

To ask the Minister for Employment and Learning what action his Department is taking to reduce student drop-out rates.

**ANSWER**

Northern Ireland's participation rates of young people in Higher Education are now the highest in the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland outperforms the other regions in increased access to higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Although there are many factors which impact on drop-out rates, there appears to be a correlation between widening participation and increased drop-out rates. In recognition of this, my Department pays the higher education institutions around £1.5m per year in the form of a Widening Participation premium to support the recruitment and retention of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The issue of drop-out rates among disadvantaged students is also being specifically addressed in the development of the Regional Strategy for Widening Participation in Higher Education.

Both Queen's University and the University of Ulster regard the issue of student retention as an institutional priority and have in place a range of mechanisms to address student drop-out rates. Details of these are attached at Annex A.

**DANNY KENNEDY MLA**

**Minister for Employment and Learning**

**Queen's University, Belfast**

In addressing the issue of student retention, Queen's University has in place a comprehensive portfolio of measures for student mentoring and development, which seeks to ensure that all students optimise their potential and leave the University with the best possible academic qualification.

The University's 'Supporting Student Attainment Sub-Group' oversees this portfolio, providing a strategic and coordinated approach to the issue. The portfolio recognises that measures to improve student retention need to start well before entry to university, and continue throughout the first semester, the first year and beyond. Such measures rely on the full involvement of teaching staff and are embedded in programme content and learning, teaching and assessment strategies.

Initiatives that the University has taken to enhance retention rates include:

- Establishing minimum undergraduate student retention targets for each School.
- Developing a prospective student portal, reviewing open days, and developing a range of events for teachers and pupils so that prospective students have a better idea of the demands and rewards of university.
- Reviewing and refining welcome, induction and orientation programmes.
- Introducing a 10% contribution of Level 1 results to the overall degree classification.
- Implementing a Student at Risk policy.
- Introducing Personal Tutors for Levels 1 and 2 students.

- Piloting peer mentoring.
- Establishing, as a single point of contact, the Student Guidance Centre, which houses a number of practical and pastoral services for students—ranging from welfare and finance, to disability and counselling services.
- Establishing a Learning Development Service which provides one-to-one support for students with particular needs, as well as learning support and assistance for Schools.
- Helping new students to identify with their subject area in order to improve student engagement, for example, by including the development of social space within Schools.
- Providing a range of support mechanisms through the Students' Union and Student Accommodation service in order to foster a greater sense of 'student community'.
- Developing and promoting extra-curricular activities through the Degree Plus programme.

Progress against these targets is monitored through the annual performance management reports, produced at both School and corporate level, and are reviewed annually as an integral part of the academic planning process.

### **University of Ulster**

The University of Ulster has conducted research on the multi-factorial nature of student non-continuation and actions that might impact on this through two projects funded by the Department for Employment and Learning. The University has adopted the recommendations of these projects.

As first year students have the highest non-continuation rates, the University has given increased priority to first-year non-continuation and progression in its current Teaching and Learning Strategy, 2008/09-2012/13. The figure for first year early leavers has decreased by 4% over the past four years.

The University monitors non-continuation and progression data on a regular basis and works with faculties to address specific issues identified through this monitoring. The University's Senate reviews non-continuation regularly and has set targets for the reduction of the figure at faculty level year-on-year. Progress towards these targets is reviewed annually.

There have been recent audits, by the University's external auditors, of the University's processes for monitoring and managing student non-continuation which found that the processes are operating as intended and are aimed at pro-actively addressing the causes of non-continuation.