"I WISH I'D KNOWN THAT BEFORE I STARTED!" A PROPOSED MODEL FOR CAPTURING AND SHARING EXPERIENCES TO SUPPORT STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, WELLBEING AND RETENTION THROUGHOUT THE FIRST YEAR AND BEYOND

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Abstract

Non-progression of students is a significant problem across the higher education sector, with more than one in six students in Ireland dropping out before completing their first year. The HEA have identified retention as a priority, and colleges and universities are actively seeking ways to support students. Initiatives to engage and encourage new students include activities such as orientation talks, campus tours and peer mentoring. Such efforts are typically focused on the first few weeks of term; after that period students are often considered to have 'settled in' to college life. However, the evidence indicates that retention remains a concern, with peak dropping-out times occurring around traditional stress periods such as exams, assignments, and transitions. One of the most common reasons given for leaving is the gap between students' expectations and the reality of university, with students feeling ill-prepared for the demands and nature of undergraduate study.

How can we support students beyond the first few weeks, and help them to navigate the rollercoaster of independent study throughout their university life?

This presentation outlines a pilot initiative aimed at sharing the wisdom of existing students, gained from their own experiences, with those in lower years. Studies have shown that students often trust the perspectives of their peers more than those in authority (hence the success of peer mentoring schemes), and this project aims to take advantage of this natural inclination for the benefit of both parties. The hypothesis is that students at all stages of a third level course, from enrolment up to graduation and beyond, will benefit by using the experience of others to help them prepare for what is ahead of them. In turn, existing students can benefit by being asked to reflect on their own journey through university, identifying the challenges and opportunities they have encountered. Reflecting on how they have overcome difficulties will encourage a growth mindset, thereby empowering their own strategies for future success.

To gather these reflective insights, it is planned to record the experiences, opinions and advice of existing students of all years in Technological University Dublin - Blanchardstown Campus. Methods include online surveys, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups with students from all years. Graduates will also be contacted to share their experiences, in order to help students prepare for working life or postgraduate research. A variety of insights and advice will be recorded by prompting students to reflect and offer advice on academic, administrative, social and life skills.

In order to make this information widely available, it is proposed to create a website with information and tips organised by year and by subject, which students and their families can access at any time. This site will plot the typical pressure point timelines for each year, and include relevant advice for each stage or challenge, with links to other student supports available. Advice and tips most relevant to the first year can also be included in a printed resource to be given out at induction. In addition, timely advice in the form of social media posts or a digital newsletter can be shared at key points throughout the year.

This scope of this initiative is ambitious, so will start with a pilot project with one degree subject, and if successful can be rolled out to other subject areas and student categories.

Keywords: Student engagement, retention, first year experience, student success, reflection, students as partners.