

A Study Of Non-completion In Dual Sector Further Education In Northern Ireland.*

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Abstract

The paper deals with an empirical question in the under-researched area of student retention in higher education in Northern Ireland; specifically, it explores the barriers to learning and programme completion that full-time higher education students encountered in a specific dual-sector further and higher education college in Northern Ireland from the perspective of ten withdrawn students.

Data was gathered with the support of interpretive paradigm and analyzed with the grounded theory method of data analysis.

On the basis of this analysis, barriers to learning were identified to illustrate students non-completion of studies within the case institution and, in doing so, the theories of hot knowledge, capitals and habitus were explored, modified and added to in the context of this study. However, these barriers in isolation did not lead students to withdraw, it is only when barriers combined that the desire to withdraw was outweighed by the decision to complete.

This subject area of student retention is poorly investigated in an environment which has a long history of conflict, with a legacy of high unemployment and significant poverty. This study will form the foundation blocks and commence a body of knowledge on student non-completion in dual-sector further and higher education institutions in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, this study adds to both national and international knowledge on the barriers to completion which students encounter as members of a dual-sector educational system.

Keywords: dual-sector; hot knowledge; retention; social, cultural, and economic capital.

* .URL: [http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/\[190\]](http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/[190])

1. Overview

Northern Ireland's (NI) education sector is similar to elsewhere in the United Kingdom (UK), whereby students have the opportunity to avail of higher education (HE) programmes in NI's (two) universities or in dual-sector Further and Higher Education Colleges (F&HE)¹. Programmes in the university sector focus primarily on undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses and attract more of the HE student base. Dual-sector F&HE Colleges predominantly provide intermediate higher education programmes including, Foundation Degrees (FDs) and Higher National/ Certificate and Diplomas (HND /HNC's). This results in 18% of the total HE enrolments delivered in F&HE colleges, the remainder within the university sector (Department of Education and Learning Northern Ireland (DELNI), 2011). The uptake of these educational opportunities has risen substantially with an increase of 45% full-time entrants to higher education over the decade 1996–2006, up from 18% full-time entrants in 1981 (DELNI), 2011). More recently (2008-2009) this figure has risen to almost 50%. Within this, there are a promising 41.7% entrants from Socio-Economic Classifications 4-7, compared with 32.4% in England and 28.2% in Scotland (DELNI, 2011).

However, there is a comparatively high non-completion rate within the F&HE sector. Queen's University, experiences low withdrawal rates for young entrants at 3.3%, while the University of Ulster reported 8.7% non-completion. (Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA,) 2013). In the (F&HE) sector, student withdrawal figures, over all programmes (level 1 to 5) in 2006 was over 16%, with some dual F&HE's colleges reporting substantially greater individual non-completion figures.

Primary research investigating non-completion rates in post-compulsory education in NI is limited. This paper seeks to address this issue and commence the debate. To launch this body of knowledge, this paper will focus specifically on the problem of student retention in one dual-sector F&HE college in NI. The primary rationale for adopting a case study approach is based on the nature of the problem, which requires an investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 1984). In addition, the use of a case study approach with one educational provider as the case subject gives the opportunity to examine this problem of retention in the depth required (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995).

1 Throughout this study the case institution was one of the 16 independent F & HE colleges in NI. This college has since merged with others as part of a government strategy to be part of the six super colleges.

1.1 Community Context

Similar to NI overall, the community where the case institution is located has been shaped by its past. During the Troubles this predominantly rural area was the site of some of the most horrific scenes of violence (Bew, Patterson and Teague, 2000). The residual impact of this conflict contributed to socio-economic problems where 10,000 (54%) of the working age population have no qualifications and a skills deficit is believed to exist which deters investment and employment opportunities. Consequently, this area is viewed as one of the more socially deprived areas of NI, a great deal of the population belonging to the lower socio-economic groups (DC, 2011).

1.2 The case context.

The case institution provides programmes at FE and HE levels (1-5) over a large number of disciplines to both full-time and part-time students. FE provision represents the larger student body, with a smaller representation of HE programmes of learning. This HE provision was established under the 1999 government increase of undergraduate places within the maximum student numbers (MaSN²) cap system, which although small has given the institution an advantage over many other F&HEs who were not afforded the same opportunity (DELNI, 2008). HE programmes are normally at HND or Foundation degree level with some having direct progression routes to university to progress to honours degree level. HE Programmes subjects included Sport and Recreation, Health and Social Care, Computer and Food and Catering. Entry pathways are through Advanced Subsidiary (AS), A Level, 'Business and Technology Education Council' (BTEC) level or through access programmes. The entry points requirement is lower than those in the university sector.

