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NAME:	Niamh Halpenny
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SUPERVISOR NAME:	Orla Tuohy
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Management of Conflict & Retention within Irish Third Level Institutions

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Niamh Halpenny

51706857

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Management of Conflict & Retention within Irish Third Level Institutions

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Abstract

The aim and objective of this research is to explore conflict management systems within higher education and if the introduction of a conflict management process such as mediation can impact on retention numbers. I also aim to have a greater understanding as to why students disengage in higher education and to demonstrate the positive effects learner engagement can have on an institution. Lastly, I would like my research to make recommendations around the development and implementation of a national retention and conflict management strategy for higher education in Ireland. I used secondary research to develop a clear understanding of how conflict and retention is currently managed within third level education today. I adopted a qualitative research method, and the primary data was collected through an online questionnaire. The sample size of the study was 44 ranging from different higher education institutions in Ireland including private and public colleges in Ireland. I elected to engage with various institutions to ensure varying perspectives were reflected and to gather a stronger insight into a variety of strategies used by colleges in Ireland.

Introduction

The focus of this study is to further understand what the elements are inherent in the management of conflict and student retention in the context of third level college in Ireland.

Over the past five years, I have worked in higher education, directly supporting students at both a regional and national level. I began my journey representing students as a union elected officer and then progressed my career working for a higher education provider as the Learner Experience Manager. Currently, I am the Head of Student Services for a higher education institute which is a young, privately-owned college in the heart of Dublin city in Ireland.

Presently, my career is focused on student retention and understanding conflict between students, staff, and external agencies within Independent College. My interest in student engagement and retention leads on from my previous role as Vice President for Maynooth Student's Union where I represented student issues on a regional and national level. I always had a keen interest in student welfare and engagement and this where my passion for working with students in third level education begun.

The college I currently work for was quite modest until 2017 when I was employed to increase student engagement and student involvement in the decision-making process of the college. My career progressed when I was tasked with student retention.

Daily, I face conflict within my role and although I enjoy it, I question sometimes where an institution can improve in retaining their students and avoiding such conflict surrounding this, especially within a private institution where retaining students is of paramount importance. However, as we know low student retention statistics can be detrimental to any academic institution and can impact an institution's international ranking. Public colleges are funded based on their student records and therefore impact the development of an institution in terms of recruitment of staff, renovation, and growth on campus (Statistics | Higher Education Authority, 2021).

The higher education system in Ireland is divided mostly into two types. These are publicly funded colleges made up of universities, technology institutions, and colleges of education. Other academic institutions in Ireland are small privately-owned organizations that are not

funded by the Irish government and are solely financed by the students and their fees (van Stolk, Tiessen, Clift, and Levitt, 2007).

The majority of students choose to attend publicly funded campuses. From a Higher Education Authority (HEA) study based on third level participation, universities make up 45.9% of the student population in Ireland with technology colleges (43.9%) following closely behind. The remainder of the population falls under Colleges of Education (3.7%) and finally, private institutions which only make up approximately 6.5% of the overall student populace (HEA's (2005): A review of higher education participation in 2003, Table 1).

Several measures have been put in place over time to promote and improve retention figures across the education sector in Ireland. For example, some of these initiatives can be seen below:

- In 1995, education tuition was abolished for full-time undergraduate students. Irish education became more accessible for students regardless of their socio-economic background and therefore increased participation and advancement for students (van Stolk, Tiessen, Clift, and Levitt, 2007).
- In 2000, the HEA provided funding for retention-focused initiatives aimed at understanding the causes of student non-completion (van Stolk, Tiessen, Clift, and Levitt, 2007).
- In 2001, A networking group (now called the Irish University Association (IUA)) was established consisting of the Presidents of several institutions to share ideas on retention concerns (van Stolk, Tiessen, Clift, and Levitt, 2007).

From my introduction it would seem that student retention and conflict has been a topic of interest for some time but has yet to be fully understood. My plan is not the creation of a panacea for the issue of student retention but to more fully understand what are the elements inherent in it. I will do this by researching what are the experiences of both learners and staff within institutions, including those that are tasked with student engagement. I would also like to investigate the current policies and tools used by the higher education sector to retain students and conflict management.

