressed.

4.13.1 Prior Educational Attainment:

Students with low points ratings in the Leaving Certificate, particularly in Mathematics, were most at risk of non-completion.

This suggests that there is a need to review the entry requirements for the courses, and/or to provide additional supports for students entering without adequate academic skills.

4.13.2 Information, Guidance and Support:

Students who left were especially critical of the type of guidance and information they had received about the academic, organisational and financial demands of their chosen course, prior to entry.

Students need greater guidance in making course choices, and Institutes need to give more precise information to students, specifying the requirements and demands of different courses. Students also require more ongoing guidance and support while attending college; this is especially crucial in first year.

4.13.3 Financial Supports for Students:

Students who left were more likely to have experienced financial difficulties than those who passed; they were also more likely to be working part-time.

There is a need therefore to improve both the scope and level of the higher education maintenance grants.

4.13.4 Facilities in the Institutes:

Students attributed some of their difficulties to the poor quality of facilities, including libraries, computing services, canteens and other support services.

There is need for substantial investment in student support services in the Institutes as students on low incomes are especially reliant on college resources to complete their courses.

4.13.5 Communication between Staff and Students:

While students who did not complete were generally positive about their experience, they were more critical of college teaching, and of communication between staff and students generally, than those who passed. Students expressed an interest in being more involved in the management decisions that affected them directly.

An improved communication structure needs to be developed between management, staff and students in the Institutes; in particular there needs to be clear procedures for giving students regular feedback on their performance.

4.13.6 A Standardised System for Tracking Students:

There is a need to establish a standardised tracking system for recording data on student performance across the Institutes of Technology sector. The necessary expertise and technological resources need to be put in place to achieve this.

5. Information, Guidance and Support for Transition to Higher Education

Presentations from the Perspectives of:

- 5.1 Parents;
- 5.2 Students;
- 5.3 Registrars / Directors;
- 5.4 Guidance Counsellor;
- 5.5 Student Counsellor at Third Level.

5.1 Parents

Rose Tully, National Parents Council Post Primary (NPC PP).

5.1.1 Why do our students drop out of college and how many actually “drop out?”

The complete figure seems to be unknown. One has to ask the question, are they really dropping out? The course they are dropping out from may have been their 5th or 6th choice. The student may be planning to re-enter another course the following year. They may be entering employment. They may be planning to re-enter next year knowing they have the points for a different course.

Some who drop out may not have researched the course, some only know the title and the number of points required before entering a course. They might not have the basic background knowledge in the subject at Leaving Certificate level, only the points requirements to enter a specific course. Financial reasons and having to work part-time to exist at college, puts pressure on individuals to drop out. Social difficulties and/or coming from a background of unemployment can be factors causing others to dropout. Failure in an examination can cause some students to dropout. If some students have to stay out of college for a year, it can cause them to lose interest in the course.

5.1.2 How do we address the issue of College Dropout?

It is important that Management in schools allocate the designated amount of time to the area of Guidance and Counselling in schools and training centres. Students should be encouraged to take responsibility for accessing information about courses of interest to them. Both teachers and parents should encourage students to examine information around subject areas rather than around points. By encouraging students to examine their own strengths/intelligence they will become more aware of the foundation that they have developed towards choosing and developing their career path. Parents and teachers should listen to what the student has to say. After all, it is their future at the end of the day. Encouraging input from students attending third level courses, into information nights, should access basic knowledge around college life. Meetings to inform students and parents should be organised by the parents association in consultation with the guidance counsellor and principal in the school.

Supports for students at risk of failing in the education system are needed in both second and third level institutions. Providing better financial support to alleviate financial difficulties for students who are at risk of dropping out of college, due to lack of finance would help greatly. More on-campus accommodation at an affordable rate would keep more students within the system.

Developing a tracking system to establish when and where students go when they leave college would give appropriate information to parents, college authorities and the Department of Education and Science. Targeted interventions could then be put in place to help counteract the dropout. It would also help to verify the actual number of dropouts.

It is important that these issues are addressed now so that the percentage of students who are leaving the system are monitored and encouraged to return to education. Addressing these issues will ensure a more competent work force in the years ahead.

5.1.3 Summary

We can address the issue of College Dropout by:

5.1.3.1 Enabling more access to guidance and counselling in schools.

5.1.3.2 Listening to what the student has to say.

5.1.3.3 Encouraging:

- ❑ students to take responsibility for accessing information about courses of interest to them.
- ❑ students to examine information around subject areas rather than around points.
- ❑ students to examine their own strengths, aptitudes and interests.
- ❑ input from students of similar backgrounds.

5.1.3.4 Providing:

- ❑ better supports for students at risk of failing;
- ❑ better financial support;
- ❑ more on-campus accommodation at an affordable rate;
- ❑ basic knowledge around college life.

5.1.3.5 Developing a tracking system to establish when and where students go, on dropping out of college.

5.2 Guidance Counsellor

Richard Keane, Guidance Counsellor, St. Aidan's School, Whitehall, Dublin 9.

Two of my three children are college *dropouts*. One of them even attended my own school so I was also his guidance counsellor. Clearly, I am a failure both as a parent and as professional!

While I have every sympathy with the Department of Education losing enormous amounts of my tax money on this problem, I have even greater sympathy for the families involved. My own experience has damaged our family coffers to the tune of £8,000 net or around £16,000 before tax which all amounts to about half of a teacher's annual salary. While I do not fancy losing large sums of personal money I am more concerned about the upset and turmoil that these cases cause in many households each year.

So from a personal and professional point of view I welcome today's initiative and look forward to a lively debate with lots of practical outcomes.

As the other speakers have said, there is no simple or single solution. Therefore, I am going to confine my remarks to only a few issues and recommendations within the very limited amount of time available:

- 5.2.1 Guidance perspective on *Non Completion Report*
- 5.2.2 Background - CAO provisions in the context of a guidance practice
- 5.2.3 Medium term strategy/recommendations
- 5.2.4 Short term strategy/recommendations

5.2.1 Guidance perspective on *Non-Completion Report*

I speak in a personal capacity but I am sure that all guidance personnel welcome the report and congratulate the authors on its detail and usefulness. Guidance counsellors have always been aware of the seriousness of the problem from anecdotal information, but as most third level colleges were reluctant to provide this information there was little we could do to alleviate it. We hope the courage shown by the colleges involved in this report will prompt others to follow suit. We hope too that the research findings will get the careful analysis and response they deserve. Combined with today's initiative it should all eventually contribute to the decline in the number of our young people opting out of colleges.

Those with responsibility for the provision of guidance in schools do not seem to emerge too well from this report. In table A2.1 of the report, it appears that nearly 50% of students did not receive any guidance at all on choice of course or college. While on table A2.3, we read that only 13% of school staff influenced students in their decision to go to college. This contrasts with 70% being influenced by family and friends. These figures seem at variance with the findings in the NCGE's *Careers Information Materials in Irish Schools*. Here 67% of guidance counsellors were credited with providing information for students on possible opportunities after school while parents and families got 57% and 52% respectively. (Fig. 3.1) Different questions getting different answers? Perhaps the researchers or statisticians might enlighten us.

Whatever the answers, it appears that all is not well in guidance at second level. The parents' and USI representatives have also reinforced this point of view this morning. Actually, all would be very well if there were an appropriate ratio of guidance counsellors to pupils. Guidance experts generally accept that a ratio in the region of 250 pupils to one guidance counsellor is necessary as the minimum for a quality service. Instead, all guidance counsellors currently have a minimum of 500 students. Some even have up to 800! So, no matter how conscientious and diligent they are the most they can offer is a part time service.

5.2.2 Background – CAO provisions in the context of a guidance practice

As many of you are not guidance practitioners, I am anxious to give you a small flavour of the tasks we perform and to demonstrate how there can be unreal expectations about our delivery. This often leads to what we perceive to be unfair criticism of the Irish guidance service.

To illustrate what I mean, let us briefly look at a few guidance delivery points and appreciate how time consuming each are:

- 5.2.2.1 Responsibility of guidance counsellor.
- 5.2.2.2 Specific responsibility.
- 5.2.2.3 Prioritising guidance provisions.

5.2.2.1 Responsibility of Guidance Counsellor

The Department of Education and Science in its *Guidelines for the Practice of Guidance and Counselling in Second Level Schools* outlines nine areas of responsibility for the guidance counsellor:

1. Counselling.
2. Consultation.
3. Assessment.
4. Information.
5. Classroom guidance activities.
6. Referrals.
- 7. Vocational preparation.**
8. Guidance programme planning.
9. Evaluation of school's guidance needs.