This demonstrates, in agreement with Parry (2005) and DELNI (2011), that this F&HE can and does offer much to the local population in terms of an opportunity to access equitable progressive education, training, skills enhancement and improved employment prospects.

2 A cap on HE undergraduate full-time student places and numbers has been in place in NI since 1994, when in order to constrain escalating public expenditure on student support costs, the then Government introduced a UK-wide policy of consolidating the numbers of award holders in Higher Education. This cap is commonly known as the MaSN cap (maximum (aggregate) student number) cap which individual Higher Education institutions can enroll up to and is funded accordingly to this level. This cap was lifted slightly in 1999 where the Department allocated some 4,130 additional full-time equivalent student places of which for the first time 1701 went to Further Education Colleges (DELNI, 2008). The case institution benefited following this 1999 change.

However, within this case context the rate of non-completion among HE students gives grave cause for concern. In 2001, student completion for those in higher education programmes in the case institution was recorded at 71%. This placed the institution in fourteenth place out of the sixteen independent F&HE colleges (DELNI 2006) and deteriorated even further, with a 64% retention figure overall HE programmes in 2007/2008-2009. Specifically, within full-time undergraduate provision, there were 275 full-time HE students enrolled, 52 of these did not complete their studies—152 of the 275 students were from the academic year 2006-07, 99 of which were first years, 40 were second years and 13 were third year students'. Withdrawals only occurred in year one, where 31 of the students did not complete their first year. This represented a non-completion rate of 31% for first year entrants to HE in the academic year 2006-07. In the academic session 2007/08-2009³, a similar picture emerges – 123 students enrolled, of which 65 were first year students, 40 were second year students and 18 were third year students. The problem of retention again appears to be most prevalent for the student in year one, where 19 students (29%) withdrew before the end of their first year and another two students withdrew from their programme in subsequent years.

Whilst this is a small organization in terms of HE studentship, every non-completion figure is relative and relevant to the study. Understanding of student non-completion in this context is worthy of investigation as this issue is of significant concern for the institution, the local economy and for the student. The focus of this paper is to examine why such a problem occurs through an analysis of the stories and learning experiences of ten non-completing students.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design.

The knowledge of the field of student non-completion guided me to a realisation that an in-depth understanding of the lives and experiences of students, in an educational context, must be obtained in order to determine the negative or positive impact on retention within this academic institution (Mason, 2002) This led the towards an interpretive paradigm, and within this a qualitative methodology to direct the remaining parts of this study. Equally, the adoption of such an approach is believed to be oriented towards increasing our understanding of the phenomena of student departure, persistence and success (Yorke and Longden, 2004). This

³ Complete enrolment student figures for the case institution for 2008/2009 were not available due to the transitional period of higher education institutes at this time

methodology was facilitated through the use of in-depth interviews.

2.2 Methods.

The use of in-depth interviews as a research method offers much to the researcher; providing a way to explore people's lives and yield "thick descriptions" of social life (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006). It is identified as the optimum method of data collection where delicate issues need to be explored in detail, or where it is important to relate issues to a person's individual circumstances (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Consequently, this method was deemed appropriate. It allowed the researcher to explore the lived experiences of individuals in their own world, lifestyles and understanding of education and its value, the barriers to retention they faced internally and externally to the case institution and why these were barriers existed.

The interviews were semi-structured, as this approach provided both an avenue to collect personal stories rooted in specific instances and events, and an opportunity to form relationships and contextualize their experiences (Van Manen, 1990). The questions posed were developed from a review of the literature and were open ended. Such a method allowed the informants to answer from their own frame of reference rather than being confined by the structure of pre-arranged questions (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). Interviews varied in length from one hour to three hours, were recorded for later transcription and analysis.

2.3 Ethical considerations.

As this research involved exploring the personal lives of individuals, it was necessary to obtain ethics approval and follow the ethics protocols of the case study institution. Protocol required the completion of a research ethics application form and development of a participant information and consent letter. This letter included: rationale for the study; respondent's part in this research process; assurances of confidentiality and anonymity throughout through the use of participant pseudonyms and removal of identifiable information of individual and institute; acknowledgement that it was a voluntary process and that their consent was necessary prior to commencement; contact details researcher and relevant others and plans for the findings of this research (Bell, 2005). All of this was adhered to and ethics approval was granted for this study.

