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As Student Success Project Manager with the National Forum, Lee is responsible for coordinating an Irish national initiative to develop a sectoral understanding of student success and build institutional capacity for developing student success strategies. He has also lead a further national project entitled DESSI (Data-Enabled Student Success Initiative) whose purpose is to support Irish higher education institutions as they develop informed, sustainable strategies for maximising the value of their learner and institutional data. He is currently on secondment to the National Forum from University College Dublin where he holds the post of Student Record Manager.

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Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 1 October 2019 to LTForum@eua.eu. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.docx. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.

Proposal

Title: Developing a National, Student-Centred Understanding of Student Success in Irish Higher Education

Abstract (maximum of 150 words):

Student-centred learning and student success both act as lenses for reframing institutional activity with a core focus on the needs and values of individual students. While there is significant crossover between the values of these two paradigms, however, their ultimate objectives do not fully overlap. Student-centred learning prioritises the learning and engagement of students, whereas student success focuses on the broader aspirations of students including personal and social growth, work-readiness and engagement with the broader student experience. This paper looks at work currently underway in Ireland to develop a shared national understanding of student success and to identify the key enablers of student success both within and beyond the classroom

Key words (up to five): Student-Centred Learning, Student Success

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details.

While this paper has not been published elsewhere, it draws on publications from ongoing work by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

Text of paper (maximum of 3000 words, excluding references):

Introduction

Student-centred learning is a paradigm that shifts the orientation of, and locus of power in, pedagogy from teachers to students (O'Neill and McMahon, 2005). It prioritises the needs of individual learners over systematic, highly-structured approaches to conveying information, often at scale.

This value-driven approach, that focuses on the needs and ambitions of individual learners, is also at the heart of student success, a whole-of-institution philosophy that re-examines the traditions of higher education through a transformative, student-focused lens. While these perspectives share the centrality of the individual learner, however, there is some variation between their ultimate aims. While they share the goals of deepening learning and enhancing engagement, student success may be seen as having a broader objective that exists just as significantly beyond the classroom as within it. Success is not only about learning, but about empowering students to realise and achieve their holistic individual potential, encompassing not only their learning but also their personal and social growth, work-readiness and engagement with the broader student experience.

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, the national Irish body responsible for leading and advising on the enhancement of teaching and learning in Irish higher education, set out in 2019 to synthesise a range of key perspectives and shifting sectoral priorities into a national understanding of student success, in line with current national priorities. We also undertook a comprehensive literature review on student success to identify key institutional and sectoral enablers of success. While effective, engaging teaching, learning and assessment were recurrent priorities, the review identified a range of further enablers that must be aligned and optimised for student success to flourish. This paper is derived from the work currently underway by the National Forum to develop this national understanding and to identify some of the principal enablers of success.

The National Policy Perspective

National policy frames all of the priorities and drivers of higher education in Ireland. Consequently, any national understanding of student success must consider how it is articulated in national policy. Although the term ‘student success’ does not frequently arise explicitly in policy documents, with the exception of the current national System Performance Framework which requires all institutions to develop whole-of-institution student success strategies, a review of such policies gives a clear indication of the perceived role and value of higher education. The key themes emerging include:

- The power of higher education to be a transformative experience that can fundamentally change the lives of students and help them to recognise and achieve their full potential.
- The pivotal role played by higher education in developing the skills that are valued by employers and are at the heart of our national economic strategy.
- The need for higher education to be available to all students and to be representative of the diversity that exists across the national population.
- The recognition that effective, informed teaching and learning approaches are fundamental to enabling student success.
- The requirement for a quality higher education experience that gives students the opportunity to meet new people, discover new talents and expand their understanding of the world as a core element of success.

Students’ Perspectives

It is self-evident that students and their education are indivisible. Students’ perspectives are, therefore, critical to the development of an informed understanding of the values and goals that underpin success. In 2018, as part of its strategy development process, a National Forum consultation with higher education students elicited 887 responses that give some insight into what ‘success’ means to students in Irish higher education.