Source: *Guidelines for the Practice of Guidance and Counselling in Second Level Schools*. Department of Education and Science.

5.2.2.2 Specific responsibility

CAO applications come under the general heading of **vocational preparation**. To illustrate my point I will give a brief summary of that area of responsibility highlighting only a few of the practical implications in delivering this area of responsibility and reminding you of the time involved.

(a) Vocational Preparation:

This refers to the provision of experiences that promote the career development of pupils and prepares them for transition to work, training and higher education. Examples of such experiences are:

- work experience/work shadowing;
- visits to workplaces, training institutions, higher education colleges, careers exhibitions;
- participation in presentations by visiting speakers, mini-companies.

Some elements of this work are done in co-operation with the school's work experience co-ordinator. Other activities include:

(b) Higher Options Exhibition:

- Prepare adverts for classrooms and notice boards.
- Initial planning occurs in April when guidance counsellor collects money from individual pupils for tickets.
- In September plenty of advance notice is provided to principal, teachers etc.
- Tickets are distributed, travelling arrangements sign posted etc.
- Guidance counsellor also attends exhibition.

(c) FAS Opportunities '99.

(d) Open days.

(e) FAS/PLC presentation.

(f) College application meeting:

During the CAO application season the guidance department arranges an evening meeting between the current Leaving Certificate pupils and the students from the previous year who have just commenced college.

- All students are contacted, dates confirmed etc.
- Particular emphasis is placed on portfolio preparation during this evening.
- Students are also invited to bring CAO forms and seek assistance with queries.
- Refreshments are provided for the past pupils, letters of thanks etc.

(g) Annual Careers Exhibition:

The exhibition rotates annually between five local schools and is organised by the guidance counsellors. A different theme is chosen each year to reflect current economic and employment trends.

- ❑ Three preliminary meetings are held to arrange for exhibitors, speakers etc.
- ❑ Each guidance counsellor is assigned a number of contacts with whom they correspond, confirm attendance, send thank you notes etc.
- ❑ The host school organises accommodation, travel arrangements, programmes, videoing, collection of admission fees and refreshments. Ordinarily the Parents Council assists, together with student committee.
- ❑ Guidance counsellors attend on the day of the exhibition and remain until all cleaning up etc. is complete.
- ❑ One final meeting is held between guidance counsellors to evaluate the exhibition.

(h) Careers Project / Profiling.

(i) School (Mock) Interviews.

5.2.2.3 Prioritising Guidance Provisions

As the timesheet below indicates, guidance counsellors can have as many as 31 different tasks to perform. For some schools preparing pupils for third level education while important is not a priority. Dealing with early school leavers or counselling students with problems often takes precedence. Most schools, however, probably spend an inordinate amount of time on preparing pupils for entry to college. Middle class parents can be particularly demanding on this one! Telling them about the 500+ to 1 ratio is a futile exercise. Do our early school leavers or those applying for apprenticeships get proportionally the same amount of time? I very much doubt it. When audits become a way of life in guidance, it will be interesting to evaluate whether the balance has been correct.

Guidance Counsellor's Timesheet
Week Beginning.....

Activity	M	T	W	T	F	Total
1. Classroom						
2. Supervision						
3. Interviews						
• Guidance						
• Counselling						
4. Group work						
5. Parents						
• Groups						
• Individuals						
6. Information/library						
7. ICT						
8. Noticeboard						
9. Referrals						
10. Conferences/ Open days / Exhibitions						
11.CAO						
12. UCAS						
13. PLCs						
14. Apprenticeships						
15. Careers Exhibitions						
16. Mock interviews						
17. School Leaver's Report						
18. PTMs/Preparation						
19. Staff meetings						
20. Teacher/management/meetings/individual						
21. Dept. meeting						
22. Administration						
23. Personal training/ inservice						
24. Visitors						
25. Assessment tests						
26. Committees/curriculum etc.						
27. Early School Leavers						
28. Placements						
29. Past Pupils						
30. Cross curricular e.g. enterprise training						
31. European dimension						
Misc.						

5.2.3 Medium Term Solutions

5.2.3.1 Improve the Guidance Quota

Guidance counsellors are very anxious to deliver a quality service to **all** their students, including those college bound. It is imperative that the quota is improved to meet the needs of these young people and fulfil the expectations of their parents.

5.2.3.2 Raise Guidance Standards.

Raising guidance standards will improve all guidance provisions including third level. The National Centre for Guidance in Education, which has only been in existence four years, is already making a huge impact in this regard. The National Centre has produced a range of significant reports. Of particular relevance to today's proceedings is the *Careers Information Materials in Irish Schools*. All the participants in today's conference should have it on their compulsory reading list as it identifies many of the problems and offers solutions in the report's recommendations.

5.2.3.3 Guidance Programme Planning Committee

The National Centre has also convened a number of important national committees to improve guidance standards in Ireland. One of these is the *Guidance Programme Planning Committee*. The outcome of the committee's deliberations will see the development of an internal review of guidance provisions in all schools. The scheme is now at pilot stage and will be implemented in all schools in the next school year.

These are only a few of the National Centre's activities and publications. Further information can be found on its web site or in its Review 1996 – 1999. The work of the National Centre is critical to the future development of a quality guidance service. Its work needs to be highlighted and supported.

5.2.3.4 Research

Experienced guidance counsellors have much anecdotal information on all aspects of guidance provisions including third level. However, it does not replace research findings in seeking to influence the policy makers. As a priority, further analysis of the type and quality produced today, should be undertaken by the appropriate authorities. Some of the colleges who have shied away from releasing figures might then be more accountable.

5.2.3.5 Rationalisation of Guidance Programmes

With the introduction of new programmes and initiatives, guidance modules are now being made more widely available in schools. This is a positive development but some duplication is occurring. It is also a source of concern to guidance counsellors that untrained personnel are delivering these modules including information on third level colleges.

5.2.3.6 Earlier Intervention

It is imperative that guidance provision be made available to our pupils earlier. We welcome the formal inclusion of guidance and counselling in the Junior Cycle. However it alarming to discover that there is no adequate provision for its delivery on timetables. There was a national committee convened by NCGE to address the issues of rationalisation and earlier intervention. That committee should be reconvened.

5.2.4 Short Term Recommendations

5.2.4.1 Guidance Circular

A Department of Education Circular on guidance has not been issued since 1983. For those of you unaccustomed to the ways of the Department, I must explain that Circulars have the power of law in schools. A minority of school principals has ignored the *Guidelines on the Implementation of Guidance Provisions*. The Circular will enforce the implementation of these Guidelines. Rumour has it that there is one on the way. It is long overdue. When it does eventually arrive in schools, we hope it will be generous in its provisions, thus insuring that more pupils will get their guidance entitlements.

5.2.4.2 Minimum Interventions/Entitlements

Each student should get a minimum entitlement in each area of guidance provision. In the area of third level the following should be aspired to:

- *Parents' education*. Parents are the great multipliers of information on third level education. It is a complex area and they need much support. Adequate provision should be made for group and individual meetings.
- *Information/libraries*. Schools vary from those who have information stored in shoeboxes to those with sophisticated library retrieval systems. Some rationalisation and standardisation is called for.
- *Open days*. All students and guidance counsellors will have to be alerted to open days and sufficient provisions will have to be made for attendance. Some rationalisation at a national level will also have to be introduced
- *Career's exhibitions*. As above.
- *Career's projects*. It is desirable that all pupils complete a careers project to include information on third level education.
- *Text books*. Every student should have careers textbook. If other subject teachers demand a textbook why not guidance counsellors.
- *Past pupils*. Meetings with past pupils should be arranged to assist with portfolios, filling of forms etc.
- *August*. Some negotiated arrangement for guidance counsellors to be present when examination results and CAO allocations are announced is desirable.

5.2.4.3 College Experience

As we all know there is huge amount of work experience being availed of by our students. Why not have similar schemes available for college experiences? Some of the colleges have arrangements but these are usually out of the financial reach of most of our pupils.

5.2.4.4 CAO Handbook

The Handbook gets nine out of ten on content but on presentation it rates very poorly. Give it to a design firm and make it more attractive and readable for our students.

5.2.4.5 Prospectuses

- The standard of prospectuses has improved dramatically. However, there are some which are difficult for practitioners to read, let alone a child, e.g. use of academic jargon or omission of basic information like indices. Equally, students are not impressed with the CEOs photo on the inside front page.
- Irish prospectuses must arrive on time. See the UCAS system for a model of on time delivery.