In addition, the case organisations nominated a designated person to send the initial information letters and be the contact person for potential participants, where potential participants were invited to contact the designated person by phone or email if they wished to participate in this study. This ensured that participant identities remained undisclosed to the

researcher until an agreement to take part in this study was indicated by the student.

2.4 Sample.

All (55) those who had withdrawn from full-time higher education programmes within the study frame were invited to take part in this research study. Initial information letters sent to the entire withdrawn cohort requesting their participation yielded a sample size of fifteen students who expressed an interest and made contact with the designated person (to be part of this study). These fifteen respondents were subsequently contacted by phone by the researcher and any additional questions regarding any aspect of this study were answered. This resulted in a reduction in participants to a sample of ten students. Consequently, this research population was an opportunity/convenience sample, as the 10 participants were the only ones contacted from the non-completing student cohort that consented to participate (Bell, 2005).

2.4.1 Participant profile.

The participants included those from programmes in 2006-07, 2007-08/09 (Figure One). These ten students were reflective of the student body in terms of gender, marital status, ethnicity, religion, domicile, qualifications on entry and employment status. The students also represented all HE programmes that the organisation provided, with the exception of Computers and Business and Related Studies (no withdrawn student from these cohorts offered to participate in this stage of the research process).

2.5 Data analysis strategy.

Crabtree and Miller (1992) observed that there are almost as many qualitative analysis strategies as there are qualitative researchers. Mason (2002) narrowed it down to three possible strategies to analyse data in the qualitative domain. Included in this third data analysis strategy is the grounded theory approach. This theory, coined by Glaser and Strauss, believes hypotheses and theories emerge out of and are founded in data and that this becomes the answer where other methods do not work well (Polit and Hungler, 1999). This supported the design of this research study, which required the researcher to develop a theoretical account of each dataset collected that is grounded within the empirical data.

At the heart of grounded theory analysis techniques is the coding process (Babchuk, 1997). Typically, the coding process involves three stages. In the context of this study, level one coding involved reading and re-reading each interview transcript, with the intention of understanding what was meant within the data and how each independent piece of data

differed from the others. (Charmaz, 2000). At the end of level one coding preliminary interpretive coding had emerged such as e.g., 'the tech', 'not academic', 'get a job'. In the next part of this process, level two coding, also known as the constant comparison method was initiated. The practical application of level two coding to this data set involved a review and comparison of all the information and notes gathered in level one. From this review similar codes and overlaps were identified, which were then synthesized, where appropriate, into overall categories. For example, level one codes such as 'the tech' and 'not academic' became the level two code 'Perceptions of the Academic Institution'. Level two coding was completed when theoretical saturation was reached. Level three coding endeavoured to reduce the number of categories and collate in a way that shows a relationship or theme (Sherman and Webb, 2001). The completion of this collapsing process in this study led to six themes, theoretical constructs and core categories emerging.

3. Findings And Discussion.

Findings of this study indicate that the reasons for non-completion are student-specific, i.e., the issues which prompt one student's withdrawal, will not necessarily prompt another student to leave. Equally, no one stand-alone factor led the students to withdraw; a combination or domino effect, of factors caused the desire, or need to leave, to outweigh the desire to stay. These factors are represented in the following themes:

1. Encumbered choice making,
2. Internal design planning and practices,
3. No experience: no understanding,
4. A balancing act,
5. Shifting life priorities.

3.1 Encumbered choice making.

Each individual student was asked why they had chosen to study in the case organisation. The participants answered with short descriptor phrases, such as 'poor grades', 'best alternative', 'failure to get first choice', 'financial convenience', 'geographical convenience', and 'the tech' and 'a bit of a doss'. These subsequently became the level two categories of 'Limitations on Options' and 'Perceptions of the Organisation', finally evolving into the core category 'Encumbered Choice Making' to explain the complexity of factors that impacted on

students reasons for choosing the case institution . This will be explored in more detail in subsequent paragraphs.

