

# Retention & Student Success

Implementing Strategies That Make  
a Difference



# Introduction

Boasting higher than average retention rates, UK & Irish Universities must resist the temptation to become complacent when it comes to student retention and success. While research undertaken by WhatWorks? has shown only 1 in 12 students within the UK leave higher education during their first year of study, project teams across four institutions found that between 33% to 42% of students think about withdrawing.

Studies from the Social Market Foundation (SMF) draw a direct correlation between retention performance and league table performance, with lower tariff scores noted in institutes with a higher dropout rate. With the implications of high academic drop out having a significant impact on not only the financial position but also the academic standing of an institution.

Students have more choices than ever before when it comes to their college experience, from course selection to course withdrawal or transfers. With a changing educational marketplace, shifts in governmental funding and the reduced costs associated with higher retention rates, HEI's must prioritize student retention efforts and seek strategies that serve students more effectively.



*“With an increased focus on retention and academic performance Higher Education Institutions (HEI’s) must seek more effective ways to support student success”*

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# Steps to Success

With better data about the factors contributing to student success or failure, HEI's must take a proactive approach to student success, establishing early intervention programs to help students get back on track.

**1** A Shared Vision  
A campus wide approach

**2** Success Snapshot  
Understanding Student Success

**3** Early Intervention  
A proactive approach to intervention

**4** Scalable Strategies  
Learning from small scale successes

**5** A Culture of Belonging  
Building an engaged community

**6** From Big Data to Data Insights  
Levering the digital student footprint



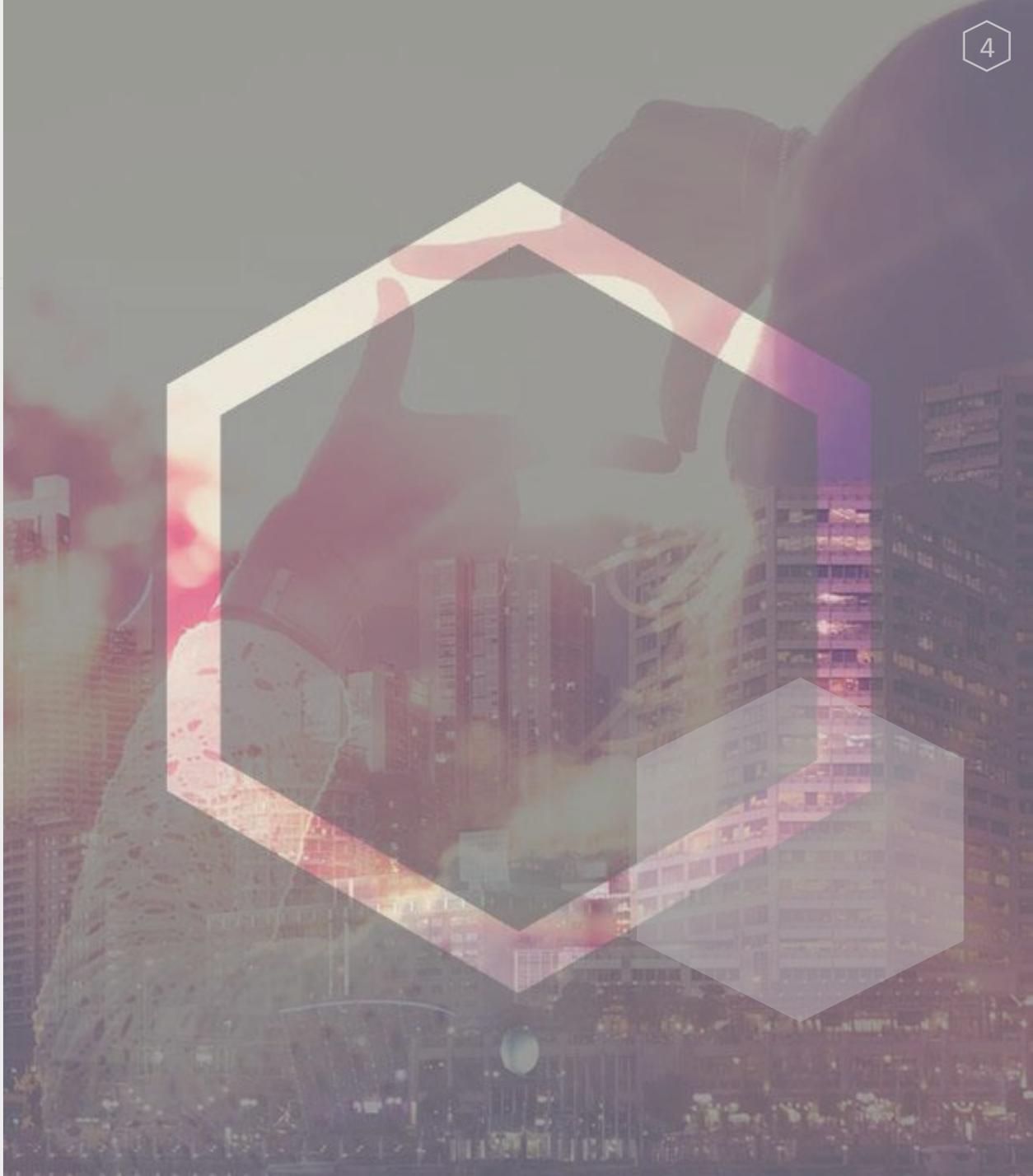
# A Shared Vision

Cultivating a successful campus-wide student success initiative will require the co-operation of everyone across your campus and in many cases partners from off-campus.

Classroom attendance while presenting some insight into student engagement and future success is not the only indicator Universities should address. Poor lifestyle choices which may be noted by personnel at dorms, return to education following an extended absence and physical and psychological health concerns all can have a significant impact on student attendance, engagement and overall academic success.