5.2.4.6 Modern Technology/Teleconferencing/E-mails

The promise of significant IT equipment and software by the Department of Education for all guidance counsellors is very welcome. Proper access to good software will revolutionise this aspect of the CAO process. Novel approaches like virtual college tours and video conferencing between students will also help. This filtering is very desirable but it should not allow us to lose sight of the important mediation role played by guidance counsellors.

5.2.4.7 Publishers

Because of the small market it has been difficult for Irish publishers to survive, much less maintain standards in career publications. Some intervention or assistance would be welcome.

5.2.4.8 Bias

Many guidance counsellors have a bias in favour of third level education. It is an area, with which we are comfortable explaining and promoting. However, at a time of high employment it might be much more appropriate that we use the same energies to promote direct entry to the work place. For many of our students their long-term employment prospects are just as well catered here as they would be by going the college route.

Complimentary and alternative part time education and training will have to be provided to enhance skills and allow for progression. Employers with government assistance and incentives ought to fill this gap.

5.2.4.9 “Bums on seats”

There will always be a healthy tension between guidance counsellors and admission officers. Admission officers have a responsibility to get students into their college. Guidance counsellors have a responsibility to make sure that the college is the most appropriate one for their student's needs. Today we might fruitfully discuss the role of college marketing and P.R.

5.2.4.10 Implement all of the recommendations in the *Careers Information Materials Report*

Finally, I must defend my family's honour and my professional reputation. At the outset, I mentioned that two of my children are college *dropouts*. The good news is that they dropped back in again. One is now a successful psychology graduate, which is completely different to her original choice of becoming a biochemist. The other is in the final year of an outdoor pursuits course. Today, he is scaling a snowy Scottish mountain peak. His mother may be very apprehensive, but he himself is a very happy young man fulfilling his dreams and pursuing his passion in life.

There are two simple messages from my personal experience, which are reinforced by the research findings:

1. Older students make wiser decisions. It should encourage us to look more at gap years/TYPs/PLCs and anything that will have more mature students entering our colleges;
2. Quality information and mediation should be available. If families as qualified as my own can get it so wrong, what chance do the majority of households have without adequate guidance support and assistance?

5.3 Students

Ian Russell, Education Officer, USI

The issue of non-completion of courses at third level has received a good deal of coverage in recent times. Numerous studies, conferences and publications have dealt with the issue and this coverage has led to some extra resources being channelled into attempts to alleviate the problem. In the 1999 Budget, the Department of Education and Science was allocated £1.5 million to spend in the area. In addition, this Summer when the non-tuition charge was increased from £260 to £278, the Minister for Education and Science stipulated - as he can under sections 17 and 18 of the RTC and DIT Acts, respectively - that the Dublin Institute of Technology and the Institutes of Technology must spend £8 of the £18 on measures related to non-completion and disadvantaged access.

Of course, the questions everyone wants answered are:

1. What are the principal causes of non-completion?
2. What measures can be taken to minimise non-completion?

The answers are not straightforward.

In dealing with non-completion, we are dealing with a series of often very difficult personal decisions made by students. Naturally, the reasons for these decisions are complex and varied. Undoubtedly factors such as interest in and suitability for the chosen course of study, as well as personal, family and financial considerations must be taken into account. There is also the issue of academic standards, which may be incompatible with a 100 per cent completion rate.

To try to answer the questions I will look at some of the recent research in this area. I will focus on three studies:

- 5.3.1 The study undertaken by Dundalk, Carlow and Tralee Institutes of Technology.
- 5.3.2 The research undertaken by the Commission on the Points System
- 5.3.3 The Survey of participants on the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) Scheme undertaken in 1997 by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs.

5.3.1 Three ITs Study

The principal institutional factors were lack of facilities and support services in the Institutes to meet course requirements and poor communication between staff and students. Another principal factor was a lack of information and guidance on course and career options both at second and throughout third level.

The report made a number of recommendations, including:

- (i) Providing additional supports for students entering without adequate academic skills;
- (ii) More ongoing guidance and support at second level and while attending college;
- (iii) Improvements in both the scope and the level of higher education maintenance grants;
- (iv) Substantial investment in student support services in the Institutes, as students on low incomes are especially reliant on the college resources to complete their courses;
- (v) Improved communication structure need to be developed between management, staff and students in the Institutes.

5.3.2 The Commission on the Points System

On average, 26 per cent of the sample who had commenced their course of study in 1992 had not yet completed their studies. This broke down as 13% non-completion in the universities and 39% in the institutes of technology.

5.3.3 Survey of Participants in the Back to Education Allowance Scheme

In 1997 the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs commissioned a survey of participants who availed of the Back to Education Scheme in the 1993/94 academic year. The findings are based on the responses of one hundred and twenty people who participated in the survey.

There was a very high success rate among participants with 84 per cent of those surveyed having graduated. Those who did not graduate or who left college midway accounted for 12 per cent. A small portion (4 per cent) was still studying and expected to complete by the end of 1997 or some time in 1998.

The 12 per cent non-completion rate is startling when compared with the 26 per cent of the Commission on the Points System. To explain this significant difference it may be worth calling to mind the differences between the BTEA students and standard students.

- ❑ BTEA students must be at least 21 years of age.
- ❑ BTEA students must be in receipt of social welfare for at least six months.
- ❑ BTEA students receive £73.50 plus any secondary benefits. They may also apply for a maintenance grant. A student under the BTEA scheme could, therefore be in receipt of over £140.00 per week (£73.50 + £21.90 rent allowance + £47.00 grant). "Standard" students receive at a maximum a maintenance grant of £47.00.

You can draw your own conclusions from these facts - in comparison with the non-completion rates detailed in the other two studies.

Before listing some recommendations, I do want to mention one other piece of research that is of interest in the context of non-completion. The Law Faculty of the Southampton Institute have recently found that law students whose degrees are broken down into units and taught in semesters get lower grades than students studying under the old three-term academic cycle. David Bailey, head of academic operations, believes concerns about the impact of semesterisation on weaker students are widespread and growing and the old three-term year will return to dominate university teaching. The difference in the pass rates of the two cohorts of students studying under semesterised and non-semesterised systems was more than 17 per cent according to the research. Could semesterisation be contributing to the problem of non-completion?

5.3.4 Recommendations

5.3.4.1 Initiatives to identify and support students in difficulties

- Third level institutions should be encouraged to develop comprehensive student support structures. In relation to non-completion, we would emphasise the development of Personal Tutors/Students Advisors, Student Peer Supports and Study Skills classes. The personal tutor/advisor would act as a guide to the students and in particular help with any personal difficulties. He/she would also act as an interface between the students and the institution. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) Guidelines for the Development of Student Services state: *"Such a role entails selectivity in the choice of personal tutors and a need for training and continuing support, including clear written guidelines as to their role. The personal tutor/student advisor service must have a clearly defined identity and should be distinguished from the study advisor/course tutor service which fulfils an academic role."*
- The Student Peer Support System (Buddy System) would consist of a system of trained student peer assistants to act as a support to new entrants. Any students who make themselves available for this service should receive acknowledgement from the Institution. The Peer Support groups could be co-ordinated by the students union.
- Anecdotal evidence would also suggest that "drop-out" is in many ways a seasonal phenomenon. Many students make their decision to abandon studies over the Christmas break. Any support structure needs to acknowledge this fact.
- The HEA or Department of Education and Science should if necessary, fund these initiatives by way of targeted initiatives (as is the case for hardship funds) as appropriate.

5.3.4.2 Review of Semesterisation.

Funds should be allocated for a review of the effects of semesterisation on the student experience of third level. USI is currently undertaking some research in this area.

5.3.4.3 Capital Investment in Facilities at Third-Level

In the 1990's we have seen a massive increase in student numbers at third level. Unfortunately, this has not been matched by proportionate increases in capital investment. In fact, in the ten years from 1988 to 1998 the amount invested per student on buildings in Irish universities fell from £342 per place to £243. The Minister can not continue to expand the system without seriously addressing this issue. As the survey of non-completion in the three ITs points out, students from lower-income backgrounds are more reliant on college facilities. They are less likely to have their own lap-top computers or copies of course text-books. And so, they are more reliant on the library and computer facilities.

5.5.4.4 Investment in Infrastructure, Equipment and Facilities

USI supports:

- ❑ The call by the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities for an investment of £460m to provide for the expansion and modernisation of university infrastructure, equipment and facilities.
- ❑ The call by the Conference of Directors of Institutes of Technology for an investment of £763 in the country's 13 institutes of technology.

We note that the National Development Plan includes £1.6 billion for education infrastructure at all levels. We look forward to hearing the detail of this investment.