Three primary themes were identified by students, namely employability, academic attainment and degree completion (Table 1). It is noteworthy, however, that approximately 70% of students cited more than one theme, indicating that success often exceeds simple definitions. This is also reflected in the broad range of themes that were identified.

There was also some variation between the response patterns of students from differing demographic groups. Female students, for example, were more likely to prioritise doing their best than their male counterparts (23% vs 13%) who were, in turn, more likely to cite employability as a key aspect of success (44% vs 32%). Final year students were considerably more likely to list academic attainment than first year students (45% vs 32%). These findings indicate that the concept of success is highly variable among students and that students may often have different priorities at differing points in their college experience.

These findings give a clear indication that fully enabling success requires a model that, like student-centred learning, is optimised to cater for the unique drives, ambitions and talents of individual students.

Table 1 Themes identified by students

Theme	Response Percent
Developing skills to maximise employability	37%
Achieving high academic attainment	36%
Competing award, graduating	31%
Deepening learning/understanding	21%
Doing your best, achieving personal potential	18%
Socialising and making friends	18%
Developing personal attributes	13%
Engaging with the full college experience	13%
Being happy/satisfied	12%
Contributing to society	3%
Progressing to a postgraduate programme	1%

Respondents were also asked to identify the key enablers they would like to see their institutions address in relation to student success. In addition to a desire for enhanced teaching practices, students also emphasised a need for a caring and encouraging campus culture, improved learning and social facilities and a focus on health and wellness, particularly mental health services and supports.

Institutional Perspectives

Institutional strategies give a further understanding of student success by revealing the current priorities of institutions in relation to supporting and enabling students. A commitment to enhancing Teaching and Learning through the National Professional Development Framework and improving the overall student experience through the enhancement of supports and services and co-curricular facilities emerge as clear priorities. Graduate attributes described by institutional strategies also give some insights into HEIs' understanding of success in relation to their students. Current Irish graduate attributes (listed alphabetically) generally comprise the following characteristics:

- Communication and influence

- Creativity and innovation
- Critical and analytic thinking
- Disciplinary expertise
- Ethics and integrity
- Independence and autonomy
- Global awareness
- Leadership and collaboration
- Professional competence
- Respect for knowledge and learning

These characteristics are largely representative of individual values and competencies and show the richness and breadth of interpretation of success at an institutional level. They also demonstrate an understanding of student success as an ongoing, developmental process; students do not suddenly become creative on the day of graduation.

The Emerging Understanding of Student Success

A focus on student success requires putting the student at the centre of the entire higher education experience, both within and beyond the classroom. In the words of Felten et al., (2016), this ‘does not mean coddling [students], but rather making student learning the lens through which all institutional activity would be viewed’ (p. 143).

This reframing of priorities has been mirrored over recent years in the Irish higher education sector. Emerging from recent national developments are a number of clear shifts in the way student success is understood and valued. It is apparent that success is becoming recognised as an individualised developmental process that is too nuanced to be effectively captured by binary markers such as progression and completion rates. This requires strategies that do not prioritise outcomes, but ensure that all institutional enablers of success are aligned and optimised, with an emphasis on real-time quality enhancement, rather than on retrospective performance indicators and metrics. This is coupled with a growing understanding of success as the ongoing empowerment of students to recognise and achieve their own potential, necessitating a highly individualised, values-driven approach.

A key turning point in Ireland’s changing approach was the re-designation of the National Scoping Group on Non-Completion as the National Scoping Group on Student Success in summer 2017. This change in aspect recognises that a ‘deficit’ focus is of less value to students and the sector than one that seeks to optimise students’ experience and reframes the goal from helping students to cross the line to empowering them to flourish.

In June 2019, John N. Gardner advised the Irish sector to ‘move beyond access to success. Access is necessary but insufficient.’ This perspective is reflective of a further change: increasingly, responsibility for supporting students is not seen as situated solely within the remit of Access Offices, rather it is shared throughout the institution and required for all students. It is noteworthy that this perspective is articulated in the System

Performance Framework 2018-2020 that calls on HEIs to develop student success strategies that ‘embed whole-of-institution approaches’ (p. 15).