Therefore the identification of “at risk” students should extend beyond class attendance. By finding ways to communicate with every stakeholder who holds a piece of the puzzle, institutions can provide not just one, but multiple safety nets for students.

A campus-wide vision for student success must be created with appropriate incentives to ensure the participation of all stakeholders. This shared vision will allow for the effective allocation of resources to support defined goals.



# *Building a Shared Vision?*



*Consider these key questions.*

- » What are the institutes priorities, overall retention/graduation rates? Will you focus on a particular student group?
- » What department or academic units are already collaborating and how can you build upon these existing partnerships?
- » Which on- and off-campus stakeholders can contribute to our institutions student success vision?
- » What criteria will be used to assess and define “at risk” students
- » What defines student success and how can the success of the institutes efforts be measured?
- » Has the vision been communicated to all stakeholders?
- » Have resources been allocated and do any opportunities exist for resource integration or the synthesisation of data?



# Success Snapshot

For many students, the move from post-primary to higher education presents a unique set of challenges, faced with new responsibilities both from a financial and academic standpoint. Many come to college with little understanding of what it will take to succeed or the resources available to them to achieve this success. Away from the watchful gaze of their parents many assume that class attendance is optional, or that the level that got them through at a post-primary level will be sufficient at college.

Ensuring your students have the tools to succeed requires a concentrated effort on the part of the HEI. A clear snapshot of what success looks like should be developed and shared.

- » Do students understand the HEI grading system and what is required from them to maintain good academic standing?
- » Have students a clear understanding of their responsibilities with regards to maintaining scholarships or a Tier 4 Visa?
- » Are students aware of all resources available on-campus?
- » Do opportunities exist for students to engage with educationally purposeful activities in and out of the classroom?

# Early Intervention

A clear understanding of what defines an “at risk” student while essential to the development of an intervention strategy, is not sufficient. Universities must ensure a pro-active approach is taken to intervention strategies. For a student showing early indicators of withdrawal, waiting until the mid-term to intervene may prove too late to reach out.