5.3.4.5 Student Financial Support

Any revised system of student financial support must make additional resources available to those students most at risk of non-completion, i.e. students from a disadvantaged background. Any initiative in this area should link in with the £3 million fund to tackle disadvantage participation at third level and a review of the grants system.

In terms of grant reform there are many issues to be addressed, including:

- ❑ A more tapered system of grant entitlement.
- ❑ Independent assessment for some students under 23.
- ❑ Extra support for those studying in areas where there is a high cost of living.
- ❑ The relationship between the amount of grant receivable by those within and outside 15 miles of their place of study.
- ❑ Centralisation of the application process.

However, while all these and other areas need to be addressed, it would be very useful if the Government could give an indication of where it sees the optimum level of student financial support. This could be done through a process of target setting, as was the case with Social Welfare Payments. The Minister is on record as saying that the grant should be increased as resources permit. This is laudable. However, what are these targets? Is there a plan for reaching these targets?

Perhaps the term "drop-out" needs to be changed as in many cases these students may go to another institution, course or place of employment. "Drop-out" implies failure and perhaps what we are talking about is a re-direction in a student's career and thus students should not be penalised financially for what may be a better decision.

Many other European countries' grant systems allow students a "second chance", the Irish system should do likewise. The NCEA announced recently that there are now 760 NCEA courses. When one adds the courses available in other institutions to this number, the array of possible study options facing the student is bewildering. And, this choice is usually made by a 17 or 18 year old who is already under a deal of pressure preparing for the Leaving Certificate examination. This situation leads to a sense of the choice of course being a "*once-off, high stakes*" choice and if the choice proves less than perfect the student is left feeling like a failure. We must address this.

5.3.4.6 Attitudes.

There is a sense of elitism in some secondary schools. Universities and Institutes of Technology, for many, are the only option acceptable to some students when in fact there are many routes to a successful and rewarding career out there. It is hoped that with the new Qualifications Act, these routes become much more visible and accessible to the student. As an example, there are many PLC colleges out there, which offer a valuable route not only to employment but also to further study.

In closing, can I thank you for inviting me to speak to you here today and wish your conference every success.

5.3 Registrars / Directors

Dr. Dermot J Douglas, Registrar, Institute of Technology, Tallaght.

5.4.1 Introduction

The issue of poor retention of students in Institutes of Technology is multifaceted. It is a reflection of individual student problems, either personal or with the Institute, and, as such, there are as many solutions as there are reasons. In attempting to cope with the issue, however, it is necessary for us to try and group these problems into broad classes, which may be amenable to solution.

One of the problems which frequently arise in discussion on the issues of retention and progression is that we do not all use the same language. The same term is often used to describe two completely different situations. For the purpose of this paper the following definitions are used:

- Withdrawal – student certifies in writing that he/she wishes to withdraw from the course in the period between registration and summer examinations
- Drop-out – certified and uncertified withdrawals in the period between registration and summer examinations
- Non-progression – those who drop-out, those who fail in examinations and those who pass but leave to take up work

5.4.2 Recent Statistics

The annual drop-out (certified and uncertified withdrawals) in the Institute of Technology Tallaght, for the period 1992 to 1999, averaged 5.5%.

Ratio of Withdrawals by study area for the period 1995 to 1999 is given in Table 1 below.

Department	95/96	96/97	97/98	98/99
Business Studies	0.07	0.19	0.37	0.08
Computing	0.00	0.17	0.17	0.12
Science	0.06	0.26	0.16	0.09
Electronic Engineering	0.36	0.19	0.07	0.23
Mechanical Engineering	0.50	0.19	0.21	0.10

Table 1: Withdrawal by college department (1995 – 1999)

As can be seen from Table 1, no clear pattern emerges from these figures.

The distortion in numbers apparent in 1995/1996 represents the fact that in this year we recorded withdrawals for the first time and the students in Engineering were more conscientious in filling in withdrawal forms than the students in other faculties. Of those who withdrew over this period, males were more likely to leave than females. The average over the period represented in our statistics is 60% male and 40% female. Most withdrawals (60%) take place in the first half of the academic year (i.e. in the period September to January).

5.4.3 Reason for Withdrawal

What is interesting about Table 2 (below) is that half of those who withdrew did so for positive reasons. A quarter of those who left did so because they experienced some academic difficulties and the remaining quarter left for personal reasons.

To take up another course	40%
Poor course choice	16%
To take up employment	15%
Academic difficulties	10%
Personal/family reasons	5%
Financial difficulties	5%
Unspecified	9%

Table 2. Reasons for Withdrawal

The principal reasons why students drop-out of college, other than for reasons beyond their control are:

- ❑ WRONG Course Choice
- ❑ Only Course Offer

The former generally occurs as a result of poor research or no research into the course choices listed by the student on the CAO application form. Peer and/or parental pressure to make uninformed choices invariably cause problems.

The latter occurs where a student is offered a low preference based on Leaving Certificate performance and these low preference course choices are often ill-researched or included as space-fillers on the application form.

The problem of drop-out is largely a feature of first year and is generally a reflection of unrealised expectations or complete surprise at what a course involves either in terms of content or the required effort.

- ❑ Of those who drop-out, our surveys show that approximately 90% take up work, further study or both.

5.4.4 Solutions

I believe that the multiplicity of reasons for dropout can be summarised under one heading, viz. incorrect or inappropriate expectations on the part of the student. On this basis a number of solutions present themselves:

- ❑ Improved college and course publicity – user friendly English
- ❑ Links to partner schools
- ❑ Taster sessions
- ❑ Specialist guidance provided by higher education college academic specialists to second level schools
- ❑ Pre-course briefings – between offer and acceptance
- ❑ Realistic induction programmes setting out requirements, demands and dividends
- ❑ Use of the so-called “Buddy” system – current students can “*tell it as it is.*”

5.4.5 Student Performance in Exams

Retention is predominantly a reflection of student performance in examinations. This is most graphically reflected in performance at first year level. In the Institute of Technology, Tallaght the average pass rate (i.e. the proportion of those who sit and pass) in examinations is given in Table 3 below:

First Year	National Certificate	National Diploma	Bachelor Degree (Hons.)	Overall average
71%	82.5%	92%	96%	75%

Table 3. Average pass rates (first year to fourth year) in the period 1992 to 1998.

Averages, such as these can disguise the fact that individual pockets of very poor performance can occur. Analysis of failure rates over the last seven years has shown some significant levels of under-achievement. In 1994/1995 the pass rate in first year computing was about 46% while electronic engineering recorded a low of 42% in the same year. It is evident from all our figures that first year is the major academic hurdle.

As a result of our analysis of exam results, Course Boards identified the following as major contributory factors to poor performance:

- ❑ Students who accept places often have poor appreciation of what level of study is required in higher education.
- ❑ Students are often unsure of what the programme they have accepted entails and are unable to cope with the demands of unexpected subjects.
- ❑ First year students are often unable to undertake the type of autonomous work involved in higher education.
- ❑ Many first year students – particularly those with average or below average Leaving Certificates – are poorly motivated.

- ❑ Part-time work/part-time attendance at class. This is a growing problem in both second level and in higher education. Studies in IT Tallaght have shown that students who undertake more than 12 hours of part-time paid employment and those who attend less than 75% of the scheduled teaching hours are at academic risk. More than 90% of first year students were already engaged in part-time work or actively seeking work. The majority of these (62%) worked between 10 and 20 hours per week while 13% worked more than 20 hours.
- ❑ Financial problems.
- ❑ Relationships/Personal/Family.

5.4.6 Retention Initiatives

Remedial actions taken in the IT Tallaght have included:

5.4.6.1 Review of Course Requirements

We have done this in computing and engineering, with some success. It has taken the form of:

- ❑ Rescheduling platform modules to an early stage (e.g. physics in Electronic Engineering).
- ❑ Early formative evaluation and remediation in challenging subjects – particularly mathematics.
- ❑ Re-design of modules.
- ❑ Better teaching methods.

Currently, all our courses are undergoing review and re-design, which is informed by our experience, particularly over the last five years.

5.4.6.2 In-Course Information/Guidance and Support

This has been provided through the following mechanisms:

- ❑ Streamlined induction programmes in technological disciplines.
- ❑ Wider use of tutorials.
- ❑ Use of CBT.
- ❑ Free book schemes.
- ❑ Hardship fund.
- ❑ Employment of a full-time student counsellor.

5.4.6.3 Progression Rates

The cumulative effect of drop-out and failure in examinations is that students do not progress to second or subsequent years. Table 4, below, shows progression rates in IT Tallaght over the past 7 years.

