

**Title:** **Improving student engagement and belonging through student staff partnerships: outcomes from the HEA What Works? Programme at Ulster University**

**Presenter:** **Roisin Curran, Aine McKillop, Grainne Dooher, Avril Honan, Jason Grogan, Ian Montgomery**  
Ulster University

### **Session Learning Outcomes**

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

- Develop an understanding of the most effective interventions that improve students' sense of belonging, engagement and confidence in first year at HE institutions.
- Discuss routes for student success that focus on pre-entry information; active learning; and co-curricular activities.
- Appreciate the importance of the student voice and have a greater understanding of the impact of student staff partnerships
- Reflect and discuss the opportunities and challenges in improving student retention and success in their own areas.

### **Session Outline**

Ulster University is taking part in the HEA What works? Student Retention & Success programme (HEA 2012) which aims to improve the strategic approach to the engagement, belonging, retention and success of students. This 3-year change programme involving 13 UK Universities is the implementation of specific interventions in the areas of induction, active learning and co-curricular activities. During 2013-15, seven discipline teams implemented and evaluated a range of activities with the aim of promoting belongingness within the first year student cohort. Research has shown (Tinto (1993), Thomas (2012), Strayhorn (2012)) that this is critical to addressing the issue of early leavers in HE. A range of evaluation methodologies has been used in the programme to evaluate the impact of these interventions at a discipline and institutional level.

This paper reports on the synthesis of the 'belonging survey' (supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation), which can identify changes over time in students' sense of belonging to their institution, their academic engagement and their self-confidence. Four surveys containing 16 questions rated on a Likert scale have been administered to all first years in the seven discipline areas, the first of these in November 2013 (n=274), the second in April 2014 (n=230), the third in November 2014 (n=359) and the fourth in April 2015 to both first years

(n=333) and second years (n=240). The data has been compared with the findings in other UK Universities (n=3718).

Evidence from qualitative data gathered using an Appreciative Inquiry approach with first-year students in semester 1 and 2 during 2014-15 highlights the most effective interventions at pre-entry, induction, and those that occur in the academic sphere. Developing student capacity to engage and staff capacity to be engaging (Mann, 2005) through a partnership approach will be discussed.

Initial analysis indicates that student engagement was increased as students progressed through Year 1 and Year 2. This trend was observed for new students starting in 2013/14 and 2014/15. Student engagement was higher in those students starting in September 2014/15 than in 2013/14 which may reflect implementation of the project interventions. In general, students respond very positively in terms of their sense of belonging at University particularly in comparison to student engagement and self-confidence. As expected student's self-confidence improved as the year progressed, and this was also reflected in their expectation to do well in their programme as this was higher from Year 1 to Year 2.

### **Session Activities and Approximate Timings**

The outline of the workshop is as follows;

Presentation of key findings      15 Minutes

Q&A and comments                5 Minutes

Small group discussion          15 minutes

What can institutions and course teams do to implement and embed the outcomes of What works? in supporting first-years to make the transition into HE so that all our learners have an equal chance of success?

Feedback and next steps          10 minutes

### **References**

HEA (2012) Student retention and success change programme: Implementing and evaluating the impact of the 'What works?' programme. Available at <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/workstreams-research/themes/retention-and-success/what-works-student-retention-and-success-change> [Accessed 01 Nov, 2014]

Mann, S. (2005) Alienation in the learning environment: a failure of community? *Studies in Higher Education*. 30 (1), pp. 43–55.

Tinto, V. (1993) *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Thomas, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme*. Available at <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/node/2932> [Accessed 4 March 2013]

Strayhorn, T. L. (2012) *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students*. London: Routledge.