For all participants, their selection of institution was not based on academic criteria, but included the following: they did not get the grades or a place on the programme in another first-choice academic institution; they felt unprepared for university; did not want to move away from local community, they needed geographical convenience for family care reasons/financial and/or personal reasons. Shauna⁴ explains: *“I wanted to go forward in some direction”*; however, she was not in a position to relocate, and chose a programme in the case institution *“It was the closest one I could get to what I wanted to do”*. Peter, chose his programme in the case institution based on geographical convenience; he explains: *“Yeah, we (student and his partner) were looking at a college, you’re always going to look at the closest first; again, travelling wise, I wasn’t going to go too far”*.

Niamh’s reasoning differed, *“I think it was because I was scared to go university... I thought [to] myself that I wasn’t ready”*. This student also commenced her programme, believing it guaranteed an *“automatic place in university for social work”*. The discovery that this was not the case, adversely affected her motivation and commitment.

Because of this encumbered choice-making process, participants were subsequently questioned on whether their programme met initial expectations. Six of the ten students felt that it did not. Niamh: *“it was totally different [from what she had expected, and subsequently] my heart wasn’t in it”*. Others had no clear understanding or expectation of what their programme entailed. Suzi, *“I didn’t have a clue”*. Further questioning revealed that the majority (nine out of ten) of withdrawn students had not researched their programme but gathered their information on HE and the HE institution from the local community, through hot knowledge, through social networks of family and friends (Ball,2006, McTaggart,2012). Participants themselves concluded that this lack of understanding led to an underestimation of the academic rigour and demands of their studies and in the mental preparation for transition and progression in HE in the case organisation. As the majority of participants (8/10) were first generation HE students, neither they, nor their families were linked into HE networks to gain more accurate knowledge.

4 In quoting from participants, they are coded by pseudonym, i.e., Claire, Niamh, Peter, Lisa, Arthur, Jenny, Shauna, Mike, Suzi and Ella.

This choice making, indicates a risk from the outset, given that individual needs might not be met and when we consider findings on student retention in other contexts, where it has been clearly demonstrated that a student's initial choice of institution and program is an important influence on their subsequent success and retention (Davies and Elias, 2003; Byrne and Flood, 2005). The students were then asked whether they had looked for support to help them continue their studies. This led to the development of further themes.

3.2 Internal design planning and practices.

All ten participants identified internal case institution practices and planning factors which they felt obstructed their learning. These included workload concerns exacerbated by student's outside employment, poor programme planning, poor feedback strategies, and insufficient knowledge of support available. Shauna: *"I just thought it was so chaotic, everything on top of everything else; you got one assignment and another one on top of another assignment"*. Mike: *"very hard to keep track of what you had to have done and when you had to have it done by. It was just very hard to follow"*. Claire:

'We had the first assignment, and even though it wasn't due in they still went and handed out the second assignment. You didn't know which one you were supposed to focus on because they were all going in on different instalments and you would have to hand it back and we still hadn't the first one completely finished before we were in the middle of the second one.'

Other students perceived significant time delays between submissions and feedback, and deficiencies in the way feedback was given. Arthur:

'I did well, I thought (based on class tutor feedback), on three of my assignments, then the course coordinator give me really nasty feedback at the end of the semester and told me I had to redo one of the assignments and a class presentation in only two weeks. This was at the end of the semester – why had it not been highlighted to me when I had given the work in months before? I tried to keep it going after this, but it was too much work to be done in [such] a short period.'

From these findings, each student was asked whether they had discussed their concerns about their programme, its design, workload, etc., with organisational members. Only two had done this, and only with members of the lecturing staff. Lisa:

' I did go to one of my teachers – I – and I said to her about the amount of work we were getting and she let me drop one or two subjects to give me time, and that was grand for a while and then they started handing out the second assignment even when the first assignment wasn't due in yet, and they just lost me altogether after that.'

Unfortunately, Arthur believed that the feedback provided was more destructive than constructive and acted as a de-motivator, as he lost confidence in his ability to achieve the programme's goals.

In highlighting barriers to their learning both internally and externally, students were asked if they had sought support from student services, but none had. Eight out of the ten respondents were unsure of the services offered e.g. financial support, learning support, career guidance. The reason for this particular lack of knowledge is unclear. The practical impact was that those most in need of support did not avail of services. This lack of awareness was further exacerbated for first-generation HE students, as they were unable to glean information from family on what services might exist to support their learning and achievement. Such internal organisational problems are not uncommon in examination of student retention. Similar problems have been cited by others, including Davies (1999), who concluded that students who withdraw tend to be less satisfied with the institutions, than those who stay.