Colleges across the country have many mechanisms that help to prevent high dropout rates, and support students however, a national system has yet to be devised or implemented.

I would also like to investigate current tools used by higher education sectors to retain students.

The goal of my research is:

- To have a greater understanding as to why students disengage or 'drop out' of their third level institution.
- Investigate what higher education institutions could do to improve retention rates.
- To demonstrate the positive effects learner engagement has a third level campus.
- Investigate whether alternative dispute resolution methods could help solve and manage conflict on third level campuses in Ireland.
- To make recommendations around the development and implementation of a National Retention Strategy and conflict management for the Higher Education Sector in Ireland

Overview of Research Structure

Introduction

The introduction chapter will give a setting of conflict management and retention. It also has provided the aims, objectives, and research questions that the research study will answer

Literature Review

This chapter has provided an in-depth, detailed analysis of conflict management and retention within higher education in Ireland. It has detailing evaluated many different aspects of higher education where students are involved and the issues currently facing students in third level education.

Methodology

The methodology section describes the methodological approach that was applied by the researcher to gather the statistics needed to carry out the research study. The researcher defines the research design, the approach, methods, sample, ethical considerations, limitations, the reliability and validity of the research study, reflexivity and data analysis.

Findings

The findings of the research study are presented in this chapter. This section shows the questions used within the questionnaire and the answers given by the participants. The researcher shows the findings of the 44 participants who were participating in the study.

Discussion

This portion of the research gives a discussion between the results of the primary research in comparison to the research already undertaken. This chapter was divided into the four primary topics and each section presents a discussion on the topic. This chapter also emphasized potential questions that evolved from the discussion.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a summary of the crucial points learned in the course of the research study. It also presented suggestions for higher education institutions on conflict management and retention.

Literature Review

To fully understand student retention and student engagement, we must first evaluate the existing research and literature that has already been shown.

Research on student retention is not something new to 3rd level institutions. Colleges from all over the world have been conducting research focused on this topic for decades as you can see from the readings I will use below, however, as time moves on, strategies around retention must continue to develop.

I will analysis the research already conducted under the following headings:
- Student Retention
- Student Feedback
- Student Experience
- Student Initiatives
- Student Engagement

- Higher Education- Public Sector

- Higher Education – Private Sector

- Benefits of Student Engagement

- Other Factors

- Conflict Management in Third Level Education

- Maynooth University – Conflict Example

Student Retention

While student retention is a constant element of a third level campus, minimal analysis has been conducted on the role of the institutions in combating retention rates and conflict. Student progression and retention remains a constant issue for higher education across the world. Colleges strive to create an engaging campus that is fit for purpose to meet a student's personal and societal needs.

According to an English academic named Bernard Longden (2006) higher education is a growing sector which can now provide a range of undergraduate programmes for people from any background, however, the culture within universities has remained the same with very little progressions in their systems. Longden said that 3rd level education has grown over the years and student's choices of careers and courses has increased. With this, 3rd level education has become more accessible to students from diverse backgrounds no matter their socio-economic environment however, systems in place to support students have remained unchanged with very little funding put towards support staff and initiatives. (Longden, 2006)

Within his research the question was raised whether it is the student's or the institution fault when a student decided to withdraw from their course? From his perspective it is plain to see that institutions have been unable to adapt and understand the evolving student body. He explored in his research if a student's non-completion of their college course was an indirect response by their institution to students who were unfit for third level education or was it because campuses have been unable to adapt to the changing student population.
 (Longden, 2006, p 101)
In 2002 at the European Access Network conference, the question was asked: What are the conditions for student retention? In terms of the university, the easy solution would be to only

allow motivated students enrol however, we are now in a world where education is no longer a privilege, it is a right to everyone so institutions must establish mechanism that promote learner retention. (Longden, 2006)

As of 2011, the retention rates in Ireland were higher than the average of the United States (US) and this is due to the fact Ireland provides cheaper or 'free' education whereas, in the United States, tuition fees are higher than any other country. Although our retention numbers were higher, Irelands statistics were extremely affected by the economic downturn and therefore sought support from American universities for ways to improve their retention systems. Ireland began searching for new methods to improve retention that have already been implemented in the United States and are shaping them to meet the needs of their student population. (Sibson, 2011).