Early intervention is key to helping students before problems become too overwhelming to handle. For many students, the transition from post-primary to higher education can prove lonely, and the simple knowledge that someone in the institution cares about their performance can be a powerful motivator. Helping students establish a solid foundation for future success is, or should be an integral part of any institutions core mission.

Questions to consider when implementing an early intervention strategy;

- » What is the earliest indicator that a student is struggling?
- » What criteria can be used to determine if a student is off-track?
- » Who should reach out to the student & what systems are in place to ensure they receive notification that the student is struggling in a timely manner?
- » What systems are in place to pro-actively address students' academic, health, social and financial needs once identified as at risk?



# Scalable Strategies

With student retention, a focus for many UK & Irish HEI's many institutions will already have programs and initiatives in place. Finding those programs and understanding what does and does not work with provide a strong foundation for the development of a retention strategy.

Start small, develop the strategy at an incubator model level – by course, department or program – establishing systems and measures for success that can be scaled effectively throughout the institution. Once a successful approach has been identified you can scale up, leveraging incubation successes to foster support and build enthusiasm for the program across campus.



When developing incubator strategies you should consider some of the following

- » Where do you want to begin? With first-year students or by department, at what qualification level or by course?
- » Who will support the program within this subset?
- » How will you measure success?
- » How will the program improve and scale?

# A Culture of Belonging

A topic of much research, sense of belonging has been shown to play a key role in student persistence and is closely aligned with the concept of student engagement. In a study conducted by McKinsey & Co. a sense of belonging was shown to be an even stronger predictor of success than conventionally accepted factors like post-primary GPA, or whether a students' parents went to college.

Therefore, at the heart of any successful student retention and success initiative should lie a strategy to develop a strong sense of belonging for all students. This is most effectively achieved by nurturing mainstream activities that all students participate in.

Research conducted by WhatWorks? identified key strategies for achieving a sense of student belonging;

- » Establishing supportive peer relations
- » Development of meaningful interaction between staff and students
- » Developing a personal sense of knowledge, confidence and indemnity within students
- » Providing an environment which fosters unique interests and provides opportunities for students to participate in activities that support their future goals.

## Definition of Belonging in Educational Environments

“Student’s sense of being **accepted, valued, included & encouraged** by others...more than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves **support & respect** for personal autonomy & for the students as an individual”

*Goodenow (1993)*

# From Big Data to Data Insights

As student services becomes increasingly digitized, a growing digital footprint emerges, providing HEI's with a wealth of student information. This information is essential in guiding a retention strategy, directing decisions and resource allocations and assessing program effectiveness. For many HEI's analysing this volume of data is a daunting task, one which puts added strain on already stretched in-house resources. However, institutions are beginning to recognise the benefits data insights and predictive analysis can offer with regards to student success and retention.

Coupling readily available student data with your retention strategy will ensure a focused effort on the most promising tactics, helping steer effective allocation of scarce resources.



# Launching a Data Strategy

*Before launching a data strategy consider the following questions;*

- 1 What data is most important for understanding persistence, learning and success?
- 2 What data governance structure is in place?
- 3 Is data captured in a timely, reliable manner?
- 4 How will data be used for decision making, program development and resource allocation?
- 5 How can technology facilitate relevant reports and records to improve services to students and reduce administrative burden on academic staff?
- 6 Can technology provide access to data rich insights displayed in graphical format through bespoke user dashboards?



# Conclusion

It is not easy to achieve sustainable and measurable strides in improving student learning, success and persistence-to-degree completion. However, for institutions seeking to succeed in the competitive educational environment a continued commitment to the development of an engaged campus is critical to organisational success.

Universities must adapt to meet the needs of their students, focusing on building communities that promote academic and social success.

## About TDS Student

TDS Student is the leading provider of student attendance monitoring and engagement software, offering tailored software solutions designed to boost student retention and foster an environment of student success.

Real time data capture allows institutions to identify “at risk” students, with automatic communications designed to initiate conversation with these students and prompt re-engagement. Intelligent reporting functionality and deep level system integrations ensure HEI’s have access to data insights that affect change.

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