Average 1992/1997		Actual 1998/1999	
Business	78%	Business	90%
Computing	62%	Computing	85%
Science	64%	Science	61%
Electronics	56%	Electronics	63%
Mechanical	64%	Mechanical	63%
		<i>Faculty Target set in 1997</i>	<i>70%</i>
		<i>Overall Target set in 1997</i>	<i>75%</i>
Overall	69%	Overall	75%

Table 4. Progression rates 1992 – 1999.

The above figures show that our retention initiatives for first year students have been successful in both electronics and computing. However, difficulties still exist with both science and mechanical engineering. While we have achieved the overall institutional target we set in 1997, we still have to achieve the faculty average in all areas. These targets represented the improvements we set as achievable aims in 1997, and represent the basis upon which future improvements in retention will be built.

It is interesting to note that a small, but growing, number of those who pass do not progress as they enter the workforce. Many of these students return onto our part-time programmes, either funding themselves or being supported by their employer.

The falling population of school-leavers, the requirement for knowledge-based working and the buoyant state of the economy suggests strongly that we need to re-define our attitudes to educational success and failure and that we need to modify our higher educational provision to suit the demands of our potential future customer. Industrial imperatives can no longer be ignored nor can the demand by students for more flexible and accessible modes of higher education.

5.4.6.4 Shortcomings in IT Services

System-wide shortcomings, which need to be addressed urgently, include:

- Poor academic support services.
- Crowded/poorly stocked libraries.
- Lack of open access to computers.
- Poor use of distance education and ICT.
- Restricted tutorial/mentoring systems.
- Lack of a safety-net for students in academic trouble.
- Lack of appropriate academic forgiveness mechanisms.
- No change of mind facility for poor course choice.

5.4.6.5 Redefining “Dropout”

In our attempts to address the issues of retention and progression, we should be careful that we don't regard everything solely in a negative light. As a nation we are quicker to condemn than praise and more ready to point to failure than celebrate achievement. In making our judgements, we are quick to blame individuals for their seeming failures or institutions for their seeming shortcomings.

Not every drop-out is a failure. Not everyone who doesn't progress is a failure. People drop-out for positive as well as negative reasons. Sometimes this represents re-orientation to access more acceptable educational opportunities, sharpening of focus to assess real career aspirations or simply a desire to take up employment opportunities. Rather than only examine the issues as problems we should also look at them as opportunities. Opportunities to re-assess how we do our business, whether the business we are doing is relevant to the needs of the new century, and whether we are remaining stagnant while our potential clientele speeds past us.

We are quick to make snap judgements, which, in the light of events, often prove fallible. In my experience, many drop-outs are waiting for the right arena or the right opportunity to prove themselves. Given a second or even a third chance many excel and by doing so highlight the fallibility of those who made superficial judgements about them in environments for which they were patently unsuited. The phrase “learn by your mistakes” is often best exemplified by those who have the courage to admit they made a wrong choice and leave, but ignored by those who “stick with it,” despite total lack of interest in their course choice and the subsequent career they follow. The former holds the potential for job satisfaction and happiness, the latter the certainty of dissatisfaction with work and the associated negative impacts on all aspects of life.

5.5 Student Counsellor at Third Level

Dr Susan Lindsay, Counselling Psychologist, DIT.

5.5.1 Introduction

My plan in this short presentation is to provide you with a psychological framework with which to view the concept of student retention. I will be drawing upon findings from international and national studies in my talk as well as findings from my own doctorate study in which I investigated the factors which influenced the well being and withdrawal of a sample of students within the DIT. Essentially the focus of my talk will be on the first year experience because students tend to be more at risk at this time.

There is growing recognition that there is a constellation of reasons why students do not complete higher education. However, in my research, I have noted that there tends to be an implicit deficit model of the student inherent in much of the thinking in this area. In other words, there is something wrong with the student if he/she decides to leave. There is an assumption that drop out can be explained in terms of differences in background ability, motivation etc., between those who complete and those who did not complete.

This approach does tend to let institutions off the hook.

When I first became interested in this area many years ago, the question that I posed is why do some students, experiencing the same level of stress, cope more successfully than other students?

I would argue that the student deficit model is insufficient in explaining why. I believe that the institutional characteristics and culture may also play a significant role in determining which students stay and which students leave.

I would hold the view that what happens to students is some combination of who they are and what happens to them after they arrive.

5.5.2 The First Year Experience

There is a consensus in the literature in this area that the transition through the first year experience can create considerable anxiety and stress among many students and can induce a crisis which can affect their withdrawal/completion behaviour. Some authors would go as far as to say that the college days may be the most stressful encountered in one's life. Certainly, the increasing number of students reporting college related stress is an indicator that students do feel under strain at this time. Some researchers would argue that the drop out rates represents a flight response, in which there is a mismatch between the students and their college. These vulnerable students wish to distance themselves from the source of stress.

In the first year nearly 60% of a sample of 262 students reported some degree of stress and nearly 40% of the well being of the students declined to some degree from year 1 to year 2.

The factors that predicted distress and withdrawal were:

- age (as age increased, students were more inclined to be distressed and/or withdrew);
- first generation students (possibly due to the fact they lacked role models or because there was an absence of emotional/financial support within the family).

There were a number of other factors, which predicted distress, and withdrawal and this included the issue of control. Subjects who perceived that they had less control over their situation exhibited more distress. The issue of losing control was very commonly reported by first year students and yet it is inevitable that as they learn to adjust to a new environment, there will be times when they won't always be in control, but this created considerable anxiety among many new students.

Students, who perceived that their stress was new, and did not have adequate information about what they were facing, were also more stressed than those who were better informed. This was also highlighted in the Carpenter, Healy and Lynch study. One interesting finding was that students in their first year engaged in a wide variety of coping efforts, but I would suggest that this was due to the fact that they are searching for a workable solution and they expended considerable effort in coping with their new situations. Overall, I found that students who used avoidance coping were more distressed and more likely to withdraw than students who used more approach coping. In terms of support, I found that emotional support from peers was a critical factor in determining well being of the first year students while practical support lowered the distress levels of students as they progressed into their second year.

5.5.3 What can we do to help?

I would like to put forward some suggestions about how we might help students adjust more resourcefully to college life.

Firstly, I believe that it is important for anyone who has any contact with students to build up their own knowledge of the context in which students learn and develop in college. Institutions tend to just focus on their student's role as learners and forget about the other roles that they are engaged in. In particular, attention needs to be paid to entering students' backgrounds and characteristics so we can provide programmes or interventions, which meet specific needs. With this in mind, the DIT is collaborating with the Educational Research Unit in carrying out some action research into this area. In addition to tracking students through a number of years, we are also surveying all first year students in order to obtain information on their backgrounds and characteristics.

Chickering who has written extensively in this area argued that higher education would only be educationally effective, if it connects significantly with those concerns of central importance to students.

The college experience, however, can be experienced in different ways, depending upon the students personal or life circumstances. Most students as Earwaker (1992) noted, are in a state of high arousal during this time in which their resources can be fully stretched.

Ryle (1966), in his classic book *'Student Casualties'* noted that when students enter higher education, there is an abrupt alteration in status from a position where they enter into a community with new freedom and responsibilities and where peer pressure can be quite extreme.

In some ways, entering higher education can be compared to entering a foreign country. Some students experience a form of culture shock; there is a new language to be learnt, hidden norms of behaviour and values to be acquired. Specific subsets of the population may also experience more difficulties than others in adjusting to this new culture, for example, first generation students, students from smaller rural communities, etc.

The literature also shows that female students experience or report more stress. Tyrell (1994) in an Irish study on student stress found there was a tendency for female students to rate issues as more stressful than males. However, this did not indicate that they were more inclined to withdraw than males. But one can argue that it is culturally more acceptable for females to discuss their personal problems than males. The sad reality is that young males do appear to be more vulnerable as statistically they are more inclined to take their own lives than females. I would note that in our own Institute, it is frequently the males who often don't confide in anyone if they are considering leaving.

5.5.4 Prior Vulnerabilities

One has to acknowledge that there are some students who are vulnerable prior to entering higher education. They may have a predisposition to becoming distressed and may react adversely to even minor threats in their environment. There is substantial evidence, which shows that the new standards and strains associated with higher education might intensify these individuals' vulnerability to the effects of prior interpersonal and/or psychological difficulties.

Considerable attention is also paid in the literature to the developmental context in which students can find themselves in, as it can lead to increasing levels of stress and withdrawal. This is especially true of students who fall between the age of 18 and 22, as they are in that transition between adolescence and adulthood. What is at stake for these students, according to Grayson (1989) is their sense of self, but also how they handle the core developmental tasks of identity, separation and intimacy. Of course, not all stress can be attributed to these issues. There are other issues such as basic survival needs, for example financial problems that can be a considerable source of stress for many students.

