Chapter 4: Assisting the Individual: Practical Interventions to Assist in Student Retention

Dr Leanne Blaney

Special Teaching Fellow

UCD School of History

leanne.blaney@ucd.ie

Dr Paul Rouse

Lecturer

UCD School of History

p.rouse@ucd.ie

Introduction and context

Student engagement can be challenging in a large programme such as Arts. The School of History has run a pilot scheme designed to reduce the number of students who fail or drop out of history modules. The Scheme commenced in January 2015 and operated through the second semester of the 2014/15 academic year. It then ran through both semesters of the 2015/16 academic year. The ambition of the School of History Student Support Scheme is to reduce the number of students who fail or drop out of history modules.

Why Universal Design for this initiative?

Comment has already been made in other forums on the challenges surrounding the BA programme (and in all large university programmes), on the alienation experienced by some students who struggle to settle and adapt. At the core of this challenge is the anonymous nature of the experience of students, particularly in First Year (Tinto, 2012). Changing this experience is essential. All of these points are supported by the evidence that has emerged in the early operation of this Scheme. Indeed, the Scheme is designed precisely to combat such problems.

Initiative	School of History Student Support Scheme
Universal Design Principles	- Tolerance for error - Instructional climate - Simple and intuitive
Discipline	History
Level	UCD levels 1 and 2
College	Arts and Social Sciences
Learning Outcomes	**The ambition of the School of History Student Support Scheme is to reduce the number of students who fail or drop out of history modules. The Scheme seeks to achieve this ambition by:** - Providing practical assistance to students of history who fail modules - Offering students support in understanding and undertaking the repeat/re-sit process - Assisting students to develop the skills which will enable them to avoid further failures - Examining the reasons why students fail modules - Providing students struggling with history modules with a central and definite point of contact where they can seek assistance - Identifying measures that might be introduced across history modules to improve student learning

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On the advice of a professor of history, I made an appointment with Leanne Blaney. I found this first contact quite relaxing and **very comfortable**. The reason I attended the writing academy was to understand more fully the bibliography and footnoting properly. I found Leanne quite enjoyable to work with and her work **provided some vital tools** for me going forward. For me being a first year student I found Leanne and her work especially crucial in getting a foothold on the academic requirements of UCD.

The **transition is difficult** enough and I feel that the service provided by Leanne is essential, especially first years, as it provides a guide to knowing what is needed to progress. I only regret that I did not utilize the opportunity sooner. Looking forward to the next semester, I hopefully will not need the service of Leanne and her colleagues but I am supremely **confident that I will get the support** that I need to maintain a high GPA.

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1ST YEAR HISTORY STUDENT

Design and implementation

The Scheme is rooted in offering practical support to students. Its methodology is **Simple and intuitive**. It seeks to identify students who need assistance, contact those students, meet them, assist them with their particular problems, and guide them through the repeat/re-sit process. Across the three semesters in question, the following broad measures were undertaken.

1. Identifying students

Students were identified through two methods. Firstly, analysis of end-of-term semester results identified the students who failed modules and how they had failed them. This was achieved through tabulation of their grades (composed of Attendance, Mid-term assignment and End of term assignment/examination). Secondly, during the semesters students were recommended to avail of the Scheme by teaching members of the School of History. Usually these were staff members who had met or corresponded with the students on an individual basis and believed that they would benefit from the Support Scheme. Their details were then passed onto the Special Teaching Fellow, Leanne Blaney[1].

2. Contacting students

The operation of the scheme centred on establishing and maintaining direct contact with students who had failed to complete history modules. The first contact was by email, with students advised on the practical steps they needed to take to pass the module. If a student failed to respond to the email, failed to register to repeat, or failed to sign out the re-sit essay title set for each particular module, they were contacted by phone. Again, every student was offered advice and encouragement to engage with the assistance on offer.

3. Meeting students

The first meeting with the student who had failed a module usually occurred within the first two weeks of semester. It provided students with an opportunity to meet the Special Teaching Fellow and an opportunity to explain why they felt they had failed the module. The Special Teaching Fellow used these initial meetings to identify whether the student required writing and academic support, or pastoral care.