A conflict that ends in a student terminating their studies can be due to many different reasons, perhaps it is personal and therefore there is little an institution can do, however, sometimes it can be because of the interactions a student has had with their institution. This could be a lecturer or a Head of Department. No matter the conflict, it is important for a college to always consider the student's perspective no matter who is right or wrong. From my reading of 'understanding conflict with students,' it is believed that a better understanding of students is needed to actively engage them in their studies. 'Regardless of the legitimacy of students' concerns, a better understanding of students is needed' (Weimer, 2021).

Although a student's concerns may be based on incorrect assumptions, whether it is regarding a grade or an exam, the response or interaction they have with their college has a big part to play in their student engagement with the college in the future. The most frequent problem we can see from research conducted is a college's actions when it comes to a student problem. The strategy is often to deny the dilemma occurred or take no notice of it and avoid giving timely information to students. It seems that a lot of institutions have problems in closing their 'feedback loop'.

Student Feedback

Student feedback is a constant mechanism used within 3rd level institutions and surveys are

issued to students usually at the end of the semester. Colleges have also begun to evaluate student feedback mid-way through a semester within each module so lecturers can make improvements before the semester ends. Feedback, although a constant does not seem to enlighten institutions on the 'disengaged'. The higher education authority has funded many international feedback systems that we will explore below.

From looking at several institutions in Ireland, we can see that student feedback has a big part to play in student engagement. Many public institutions are affiliated and take part in the 'Irish Survey for Student Engagement'. This survey takes place once a year across all public colleges in Ireland for the HEA and its purpose is to evaluate student issues, concerns, and engagement levels.

Since the survey began in 2013, 245,000 students have taken part. (Student Feedback, 2021). This data is published every year and made available to colleges and the participating students. Colleges across the country drive the campaign in making sure students take part in the survey however little is done when it comes to encouraging students to read the results or question the outcomes.

A major concern from students is what happens to their feedback. Closing the feedback loop has always been an issue for institutions and has resulted in 'survey fatigue'. This ultimately means students lose interest and therefore student engagement decreases. According to a study conducted at University College Dublin (UCD) 'A major criticism of student evaluation of teaching is that generally, it does not close the feedback loop.' (Watson, 2003)
After feedback is evaluated, actions should be communicated back to the learners and should occur as soon as possible. 'By closing the loop students appreciate the value of the importance are more likely to participate constructively in future evaluation surveys rather than using the process to vent frustration (Tucker, Jones, & Straker, 2008).

It is also important for an institution to involve their students after the feedback process and engage them in problem-solving. This will help students have a better understanding of their college and therefore will lead to fewer disagreements and disputes. (Surgenor, 2010)

Student Experience

Although, the main goal for a learner going to college is to successfully graduate in their chosen career, experience outside of the classroom has become extremely important. Students now take into consideration, clubs and societies, student unions and other extracurricular activities when choosing an institution. The goal is to be accepted into a college that can offer quality education as well as other experiences that will aid them in their life after graduation.

Research has indicated that easy access to resources is a key function with any HEI. These include academic support and engagement with college life. The majority of students want to live the 'college experience'. They hear about it from their families, they see it on television, and they come having high expectations before they set foot on campus. Institutions sometimes fall short of meeting this expectation leaving students disappointed and deflated. In Ireland, we see a major shift over the last decade in many aspects of higher education that have impacted students in different ways. Profoundly in public institutions, we can see significant changes both negative and positive. Although, there has been many different funding models announced by the government, there has also been several cutbacks and under funding in areas. Ireland has found itself in a competitive job market and students are searching for courses that will give them both academic knowledge and professional experience that will make them 'stand out' within their chosen sector. There are increasing demands to provide a closer fit between the qualifications offered by colleges and the job market. (Fleming and Finnegan, 2010).

Education in Ireland has improved in many ways. These include the change in grading systems and putting more emphasis on different types of assessments, engaging open days, and increased access to supports such as counsellors that give them personal support and academic tutors that will guide them through their courses. (Fleming and Finnegan, 2010). However, what do the students think? The first thing that pops to mind is feedback however, feedback can only show us so much and we find that the most engaged student is the one giving us the feedback. According to Fleming and Finnegan, feedback leaves us very limited in our understanding, and we must start collecting feedback in different ways such as listening to students' backgrounds, their success stories, and their struggles. (Fleming and Finnegan, 2010).