5.5.5 Findings of Lindsay Study

I would now like to discuss very briefly findings from my own study, which I hope will give you some insights into the issues impacting upon students.

- Institutions need to adopt a holistic or whole approach to the student and help the student to develop personally as well as academically. An institutional climate exerts a very powerful influence on entering students. Therefore, the institution needs to identify elements that enhance student success as well to try eliminating elements that militate against student success.
- There is also a critical need to implement a first year seminar for all new students. Most institutions do have induction programmes, which welcome new students in, but we need to go further than this and extend the induction programme throughout the first term; with a follow up seminar later on in the second term.
- Finally, institutions that are committed to educational excellence must understand the multiple factors that affect successes and develop policies and resources, which enhance success. Once the institutions show some commitment to this area, only then will we begin to create a better match between the student and the higher educational environment.

6. Discussion Groups

Participants in the colloquium were divided into discussion groups. In this section, the deliberations of these four discussion groups are reported. Each discussion group was asked to address a specific theme:

1. Defining best practice in preparing post-primary pupils for higher education.
2. Defining best practice for receiving and supporting students in higher education.
3. Defining best practice in support materials and methods of dissemination produced by higher education institutions.
4. Tracking and evaluation of students.

6.1 Discussion Group A

Defining Best Practice in Preparing Post-Primary Pupils for Higher Education

Chairperson: Tim Lynch (IGC)
Rapporteur: Breeda Coyle (IGC)

The main themes discussed in the group were as follows:

- ❑ Part-time work.
- ❑ Elements of good practice – some examples.
- ❑ What more needs to be done?
- ❑ What learning activities do young people need to undertake to prepare for Higher Education?
- ❑ What is careers education?
- ❑ What role can parents play?
- ❑ Main Recommendations.

6.1.1 Part-time work

The first issue raised was that of students engaging in part-time work, as referred to on page 61 of the Three ITs study. It was noted that research from third level shows that students should not work more than 12 hours per week. In IT Tallaght for instance, students sign contracts not to work between Monday and Friday. IT Tallaght is considering setting up a placement agency in order to ensure that students get work which is related to their field of study.

6.1.2 Elements of good practice – some examples

It was strongly felt that the notion of each student having a personal tutor was a laudable one. It was noted by the group that even though no in-depth studies have been done, anecdotal evidence suggests that students who have done the new curricular programmes such as Transition Year Option, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and Leaving Certificate Applied Programme seem to perform better personally and academically than other students, when they reach third level.

6.1.3 What more needs to be done?

- Information on course content should be provided on the Internet in addition to college prospectuses as it was felt that many students are more inclined to accessing information in this manner than through reading material.
- Prospectuses should not be written solely by academics, the language used should be clear, simple concise everyday English. They should all ideally obtain the *Crystal Mark* from the *Plain English Campaign*.
- Second-level students also need to be given every encouragement to come forward and utilise guidance personnel and resources.
- The availability of vast amounts of information on college courses and content, on further education, on training and on careers, requires that all this information needs to be mediated through a guidance counsellor.
- A dedicated telephone line to provide immediate and direct access to third-level sources of information should be provided for all guidance counsellors.
- Strategies need to be developed which will assist students to undertake their own research competently (i.e. similar to Centigrade Research Sheets).

6.1.4 What learning activities do young people need to undertake to prepare for Higher Education?

- They need to be given opportunities to undertake and to deliver autonomous learning projects related to career choice, meeting deadlines etc. and to take responsibility for their own learning and research (i.e. to have real ownership over their decisions).
- Students need to learn how to communicate their needs to guidance and other school personnel.
- Students need to know who to ask, for information and advice.
- Students in Dublin in particular need to be encouraged to seriously consider course options outside of Dublin.
- Students should be encouraged to interface with third level institutions directly themselves, rather than through parents, etc.

6.1.5 What is careers education?

- It was felt that Careers Education involved not only a knowledge of the field of opportunities available but also a knowledge of a student's own aptitudes, interests and learning styles. Armed with this, the person can then go on to make appropriate career/course choices.

- ❑ The group was of the opinion that public expectations are often too high, of what schools can deliver in the area of careers education.
- ❑ As part of careers education, reference should be made to 'living away from home'.

6.1.6 What role can parents play?

- ❑ Parents could be enlisted to help with careers days and other careers related events in schools.
- ❑ Parents should be encouraged to help students to research their own interests in their free time.
- ❑ Parents should encourage and assist students to have relevant questions prepared in advance of appointments with the guidance counsellor in order to make the best use of the little time available for each student.
- ❑ Parents should be encouraged to keep a 'hands-off' approach when students are choosing college courses and not to attempt to unduly influence the decision-making process. The students should take final responsibility for the choices they make.

6.1.7 Main Recommendations

1. Students must be taught to take more responsibility for their own learning and research.
2. If particular Leaving Certificate subjects are specified for entry to third level courses (paramedical courses), then all schools should be required to provide these subjects, regardless of school size.
3. The current pupil:guidance counsellor ratio must be improved significantly.
4. A circular to this effect must be published by the Department of Education and Science with immediate effect.
5. A tracking system for students at second level should be introduced. There should be links established between such a system and the equivalent third level structure already in place. Personal tutors, "buddy" and "big brother" systems should be mainstreamed in schools.
6. Structures to facilitate 'stepping back' into the second level system should be expanded and made more flexible.
7. Many students find websites easier to navigate than prospectuses, internet access for guidance should be available to students in school both within and outside the timetable.
8. Parents should be kept well informed of college application procedures.

6.2 Discussion Group B

Defining Best Practice for Receiving and Supporting Students in Higher Education

Chairperson: Vincent Lennon (IT Tallaght)

Rapporteur: Peter Brown (DIT)

The issue was addressed in the context of 9 key areas:

1. Student induction and orientation / Personal Development.
2. Communication structures to support students.
3. 'Buddy' and Peer sitemaps.
4. Academic Support.
5. Issue of Part-time Working.
6. Teaching and Learning Development.
7. Course Transfer Mechanisms.
8. Other.
9. Recommendations.

6.2.1 Student Induction and Orientation / Personal Development

It was felt that there is much to be done in this area and that models for best practice are few (if any).

Students are bombarded with information upon arrival in third level institutions relating to courses, facilities and services, clubs/societies/entertainment etc. In addition to this, there is increasing targeting among commercial interests e.g. banks, beer companies etc. It was perceived that the magnitude of information required to be absorbed within the typical time-frames was too much and perhaps would mitigate against orientating the student properly. It was felt that induction and orientation programmes should move away from this and should be spread over months rather than days.

6.2.2 Communication Systems to Support Students

A number of observations were made within the group, namely:

- Students identify heavily with the department or school that their course is allied to. This has ramifications for the effectiveness of student support measures. Central student support units must be cognisant of this and must work in an integrated way and in conjunction with departments.
- Adequate resourcing of student support services is required so that personnel are not forced into the position of always being re-active, but rather have the time also to input into the planning and development process around student support structures and initiatives.

- ❑ C.I.T, over the last few years has developed towards an integrated Student Advisory Service. This reflects the issue that the boundaries or distinctions are increasingly blurred between Career/Education issues and Personal issues.
- ❑ Student Development Advisory Group, such as exists in D.I.T, can provide a forum in which representatives of all central and faculty based departments dealing with students can work together on measures to enhance student support and identify the kind of funding required to do this.
- ❑ How do we motivate/gently coerce students to utilise student support services? In NCI for example, time has been incorporated into academic schedules to work on this. However many students see this time as free time and attendance on these modules can be a problem.
- ❑ There was agreement that students want more contact with/feedback from lecturers but can be very intimidated, (especially first year) in a new environment. However, there are no real structures to facilitate this. Better communication and feedback largely depend on the style of individual lecturers.
- ❑ NCI's experience is that the presence of matures students on courses with younger students can have a positive effect. Mature students are much more likely to have the confidence to approach and utilise students' services. These mature students act as positive role models in this area.
- ❑ Recognition was given to the fact that academic staff can be uncomfortable and can lack the "people skills" to deal with students who approach them for support, the difficulties are often on both sides. In DIT, training has been provided to lecturers to enable them to deal with young students more effectively.

6.2.2 Peer Support and Buddy Systems

The group was strongly of the opinion that the 'Buddy System' model can be a vital component for effective socialisation and support of students. A scheme is currently up-and-running in NUI Galway whereby senior students are trained in basic listening, communication and befriending skills.