Depending on the outcome, students either continued to work with the Special Teaching Fellow or were transferred to receive Paul Rouse's assistance. All first year students (and almost all second year students) then returned for a second meeting to discuss their essay plans. Throughout the semester students regularly availed of the drop-in service which operated on Wednesdays in K115 and K118, while those who required

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[1] Dr. Brian Casey was also involved as a support teacher in the first semester of the Scheme.

additional meetings usually scheduled them via email or phone call. All contacts built on creating a positive and welcoming **Instructional climate**.

4. Writing and academic support

Writing and academic support formed the basis of the Scheme. Others needed assistance with issues such as time management, essay planning and structure. The workshops and one-to-one tuition offered by the UCD Writing Centre has proven hugely successful and the History Student Support Scheme has sought to work in tandem with the Scheme. In this regard, history students have noted the importance of receiving additional support in acquiring the particular analytical and written skills which studying third-level history requires.

5. Pastoral care

A key aspect of the Scheme is the manner in which issues relating to the pastoral care of students are revealed in the course of one-to-one meetings. These issues have ranged from depression and other health-related matters to family and relationship breakdown. On other occasions, the transition to university has overwhelmed students who require advice and assistance in meeting the demands of a new environment. All pastoral care matters are dealt with by Paul Rouse (as a full-time member of staff) and, where necessary,

referral to the appropriate support services is undertaken.

How do we know it worked?

The Support Scheme has managed to increase both registration and submission rates for history students who fail modules, and has increased the number of students successfully completing repeat/re-sit modules as the scheme allows **Tolerance for error**.

First year students

In 2015 all 67 first year students registered to re-sit first-year history modules in semester two had been contacted and met by the Scheme's mentors prior to their registration. Throughout the semester all 67 students (plus the students enrolled in semester two modules who were referred to the Scheme by members of staff) regularly met or were in contact with their mentor.

In 2016, 40 students registered to re-sit first-year history modules in semester two and throughout the semester all students regularly met or were in contact with the Teaching Support Fellow. The submission and success rates each year are significantly higher than the years before the Scheme started as shown in the chart below.
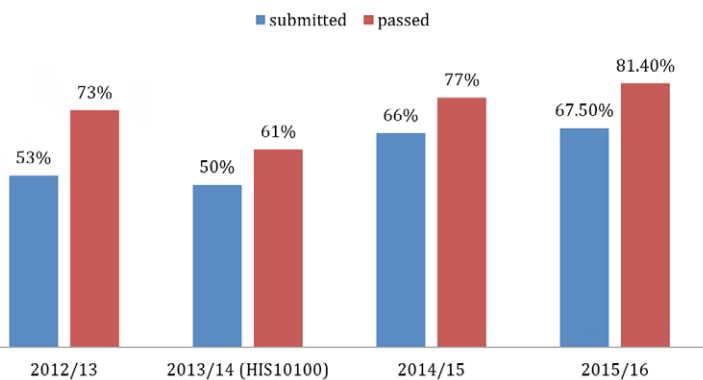
First Year Resits

Figure 1: First Year Re-sits

Feedback from members of staff who assessed the re-sits also suggest that the submitted re-sits were of a higher standard and were submitted earlier than in previous years.

Second year students – Registering, submitting and Passing re-sits
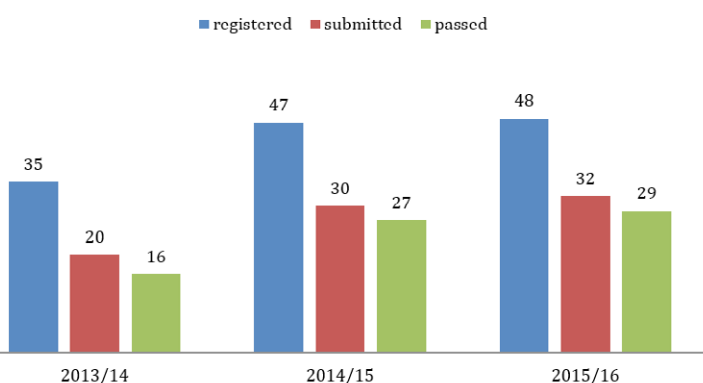
Second Year Resits

Figure 2: Second Year Re-sits

The change in curriculum design renders comparison with other years more difficult, but it is clear that for Level Two students

also the support system has proved to be beneficial. This is supported by student testimony shown later in this case study.

Making the Scheme work – issues to consider

At this junction, it is worth underlining a number of issues of wider significance. These issues involve non-attendance at seminars, non-submission of course work, and the timing and nature of repeat examinations.