In Thomas's (2002) work, she attributes internal practices which act as barriers to student learning to the habitus of the institution, which she feels does much to shape these interactions. On this occasion the habitus of this institution appeared, for the most part, to lack understanding of their student needs. This was demonstrated through the internal design planning and practices of the organisation, where students cited problems relating to timetabling, teaching styles and feedback strategies and through the lack of student awareness of the support services available. Consequently, the organisation inadvertently causes a barrier to completion for this HE full-time student base.

This lack of institutional understanding of internal barriers to learning is concerning. It raises the questions: Is the case organisation assuming a profile or economic, cultural, social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) of a student who has access to HE as one who may not face barriers to completion and/or will know how to negotiate the educational system to their advantage during difficult times? Or is the institution ill-prepared for the HE student, particularly, as the majority of those attending are FE students who may have different requirements to those pursuing HE options, e.g., teaching strategies? The concern is that this lack of knowledge of students needs may lead to the institution exacerbating difficult situations. Crosling, Heagney and Thomas. (2009) concur, believing that "when teachers know something of the lived experience

of their students, they can organize teaching programmes which facilitate the students' maximum participation" (p.15).

3.3 No experience: No understanding.

All but two of the ten participants were first generation HE students. While this in itself was not cited as affecting retention, they did feel that it occasionally added to their stress, as family members did not appreciate the commitment or reasoning behind their studies. Comments (and codes) included '*did not get the drift*' (Leo), '*lack of understanding*' "as long as I was happy (Kate)" and '*impression*' of the academic institution. Suzi: "*They just didn't have a clue*". The lack of understanding of the academic requirements of HE programmes within this institution was exacerbated by the external perception of the academic demands of a dual sector F&HE, with Ella's family members stating, "*Sure it can't be that hard, it's the tech*" and "*are you still at that*" (Niamh).

Further discussions with participants highlighted that, family members did not appear to understand/value HE progression and what it could offer. This was demonstrated throughout student discussions regarding family member's responses to student's decision to start or complete the programme. The families of Suzi, Lisa, Niamh, Mike, and Ella tended to be passive. As long as the students were happy it did not appear to matter whether they pursued a HE qualification, and/or if they completed their programme. Lisa tells how her parents responded to both her decision to progress to HE and her later decision to withdraw.

'If you don't want it then get a job... They would not make you study. They wouldn't have passed much remarks on ye. If you want to do it then you can do, and you go and do it whatever way you want as long as you are happy.'

This appears to be related to cultural and social capital, where progression in education is not the norm and as such negates the importance of achieving a HE qualification (Bourdieu, 1986). This lack of experience of HE progression, limited the family's ability to support students in relevant decision making. The risk is that because of the challenge to the students' values, beliefs and decision on HE progression, bonding capital (Coleman 1990) to their families and old life may become eroded and tensions may occur. This was apparent in this study. Consequently, students may and did appear to feel very unlike Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) fish in water, but very much out of the water in the HE organisation. Simultaneously, if the goal of education are not a shared value, a student can feel like a fish out of water and no longer bonded to their old world and the community. The disruption a student may feel within his or her own community through the pursuit of HE aspirations has

been widely acknowledged. Thomas and Quinn (2007) refer to “the ambivalence of first-generation entry” (p.63). This can ultimately have an impact on student retention. If the situation is not amended to establish a sense of belonging.

This is in stark contrast to research findings on the importance of educational attainment for children from different/higher socio-economic groups and/or those whose parents previously attended HE. Reay (1998) explains “familial habitus results in a tendency for young people to acquire expectations which are adjusted to what is acceptable for ‘people like us’” (p.526). Implying that progression to HE is a natural progression for Reay’s (1998) students, who are fully supported by family members in all aspects of their educational journey.

3.4 A balancing act.

This core category emerged when participants, reported that although economic pressures were not the primary reason for withdrawal, they did pose an obstacle to learning. All ten students had jobs and seven cited significant financial pressures when studying. This evolved into the core category and psychological process of ‘A Balancing Act’.

Some participants needed jobs in order to remain on their programmes; others chose to work to achieve more personal income than was possible with boost grants and student loans. Peter: “*Affording the course was never going to be the problem. It was everything else I was trying to afford with it. I needed to spend a lot of time earning*”. Working between 10 and 25 hours each week whilst studying full-time was typical. Jenny: “*Pressure to juggle work with school work, it was sort of impossible. It was very exhausting*”. Ella “*Because of all the work we were getting it wasn’t possible to get the work done and have a job as well*”.