It was recognised that setting up a buddy system involves a lot of work and the co-operation of relevant groups such as the Students Union is vital. In the USA, buddy systems are well established. In many institutions, students acting as buddies are assessed by an expert and receive 'skills accreditation' which is of value on their CV.

6.2.4 Academic Support

As participation in 3rd level education has widened, the need for a 'best practice' model for the provision of additional academic support to needy students was highlighted.

A number of problems were identified in this area:

- ❑ Students who require the extra tuition often do not or cannot identify this need themselves.

- Tutorials often serve to improve the top performers in a course rather than the middle-to-low performers.

Academic support was seen by the discussion group as an essential component of measures to improve and maintain satisfactory completion rates.

A tutorial scheme has been initiated in IT Tallaght in the Engineering faculty, as one of the responses to concern over completion rates on particular courses.

The Government is to fund measures to enhance Access and Retention at third level, mainly in the IT sector. This will allow institutions to address the whole issue of additional academic support and hopefully further models of best practice in this area will emerge over the coming years.

6.2.5 Part-Time Working

The group expressed concern at the levels of 'part-time' work that is being undertaken by students at third level.

- Several group members felt that many students are now working many hours beyond that which was necessary to provide for basic needs. Rather they are working to fund ever increasing social activities and entertainment. Time which is needed for academic work is being eaten up by time spent working and then socialising.
- The phenomenon of student part-time employment and how it impacts on other aspects of student life is a relatively new one which has emerged with the advent of the Celtic Tiger and the demand for labour in the service sector. Third level institutions are only now coming to terms with the problem and looking at ways of playing a more pro-active role.
- In IT Tallaght for instance, consideration is being given to whether the college should take on the role of a 'placement agency', thus facilitating students to get work, at reasonable hours, in sectors which complement their area of study.

6.2.6 Teaching and Learning Development

- There was a strong feeling in the group that the development of best practice in these areas should be a key component of the student support strategy.
- It was recognised that students learn in different ways and have different learning styles. Initiatives should be put in place, which develop awareness among students of their learning styles and their strengths and weaknesses in learning. Such modules should be incorporated into the curriculum. A number of third level institutions already run various learning/study skills development modules for students, but these are mostly outside the course curriculum and are voluntary in nature.

- In an increasingly fast-changing and technology-led world, and in the context of the need for life-long learning, third level institutions need to do more than just teach particular disciplines. They should also be teaching us how to be effective learners throughout life.
- Similarly, group members saw the recognition, fostering and encouragement of excellence in teaching/lecturing as very important. All students are entitled to receive a consistently high standard of teaching. Discussion also took place on how third level institutions should tackle poor teaching. It was recognised by the group that many teachers and lecturers in third level institutions have no formal training in this respect – unlike their colleagues at first and second levels.
- The group noted that the whole area of teaching appraisal and enhancement was a sensitive issue, for obvious reasons. It was hoped that a partnership approach with teaching/lecturing unions would ensure progress for all concerned.

6.2.7 Course Transfers

There was insufficient time for adequate discussion on this area.

- The issue was raised that third level institutions need to look at partnership arrangements and the development of an integrated system for better transfer opportunities between institutions.

6.2.8 Other

A number of other important points were raised during the discussion:

- Some courses, particularly in the IT sector have very heavy schedules. More time needs to be allocated for self-directed learning/study and extra curricular activities on these courses.
- Are 3rd level institutions paying lip service to the idea of the broad student experience (academic, social, sports, societies etc.), or are there in-built barriers to initiatives which create better social integration?
- Lets not forget the achievements of the third level sector over the past decades!
- The ITs in particular have demonstrated that many students are enrolling with average and often below-average educational attainments and are graduating with Honours degrees. This would have been unheard of 20 or 30 years ago. The challenge now is to find ways to deliver effective supports to ensure better completion among a more diverse student population.

6.2.9 Main Recommendations

The discussion group's six recommendations for third level institutions are as follows:

1. New models for integrated induction and orientation programmes should be developed. They should be more personalised, contain a greater emphasis on personal skills development and consideration should be given to making them a 'first year' rather than 'first week of first year' affair.
2. New structures for communication with students should be established. They should in particular take account of the fact that: students want more feedback from and communication with their own school/department; academic staff may need training in communication skills; student support units need to be adequately resourced (to be pro-active) and be integrated with Schools/Departments.
3. Development of a workable Peer Mentoring / Buddy system with skills training for Buddies and recognition of work of Buddies through some form of accreditation.
4. Expansion of successful models of targeted tutorial/academic support initiatives to all third level institutions.
5. Development of a more pro-active policy on the part of institutions in the area of part-time employment, together with the implementation of measures which reduce the negative impact of part-time working on academic performance and attendance.
6. Allocation of resources and the development of initiatives which enhance excellence in teaching & lecturing amongst the academic body, and allow students to identify and foster learning skills.

6.3 Discussion Group C

Defining Best Practice in Support Materials and Methods of Dissemination Produced by Higher Education Institutions.

Chairperson: Tom Hayden (UCD)
Rapporteur: Raymond Dunne (IGC)

At the outset, it was established that the parameters of the discussion would include pre and post third level College entry. This group held a general discussion on the topic of support materials (including prospectuses) produced by higher education institutions. The following were the main points to emerge from the discussions:

6.3.1 Earlier Delivery

It was generally accepted by the group that while the design and quality of third level college prospectuses had improved they should however be delivered to second level schools and guidance counsellors much earlier in the year.

6.3.2 Changes to Content and Layout of Prospectuses

It was also strongly argued that they could be better structured, better indexed and be more attractive and readable from a second level student's perspective.

6.3.3 Amount of Detail

It was speculated that possibly a prospectus that would reflect a broad overview of the college and courses might be more acceptable and valuable, than one which contained too much detail.

6.3.4 Websites

Although human linkages between second and third level colleges were acknowledged as particularly helpful and worthwhile, there was much amazement expressed when it was noted that some third level institutes have yet to have a web site in place.

6.3.5 Information at Faculty Level

It was suggested that third level college faculty staff might assemble information packages in respect of their specialist areas for all levels of study.

Guidance counsellors were also exhorted to make more extensive use of the specialist knowledge and experience of fellow staff members.

6.3.6 Orientation / Induction

The group warmly endorsed as desirable and most practical an orientation / induction bridging module to third level. This could include elements such as time management, self-management, learning styles, self-directed learning, library/research, note-taking skills, etc.

6.3.7 Alternatives to Higher Education

The group agreed that alternatives to the CAO option should be explored by some students. The group noted as undesirable a trend to select and evaluate the worth of third level courses in terms of 'add-on' possibilities to degree level.

6.3.8 Undenominated Entry

The group would welcome as a helpful strategy the development of more undenominated programmes at third level.

6.3.9 Increased Guidance Provision at Second Level

The group concluded that increased guidance services / time at second and third level are exasperatingly long overdue.

6.4 Discussion Group D

Tracking and Evaluation of Students.

Chairperson: Anne Rafferty (IGC/NCGE)
Rapporteur: Frances Newman (DoES)

6.4.1 Introduction

This discussion group focused on issues relating to the tracking and evaluation of students as a means of addressing the problem of non-completion of courses. The participants shared their experience by describing the existing systems and procedures in their respective colleges, and explored possibilities for improvement.

6.4.2 Transition between the Second Level School and the Third-Level College

- There was a strong emphasis on the need for co-operation between the second level school and the third-level college, particularly in relation to information transfer. While some caution was advised in this area, it was felt that there was a case for a limited exchange of information with the permission of the student (e.g. in relation to special needs). Improved and ongoing communication in the area of guidance was also recommended.
- The importance of knowing more about the profile of the student in second level so that it could be matched at third level was discussed. Difficulties arising from the fact that schools do not always know what courses or colleges their students have applied for were raised.
- Some of the colleges represented had experimented with school/college linkages (e.g. taster programmes, Open Days), and had brought people in touch with each other.
- The need for better preparation, and better quality of information on what is involved in third level courses was emphasised, as was the need for greater focus on careers and jobs rather than on courses. The possibility of seeking the assistance of outside bodies such as IBEC with this task was raised. Concern was expressed about those who drop out because courses do not meet their expectations.
- In the case of one college, students were asked to state on the UCAS form if they had a disability. If needed, the liaison officer arranged for special aids. In another college, students were asked to complete a questionnaire at registration stage. This helped to provide advance notification of likely problems.
- Some participants expressed the view that too much maturity is expected from students without adequate appreciation of the fact that they are coming from a structured environment to something loose.