Responding to absenteeism

It is apparent that the single most important issue underlying student failure in history modules is absence from class. Those students who do not attend class invariably fail to complete course work and then, in turn, invariably fail the module. In response to the results of the Scheme, the School has introduced a new protocol for all first year courses in respect of identifying and assisting those students who are struggling to complete course work, and in impressing on every student the imperative of attending class. As a result there has been a dramatic reduction in the number of students failing to achieve an attendance grade (awarded after the student attends 6 mandatory seminars) as shown in the tables below.

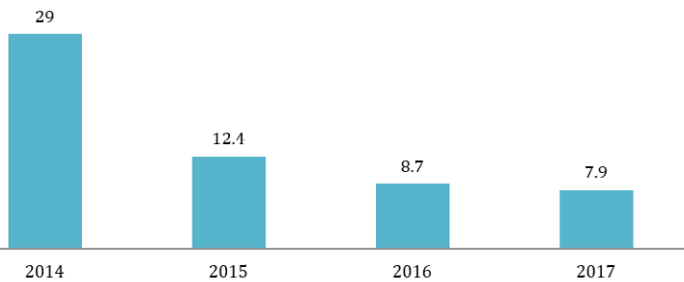## Percentage of students failing to be awarded an attendance in the core module Modern Europe

Figure 3: Students not receiving attendance mark for Modern Europe module

In response to the working of the Scheme, the School of History introduced a new protocol for all first year courses in respect of identifying and assisting those students who are struggling to complete course work, and in impressing on every student the imperative of submitting course work in full. At least in some measure because of this, there has been a significant increase in the number of midterms submitted across all modules offered in Level 1 and Level 2.

Percentage of students failing to be awarded an attendance in the module Islam and Christianity
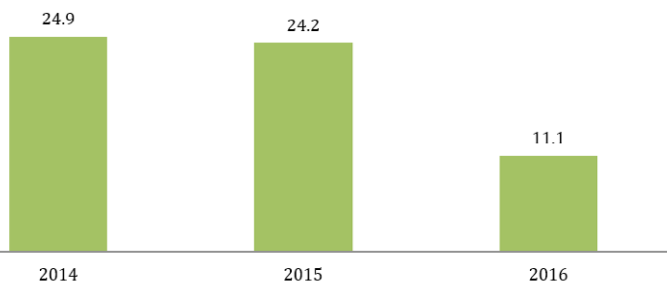
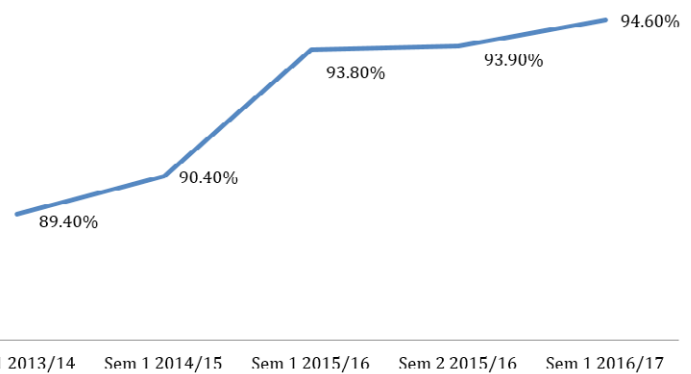**Figure 4**: Students not receiving attendance mark for Islam and Christianity module

Midterm Submission Rate

Figure 5: Midterm submission rate

The challenges of continuous assessment

The challenges posed by continuous assessment are particularly apparent among the cohort of students who perform well in end-of-semester examinations but who have not fulfilled the basic requirements in respect of course work. It is essentially impossible to pass a history module if no course work has been submitted.

The repeats process

The process of repeating and re-sitting modules in history is unsatisfactory. The simple fact is that the nature of the repeats process places an additional burden on students who are already failing. There are many instances where this has led to students carrying multiple failed modules, usually on top of new modules which they are undertaking.

The result is students trapped in a cycle of failure, often ending in ultimate withdrawal from the programme. Students admitted to university should be able to access supports to help them to succeed and institutions have a responsibility to provide this support (Tinto, 2012). It is a matter of considerable importance than the repeats system be overhauled and that a new structure be put in place.