Student Initiatives

It has been proven that students that come through different programmes such as the Access initiative have a more engaging and fruitful experience. These cohorts are usually the non-traditional student that were given support before they stepped on campus and had already made relationships with their peers early on in their college careers. From research conducted by Maynooth University in 2010, their students benefited hugely from these funded schemes. 'When I talked to non-traditional students whether young or mature those who came through the access programmes were eloquent, insightful, and benefited hugely from the firm collaborations, friendships, and networks of support they were encouraged to form as part of their struggle for retention in college and universities.' (Fleming and Finnegan, 2010).

From evaluating research already conducted in Ireland, I found that research in Ireland has usually taken place on the 'typical student' - this being the eighteen- or nineteen-year-old who has just completed their leaving certificate. Although this may be for most students, it is important to analyse other cohorts. For example, mature students and international learners.

In relation to international learners, an example by Sibson (2011) is informative. In a study of retention issues of mature students involved in higher education programmes, non-traditional students in Ireland have less interaction with their peers and faculty and less involvement in extracurricular activities and campus services (Sibson, 2011).

Fleming and Finnegan indicated from their studies that semester one or stage one was a crucial year for student engagement and once engagement was there, there was a greater chance of a student continuing their studies. They suggested an evaluation of year one within HEA's and providing students with a broader range of subjects that would range from arts and sciences and incorporate learning activities and a range of teaching and learning styles. 'Students should be given an option to undertake a more general modular semester along the lines of a 'taster menu'. This would emphasise a range of liberal arts and sciences with the experiences of collaborative and cooperative learning activities as central to the provision.' (Fleming and Finnegan, 2010).

Student Engagement

The term student engagement can be used to describe a wide range of aspects regarding the dealings a student has with their institution, the campus, and their peers. Engagement has been recognisable as being a major factor that influences all aspects of student life such as student retention and recruitment. (Kahu, 2013).

As we know student engagement can be seen to important for both the student and the institution successes. (Pike, Smart, Kuh and Hayek, 2006)

We can see at the beginning of the 20th century, only 3,200 learners were studying at 6 institutions in Ireland (Coolahan, 1981). At the time it was believed that going to college was for the elite and those who came from a wealthy background which showed a strong connection between social status and student engagement. (White, 2001) 3rd level education was only attracting a small-scale of the populace, was very under-funded and favoured training in certain professions such as medicine and law.

A report issued between 1962 and 1965 by an Irish survey team supported by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development researched the long- term needs for educational resources and invested in higher education emphasized the restricted access to education in Ireland and exclusive nature of college in Ireland. (Irish Government Publication, 1962)

This research indicated that 2% of the population aged between 15 and 19 and 3% of the population aged between 20 and 24 at the time of the census in 1961 were enrolled in higher education. This excludes students who were training for the priesthood which at the time was a very common career choice. The report outlined that universities were largely for the upper class noting that the association between education accessibility and socio-economic background was 'unmistakeable'.

From the cohort of students that completed their leaving certificate in Ireland in 1963, 65% of the students that progressed to 3rd level education were the children of business owners and professionals while as small as 2% of people that went on to college came from the trade and semi-skilled category. A further 4% of learners came from the unemployed and widows/widowers. Higher education progression was entirely defined by the learners social and family

background and entrance to further education remained the territory of the privileged people of Ireland and remined as so until the mid-1960s.

From the 1960s to the 1980s a dominant feature arose. This was the swift growth of student's enrolments, and a more diverse learner cohort began to arise. In 1980 to 1981 the level of first-time students entering college courses grew to 22%. (Higher Education Authority, 1995). Within the space of two decades, the Irish 3rd level education system transformed from a privileged system to a mass enrolment across the country. (Irish Government Publication, 1962)

Higher Education – Public Sector

Universities in Ireland within the public sector are publicly funded by the Irish government. Within these institutions, student engagement in decision making is mandated. Elected student representatives have seats on the colleges major governing boards such as Academic council which overseas any changes to an institutions academic policy or subject matter. This mandate was introduced by the University Act of 1997.