A further indication of the changing perspective in Irish higher education is the shift in focus from retention to engagement. Retention may be underpinned by an implied position that success is binary and can be understood solely in terms of persistence. Engagement as a driver focuses on the iterative, ongoing and multi-faceted relationship between students, their learning, their teachers and their institutions.

This changing context is also visible in the growth of the national focus on iterative learning, rather than on itemised, output-focused academic attainment. This mindset is clearly embedded at system and institutional level, as reinforced by even a cursory glance at national policies; the word ‘*learning*’, for example, appears 312 times in selected key policy documents (the National Strategy for Higher Education To 2030, the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education and the HE System Performance Framework). The word ‘*grades*’, conversely, does not feature.

A National Understanding

Given this shifting national context, and the wealth of contributions from the discussions that have gone before and informed it, the National Forum’s Student Success Advisory Group has identified a set of recurring tenets that underpin the understanding of success that is emerging in Irish higher education:

- Success means empowering students to recognise and achieve their own potential.
- Success is too highly nuanced and individualised to be concisely defined. This does not prohibit it, however, from being understood and facilitated.
- Success can only be facilitated through meaningful partnership and engagement between students, staff and the wider community and between all levels of the higher education sector.
- It is the responsibility of those working across higher education to identify and remove any obstacles that may hinder students from achieving their own benchmark of success.
- Success is not binary and cannot be fully encapsulated in metrics such as retention and progression rates. It reframes the perspective from product to process, from an approach driven by output metrics to one that is enabled by ongoing quality enhancement.
- Success requires whole-of-institution approaches.

Informed by these tenets, the Advisory Group has developed the following shared understanding of student success:

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

To be achieved, this requires a culture in Irish higher education that values inclusivity, equity and meaningful engagement between students, staff, their institutions and the wider community.

This understanding is intended to form a foundation for a shared sectoral common language and purpose to help inform institutional student success. Given the many nuances of success, this understanding serves

as a common platform upon which the sector can continue to build its shared understanding and enhancement of student success.

Identified Enablers of Student Success

Consistent with the perspectives above, engaging, informed teaching, learning, assessment and feedback were consistently referenced in the literature as being key priorities for student success. A range of additional complementary enablers was also identified, however, that must be aligned and optimised across higher education to enable a student-centred approach to success that empowers students to recognise and realise their own potential. This section will provide a concise overview of these further core enablers.

Engagement and Student Partnership

Engagement is recognised throughout the literature as being a key concept for student success (for example: Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten, 2014; Kuh, 2009). Trowler and Trowler (2011) define it as 'The investment of time, effort and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution.' (p.3)

It has been positively linked with a broad range of outcomes related to success including deepening learning and development of critical skills (Gellin, 2003; Pike, Kuh, and Gonyea, 2003; Kuh, Hu, and Vesper, 2000), academic achievement (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2002; Zhao and Kuh, 2004) and persistence (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea, 2008).

Embracing authentic student partnerships has been identified as a significant driver of engagement. A 2017 literature review identified a broad range of positive outcomes for both staff and students. Benefits for students include increased engagement, motivation and self-efficacy and increased meta-cognition. They also identified many benefits for teaching staff engaged in student partnerships. These include development of new or better teaching or curriculum materials, new beliefs about teaching and learning that change practice for the better, increased motivation for teaching and research and finding teaching to be more enjoyable/rewarding (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017)

Enabling Policies and Practices

Felten et al. (2016) identify the need for institutions to commit to and develop a focus on students that must be authentic, enduring, institutionally pervasive and driven strategically by institutional leaders. This assertion is supported by George Kuh's review of findings from the National Survey of Student Engagement: 'It is only with the support of presidents, governing board members, academic and student life administrators, faculty members, and students that a variety of coherent, challenging, and complementary educational activities, inside and outside the classroom, will flourish on a campus' (2003, p. 32).