Advice to others for implementation

1. The History Student Support Scheme is dependent on the commitment of a significant number of hours and a clear understanding of the particular needs of each individual student.
2. It is essential to the operation of the Scheme that a full-time academic member of staff take on the responsibility of dealing with all pastoral care issues.
3. Except in exceptional circumstances, the Student Support Scheme now seeks to contact students solely through email.
4. The cost of the Scheme in Semester Two of the 2014-15 academic year was €2,120. The cost for the 2015-16 academic year was €5,000.
5. Having a set drop-in time for students has proved extremely useful.

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I had occasion to use the Pastoral initiative because I failed my Irish History module in my first semester. I was contacted by Leanne and she explained how I could do a re-sit in Essay form. I was most grateful to her for all the help she gave me, I found her to be extremely supportive, always keeping in touch with me and providing me with comments on my final draft which was invaluable in my opinion. I would have no hesitation in recommending anyone to use this Pastoral initiative; it is wonderful to have such help especially in the first year – 1st Year Arts

I also just wanted to say thank you so much for your understanding this semester... It really made me feel like UCD had a personal side rather than just churning out students! - 2nd Year History

STUDENTS

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The aim of the re-sit, in my opinion is not to necessarily punish the student but instead to give them guidance and advice to ensure the student gets the 'leg up' needed, the re-sit I did fulfilled this. Prior to the re-sit I was negative towards and lacked confidence in my essay writing. I often would second guess my work leaving it jumbled and lacking direction. I met with Dr Casey frequently as well corresponding in emails. He ensured I managed the essay on many different levels, time wise, content wise as well as ensuring I understood the complex issues surrounding the subject I was writing. The work Dr Casey did with me has had a profound and great impact not only on my history major but also on my other major, geography. Though it wasn't an easy experience the re-sit was necessary - 2nd Year History

STUDENTS

At the start of the year, I found myself over my head in college work, and some ongoing personal issues. At times I was thinking about dropping out, the workload just seemed impossible, but the Pastoral initiative was a literal lifesaver. Being able to talk shop with someone about the work, helping me to break it down into smaller and more manageable parts, it was exactly the kind of help I needed. I could not recommend this more to any student feeling they're struggling – 3rd Year Arts.

I found myself involved in the Pastoral initiative as a result of failing a History module, and I found it extremely helpful. It has given me a lot more confidence with essay writing. At 3,000 words, the re-sit assignment was a bit longer and more daunting than the average first year essay, but the help and guidance I received from my tutor made the whole experience a lot easier and more straightforward. I'd strongly recommend the initiative to anyone who finds themselves in a similar situation - 1st Year Arts.

STUDENTS

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For me the start of semester two was a bit of a disaster, I had failed a few modules after a very difficult first semester and I was dreading even heading back to college after Christmas. When I first received an email regarding pastoral initiative I hadn't a clue what to expect and to be honest I was nervous about going up to the school to discuss in person why I had failed so many modules... Hopefully I won't be needing it again but it might help a student that was considering dropping out as I was and I would hope that it be available to students in the future. UCD can be a bit overwhelming for students and it was nice to have someone there to look out for you over the semester - 1st Year Arts.

STUDENTS

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I found it to be really helpful as it gave me a clear idea of what I had to do after the first semester. I failed nearly all of my modules and nearly considered dropping out a few times so I could redo first year in the new year. My tutor really helped me realise that there was still a lot I could do to finish my first year strongly and progress to second year by putting effort into my re-sits. My tutor was particularly helpful because she made sure I never forgot that there was still a lot that was under my control, as regards progression to second year. I would definitely recommend the initiative to other students - 1st Year Arts.

STUDENTS

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The only reason I completed my re-sits was through this initiative. I failed because I had a bereavement in my family and also suffered from a lot of financial problems after, so I was in and out of college the majority of my first year. I didn't seek any help myself and didn't really know who to go to, however, in second year I was immediately assigned my tutor and met up with her for a one-to-one chat. I constantly benefited from this initiative as I lacked a lot of confidence with history particularly with my writing abilities, and the tutor helped to eliminate these confidence issues by giving me advice on what was needed for the essay and by regularly emailing and checking up on me... My tutor was the intervention which I needed and I am extremely grateful to have been given the means to enable me to complete my first year and progress within UCD

- 2nd Year Arts.

STUDENTS

References

Tinto, Vincent. Completing college: Rethinking
institutional action. University of Chicago Press, 2012.