The University Act of 1997 welcomes students input and feedback on major decision and states that all governing bodies membership should include student representation. These student elected reps are usually chosen from a college's student union. The job of these student representatives is to bring student feedback to table and have their say on any change or decision making within an institution. Every public institution must seek student feedback before a decision can be made. (University Act, 1997)

Students feeling like their voice is heard on campus and having a place to voice their opinion has a major impact on student retention rates within a university.

Higher Education – Private Sector

Over recent times, Ireland has seen a growth in the establishment of private higher education institutions. Private colleges have grown to meet the demand of student progressing into higher education. This has absorbed pressures in response to demographic demands, the expansion of live long learning, financial pressures, and gives students other options within education. (Higher Education Authority, 2016).

A number of investors and entrepreneurs saw the gap in the market and seen it has a profitable opportunity. These institutions tend to be smaller in size, have a lower reputation status, mixed quality and focus on low-cost education for all. Private colleges tend to focus on career fields in high demand such as business, law and IT and enrol students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and non-traditional students with flexible options such as part time and evening courses. (Higher Education Authority, 2016). Private institution education is accredited by Quality Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and therefore institutions must go through a rigorous re-engagement process every five years to keep their accreditation. With this accreditation, the qualifications you receive after graduating from a private college are internationally recognised and then become attractive to many different cohorts of students.

Private education are businesses seeking profit and do not fall under the Universities Act, 1997 and therefore student engagement policy that you find in public colleges do not apply. With this, there is no mandated requirement for any student engagement or voice in decision making on senior boards however, it is implied by their accrediting body QQI.

For example, as part of the reengagement process with QQI, the involvement of learners as part of governing structure is important to be successful even though it is not required by the state. For example, in the review of a reengagement process they noted issues around student engagement including lack of transparency on how relevant stakeholders are represented within their decision-making process which includes student and academic staff. (McCaul, 2020)

Institutions could argue that due to there being no induction from QQI or from any state body that the need to have students involved in the decision-making process have been considered by some intuitions as unnecessary. This is a clear inconsistency between schools for profit and state funded colleges. It is important to note that although not required by QQI, many institutes do insist on a student voice on their major decision-making committees.

From working in a private for-profit intuition but having graduated from a public college where I sat as a student union elected representative, I can see the value the student voice adds to an institution's decision-making process and how engagement in my college life made me feel part of a community whose goal was to look after me as the learner.

Benefits of Student Engagement

We can see many publications that highlights the benefits of student engagement such as the HEA working group that was constructed to evaluate learner engagement in Irish Higher Education (2016). Further studies that have researched learner engagement found positive outcomes in terms of student wellbeing, (Boulton, et al.,2019) overall success in their education. (Webber, et al., 2013), alumni satisfaction (Drew-Branch, 2011) and finally retention (Thomas, 2012).

It is obvious that learner engagement and the student voice in decision making has many benefits for both the student and the institution and will be implanted further as colleges grow across Ireland. (Bryson, 2022).

Other Factors

It must be noted that sometimes a student withdrawing from college is within their best interest which was noted by Dr Baird who was part of the research team at Trinity College Dublin. 'Both tutors and students made the point that there are times when withdrawing from College is in a student's best interest' however, she further pointed out that mechanisms must be put place to address retention. (Baird, 2002)

Following on from that, a report on retention was published by Patricia Callaghan from Trinity College Dublin on Baird's findings.

The report shows that at Trinity College, approximately 15.4% of new students did not complete their undergraduate studies and most of these students withdraw while in their first year. 'The majority of students who withdraw from college do so while they registered as Junior Freshman students.' The study provided some needed information on why student's dropout of their courses. The study contacted 688 students and successfully received a 20% response rate. (Callaghan, 2009)

Their findings were clear however, some may say obvious. The most popular reason for disengagement was course choice and expectation of their course however, the majority of other issues raised were stress and access to support services.

Although mostly found within final year students, it was reported that students had trouble finding a successful work/life balance which is an integral part of one's careers. Perhaps could even be considered a staple skill in life. 'Students who withdrew had trouble balancing their work and study.' (Callaghan, 2009)

In 2001, the Higher Education Authority completed a study on withdrawals from undergraduate university course. The study consisted of all universities within the Republic of Ireland. The recommendation from this study was: (HEA, 2001)

- Development of policy around retention.
- A detailed study on several issues relating to completing level 8 course.
- A study on the range of problems a first-year student may face when adapting to life as a student.
- Tracking mechanism to monitor students' progression.