This financial barrier to learning has long been cited as a contributing reason for non-completion in HE. Archer, Hutchings and Ross (2003) state, financial factors form “crucially important barriers” to participation in HE (p.193). Theorists conclude that this is a particularly prevalent problem for those from lower socio-economic groups (Brennan and Osborne, 2008), reflective of the participants of this study. While this lack of direct economic capital was not cited by the withdrawn students as their sole reason for withdrawal, they felt it made their learning more challenging.

3.5 Shifting priorities

The student cohort unanimously agreed that initially the programme, further education and the future it offered, had been their number one priority. They manifested what is referred to as imagined social capital and they used the higher education institution to recreate, and re-imagine themselves and their lives (Thomas and Quinn, 2007; Schuller, Baron and Field, 2000). Unfortunately, this future imagined social capital opportunity shifted and was relegated to a lower level because of personal circumstances and life events. Consequently, the drive and ambition to see their goal of education achieved, in spite of having what Webb (2004) refers to as “dispositions to learn” (p.147), was diminished. Shauna, believed that her HND course was going to afford a “wider view” of the area in which she wanted to develop a career. She became immersed in her program, but discovered that the course content was not specific enough for her aspirations and therefore held very little interest for her. She stated,

'I found that it wasn't really anything to do with the area I was going to work in, just everything, a lot of things were based around wanting to work with older people and I knew I definitely wasn't going to work with older people. It wasn't even questionable; just do not want (work with that client group). I wasn't interested enough, to be motivated enough, to do the work, you know.'

However, whilst life events were acknowledged as a significant barrier to participant learning, they were not cited as the sole reason for withdrawing. Shauna explains, that a personal health issue also developed, which compounded the lack of interest and motivation.

'Things actually went downhill for me that year as well, as I started to become quite ill...But the worse I felt and the less interested I got, it (the course) just fell by the wayside and you know and I thought I just can't be bothered.'

She concluded that if the course had been more relevant she would have deferred until her health improved.

Peter's circumstances changed, after he commenced the programme which led to a shift in his priorities. Initially, he wished to gain a qualification to improve employment prospects, but subsequently changed to providing a secure home for his family. He felt very committed to both goals, however, the latter became the focus and he worked long hours. This resulted in missing classes and falling behind in college workload until he felt he could not catch up. The pressure of supporting a mortgage and family eventually led to his withdrawal. Other extraneous events that students encountered during this time included family changes (Suzi), family bereavements (Mike), relationship break-ups (Jenny) and health problems (Niamh). The

students felt that these life events contributed to a change in their focus during that academic year.

These specific obstacles could have been shifted, supported or removed to facilitate the student's return to priority educational achievement. For example, direction to a part-time course and financial advice may have been appropriate for those who needed to work. If staff had encouraged students to access student financial and health supports, and individual mentoring there is a possibility that their priority of HE educational achievement may not have been relegated downwards. Unfortunately the impact of a combination of barriers and obstacles led the students to withdraw. This decision was not easy for them, and therefore its impact should not be underestimated. Suzi: *"It was the happiest time of my life, and it was one of the saddest times of my life"*.

4. Conclusion.

Students in this case context withdrew from studies because of Encumbered choice making; Internal design planning and practices; No experience: No understanding; A balancing act and Shifting life priorities. None of these barriers in isolation was cited by students as the reason for non-completion but rather, when barriers combined, pressures mounted, and consequently the desire to stay was overruled by the desire to leave.

It is noteworthy that for each barrier there were un-accessed internal organisational supports and opportunities to help students avoid non-completion. Students and their families lacked a full and comprehensive prior understanding of chosen programmes, the economic and personal demands, and progression within any academic institution. A meeting before commencement would ensure the student is on a right and informed learning path from the outset.

Furthermore, the organisation and its member's need to be aware that HE students with profiles similar to the case study participants, are increasingly becoming the norm, and we need to ensure that we support them to manage their barriers, and not erect further barriers to learning and completion through our own practices.

4.1 Limitations.

The findings and conclusions of this paper offer an account of the educational experiences and perceptions of ten students who did not complete a HE programmes of learning from a dual sector Further and Higher Education Institute in Northern Ireland. Therefore, because of

this and the context nature of student retention, results cannot be considered generalizable.

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