Institutions that effectively embed student success do so by showing their commitment in real terms. They align their internal recognition structures for both staff who teach and those who provide support services to ensure that supporting and enhancing student success is recognised as a key strategic priority and

reinforced as a focus for all staff, regardless of their role. They commit the requisite resources to approaches that are designed to support success (Bettinger, Boatman, & Long, 2013). Finally, they engage collaboratively with stakeholders throughout the institution to ‘transform silos into systems by supporting cross-unit coordination and by paying more attention to the student experience than to how the organizational chart divides up the campus’ (Felten et al., 2016, P. 172).

Evidence-Based Decision-Making

By harnessing the power of data, reporting and analytics, institutional leaders, teachers and students can greatly enhance their capacity to make evidence-based decisions and take informed actions with a quantifiable likelihood of success. Given the increased recognition of these capabilities, there is a growing onus on HEIs to engage with learner data as an invaluable strategic resource: ‘Fortunately, nobody flies a plane across the Atlantic anymore without navigational instruments. Nor should colleges and universities make judgments about the effectiveness of their policies and practices in the absence of student engagement data or some comparable source of information about the quality of the student experience’ (Kuh, 2003 p. 32)

Informed decision-making is also critical for students, particularly at key transitional points. Clear, accurate guidelines are essential. This is particularly true of HE applicants, especially given the prevalence of ‘Wrong course choice’ as a reason for premature withdrawal (Moore-Cherry, Quin and Burroughs, 2015). Ensuring that prospectuses and course materials published by HEIs give applicants a realistic understanding of what to expect from their course, and what will be expected of *them*, is key.

Supporting Transitions and Cultivating Belonging

Relationships are a core enabler of success. Levin, Rixon and Keating (2019) state that ‘In order to be able to succeed and grow through higher education, students need to have the opportunity meet and interact with peers, as well as teaching staff, and feel they are part of the learning community, as learning is a social activity.’ (p. 72). Such affective factors can have a significant impact on how, and whether, students come to engage with their studies, institutions, teachers and peers. O’Keefe (2013), for example, identifies the relationship between feelings of isolation and potentially negative outcomes such as underperformance and premature withdrawal. According to Heisserer and Parette (2002), ‘the single most important factor in advising students who are at-risk is helping them to feel that they are cared for by the institution.’ (p. 6)

While the experience of not belonging can be particularly impactful on minority and first-in-family students, (Petty, 2014; Engle and Tinto, 2008; Thayer 2000; Vuong, Brown-Welty and Tracz, 2010), such feelings and their potential impacts are not limited to incoming students from these groups. According to Barefoot (2004), ‘although efforts to target special at-risk populations are necessary, a decision to limit outreach to those populations may be, in fact, short-sighted. Because dropout has so many potential root causes, “average” or even above-average students may also benefit from special assistance during the sometimes difficult transition to higher education.’ (p. 13) There are a number of factors identified in the literature as being quantifiably more impactful on student success than students’ demographic backgrounds. These include curriculum quality and teacher skills (Williams-Pierce, 2011), developing meaningful relationships with staff (Lundberg and Schreiner, 2004) and the development of motivational factors such as self-efficacy (Zajacova, Lynch and Espenshade, 2005).

Summary

Student success is a complex and multi-faceted area, informed by a broad range of sectoral perspectives. Like student-centred learning, it is highly individualised and dependent upon the values, ambitions and talents of each student. Their needs must be at the core of the pedagogies, feedback and curricula that inform and enable their learning. Success, however, does not just occur in the classroom. There are a broad range of other criteria that must envelop students to enable them to realise their own benchmarks of success. Students' needs must be at the centre of an authentic, whole-of-institution commitment to engage and form meaningful partnerships that motivate and inform every member of the higher education community. Success relies upon actions and decisions informed by accurate, timely and readily available information and upon teachers and institutional communities that value authentic person-to-person relationships in classrooms, corridors and institutional cultures.

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