6.4.3 Induction and Orientation Programmes

The importance of induction and orientation programmes was highlighted. The need to look critically at induction and orientation was discussed and questions asked as to whether it should be conducted all year round rather than concentrated at the beginning of the academic year. Reservations about the overload of induction were expressed. Forming a relationship with students was considered to be more effective.

6.4.4 Mentoring and Tutor Systems

- The role of tutorials and course tutors in supporting students was discussed, as was the importance of mentoring systems. One college represented tried to assign one tutor for every fifteen first-years. The reaction to this was very positive as it allowed for difficulties to be flagged in advance.
- The desirability of a student dimension to mentoring was raised. A participant described the operation of such a system in his college, with third level students mentoring second level students who were potential dropouts.
- The difficulty of carrying out meaningful assessments before Christmas was raised. It was felt that it was only when all subjects were put together that the difficulties came to light. By that time, the student might have left.
- In describing the assessment system, operated by his college, another participant explained how efforts are made to interview those whose attendance is poor. Following the Christmas examinations, interviews are also arranged for those experiencing difficulties across all subjects. There is an informal track on the recovery rate.
- The importance of maintaining contact with students who have dropped out was raised. It was recognised that difficulties which are sometimes presented as academic ones can, when investigated, be related to personal problems.
- It was noted that most services are geared for students who stay in college. For instance, the careers office is geared for finding jobs for those who stay. There was a lack of career guidance for those moving out.
- The need for regular contact with those dropping out was emphasised, as was the need for an integrated approach in dealing with the matter.
- The desirability of a shift from a reactive to a pro-active approach was highlighted. The current approach was considered to be too focused on the student deficit model.
- Another problem highlighted was the reluctance to talk about dropout lest it be seen to encourage it.

6.4.5 Exit and Withdrawal Systems

- The need for effective exit and withdrawal systems was emphasised, as was the importance of making contact with the student before s/he leaves. This would allow the reasons for dropout to be identified, and support to be provided in relation to any personal problems which might exist. The importance of leaving the way open for re-entry at a later date was stressed.
- Participants, representing colleges offering exit interviews, described how students are asked to meet a counsellor and complete a form. However, many students do not present for these interviews. The need for some type of incentive to encourage them to do so was raised. One college found that writing to students at both their current and home addresses was effective in getting them to attend.
- The point was made that students contemplating dropout usually discontinue lectures a few months beforehand. This could provide an early warning system and allow for intervention.

6.4.6 Other Points

- It was noted that the buoyant economy would continue to provide alternatives for young people. Concern was expressed at the fact that, in competing for numbers, colleges are offering places to students who are not capable of completing courses.
- The role of the new qualifications authority, in providing links and ladders for those who dropout and re-enter the education system, was raised.
- Views were expressed that education had moved on and that there was now a need for a more interactive approach to teaching and learning.

6.4.7 Needs/Recommendations

- The need for an integrated, pro-active approach for all students.
- The need for a comprehensive record system with an outreach dimension.
- The need to ascertain the reasons for dropout (involving all elements in the college - both academic and administrative staff).
- The need to highlight subjects in terms of career.
- The need for the allocation and more efficient use of resources.

7. Plenary Session

The following is a summary of the Plenary Session of points raised at the Discussion Groups. The comments are attributed to the constituencies of participants who attended the colloquium, e.g. (IT) – this point was made by a representative of the Institute of Technology sector.

7.1 Comments on Report of Discussion Group A – “ *Defining best practice in preparing post-primary pupils for higher education.*”

7.1.1 Issue of Students not Willing to Travel (especially outside of Dublin)

- The accommodation grant is unrealistic, students will not travel if it going to be a financial burden on them and on their parents. (National Parents' Council)
- It was felt that if institutions have courses of interest, students will travel. (IT)

7.1.2 Information Delivery Systems

- There is necessity for a mediator between student and information providers. The more automated the information and the more technology driven it is, the greater the need is for a mediator (software, Internet etc). (Publisher)
- Information is useless unless there are strategies to deliver it to the student's mind. Students need to be given help in order to conduct their own research via software or the Internet. (Publisher)

7.1.4 Guidance Personnel

- The Leaving Certificate student has an over-pressed agenda (prospectuses, open days etc). There is a need for students to get into the picture much earlier than this, some suggest as early as National School. (Guidance Counsellor)
- One guidance counsellor in a school of 600 will not have enough time for younger students. There is a need more staff to meet students earlier in their school life. (Guidance Counsellor)

7.2 Comments on Report of Discussion Group B - “ Defining best practice for receiving and supporting students in higher education.”

7.2.1 Part-time Working

- ❑ IT Tallaght idea is very useful - steering students towards relevant employment. It is an excellent idea. (IT)
- ❑ A set of guidelines should be developed for students involved in part-time working. These might cover basic issues such as suitable number of hours to work, insurance etc. (IT)
- ❑ A little part-time work is good experience. It would be better to have a non-means tested grant situation. There is a wider debate needed on student finance. One needs to ask what the demands of student life are what peer pressures students face? (Publisher)
- ❑ Part-time work is not for survival but to sustain lifestyle. In USA students work through college but there is no demand for them to get through intensive 2 year courses. They can do a third or two thirds of the course each year and decide on how much part time work to do. The flexible system is more suitable for mature students. (IT)
- ❑ Part-time working is funding the social life of a significant minority. It is more time than money that is involved in taking part in social activities. Teetotallers also work! It is the increased cost of living that is the problem. (Student)
- ❑ Colleges will have to adapt to the fact that students will continue to work. Colleges need to be more flexible in their delivery of courses. Students have the power to make economic and social choices. (IT)
- ❑ Due to employer expectations, a commitment to working a minimum number of hours is expected from students. (Guidance Counsellor)
- ❑ There are attendance issues when work sometimes takes precedence. (IT)

7.2.1 Adapting to Third Level Academic Demands

- ❑ Students find it difficult to cope with the relative freedom in responding to academic demands at third level. In the space of three months, they have to make a transition from a strict regime at second level to this freedom. (Guidance Counsellor)
- ❑ The Transition Year option provides students with many of the skills needed to survive at third level. An expansion of the TYO into all schools will help in the long term to reduce some of the dropout. (Guidance Counsellor)

7.2.2 Teaching Skills

- ❑ Teaching standards need to change. Lecturers have to be able to adapt to the needs of different students. This is a sensitive issue but it needs to be tackled. (Student)
- ❑ Some colleges tended to assign less experienced lecturers to teach first year students. (IT)
- ❑ Lecturers are not necessarily good communicators. There is no systematic assignment of inexperienced lecturers. (IT)
- ❑ There is a need for upskilling of lecturers. (IT)
- ❑ There is a need for an inclusive approach to student support. Lecturers and tutors are in a prime position to spot problems. (IT)

7.3 Comments on Report of Discussion Group C - *"Defining best practice in support materials and methods of dissemination produced by higher education institutions."*

7.3.1 Postponing CAO Application Date

- ❑ It was felt that extending the CAO closing date would not really help. Students have up to July 1st anyway to change their mind. (Guidance Counsellor)

7.3.2 Entry to Broad Type Courses in First Year

- ❑ Students do not have time for in-depth research into courses/careers at second level. In the case of science and engineering, students should attend a broad course in first year and then decide what area to specialise in. (Guidance Counsellor)
- ❑ Designated entry seemed to be a strategy for raising points in some ITs. (Guidance Counsellor)
- ❑ The RTC act demands that courses be designed in co-operation with employers and industry. It is difficult to incorporate a broad course in a two-year situation. (IT)

7.3.3 Delivery and Content of Course Information

- ❑ Some prospectus literature arrived two months late in 1999-2000. (Guidance Counsellor)
- ❑ It would be better if the prospectuses could give a flavour of the student experience and an overview of the course. (IT)
- ❑ The number of subjects on some courses is colossal and they have no link with second level provision. (Guidance Counsellor)

7.4 Comments on Report of Discussion Group D – “Tracking and evaluation of students.”

7.4.1 Comparing Universities and ITs on Non-Completion Rates

There is a need for a fair, uniform system of quantifying numbers across different institutions. Need to agree definitions and calculation method. (IT)

7.4.2 There is a Need for a Tracking System

Each second level student has a unique identification number, which should continue to be used in third level. (Guidance Counsellor)

7.5 Summing Up

- To tackle the issues second level and third level need to work proactively. It is not always additional funding that is needed, but more attention to the issues involved. (Department of Education and Science)
- Funding is still a big challenge.(IT)
- There may be some resources available through the National Development Plan to cover some of the issues discussed today. (DOES)
- It is a tribute to the individuals and systems involved that the problem is still manageable. (Chairperson)