This reported noted that monitoring progression through assessment submission was a viable way to track students who may be at risk of withdrawing from their course. 'There is a need for a tracking mechanism to monitor students' progress in third level education from entry through their coursework' (HEA, 2001)

According to Callaghan, availability of student supports plays an integral part for students and once the students have been identified as at risk, they should be notified of these available resources. 'Adequate student learning, pastoral and personal supports should be available to support students at risk of dropping out' (Callaghan, 2009). International reports on retentions shows that seclusion and aloneness have a huge impact completion rate according to Callaghan.

Other proposals made by Callaghan was that institutions should put more resources behind developing 'support peer assisted learning' and 'peer mentoring' programmes.' (Callaghan, 2009).

It is important that we explore other international education systems and their research on

student retention. As stated earlier, Bernard Longden was an English academic who published many pieces on student retention in the UK. As recent as 2006, Longden researched a piece called 'An Institutional Response to Changing Student Experience and their Impact on Retention Rates'. In this article, Longden also conducted research on what influences students to withdraw from their education.

Longden suggests four broad categories that lead to a student decision to leave college.

- Decision making around entering the programme.
- Learner's experience of the course and the institution.
- Failure to keep up with the demands of the course.
- Personal issues outside of the student's college life.

He states that its rarely a single issue, but a range of the categories listed above. It is clear however that institutions play a central role leading to a student's decision to withdraw.

There may be a presumption that students that disengage from their studies came to the decision easily without exploring their options however, this is far from the truth. Deciding to drop out of their courses is usually a very stressful experience for them. This can impact them financially and decrease their chances of obtaining a satisfactory job that will fulfill their lifestyle.

Conflict Management in Third Level Education

Although we see conflict in our everyday life, it is rare we find someone who has the tools to successfully deal with a dispute themselves without seeking professional or friendly advice. There are many different reactions to conflict according to research. These are:

- Avoidance: This technique is self-explanatory. These people tend to avoid or 'run' away from conflict.
- Competitive: These types of people are strong-minded and confident and can become aggressive in their approach.
- Collaborative: Individuals who adopt this approach are friendly and mainly concerned in preserving a relationship.

- Compromising: These people tend to settle with less to please their counterpart.

It is not uncommon for people who are faced with conflict to become hostile and offended and instead of using active listening, they get defensive and begin to justify their actions. (Patton, Ury and Fisher, 2014)

From my work as an advocate for students as Vice President of a large students' union in Ireland, my experience of engaging with universities when supporting students followed a similar trend each time. Although this is not true for every university representative I engaged with, many were defensive and justified their actions and had little interest in hearing the student's voice. I would find this like the competitive approach where these university representatives' goal was to 'win' the argument.

When engaging in dispute resolution in third level education, two crucial principles should be maintained. According to Walter H. Gmelch and James B. Carroll these are:

- People: The relation between the students and the college must be priority. By focusing on the issues by sympathising and using techniques such as active listening
- Interests: It is important when engaging in conflict with students to focus on the interests not the positions and make the effort to find the root of their problems. (Gmelch and Carroll, 1991)

Third level education is where conflict is essential part of the community life. Challenging concepts is the bread and butter of higher education. A college campus is created by a diverse range of personalities and backgrounds, and it is presumed that this is the place where people with different perceptions and viewpoints can coexist and not only is disagreement accepted but it is also encouraged.

According to Sally Klingel and Michael Maffie, third level colleges have increasingly turned to alternative dispute methods to manage conflict more effectively between staff members. (Klingel and Maffie, 2011)

Conflict is unavoidable in Education as often seen as a negative aspect however, conflict is

inevitable and can have positive outcomes. Campuses have a range of diversity which mean students have different values, opinions, and perspectives. Conflict is needed as it can help:

- Raise student problems and encourage the student voice. (Ghaffar, 2022)

- Focus work on the most appropriate issue.

- Motivate both students and staff in participate and communicate.

- Helps people involved reflect and learn from their difference.

If conflict is not properly managed in education it can have adverse effects on the campus population such as hinders productivity, decreases morale, and causes the conflict to fester.

Educators and students who understand the nature of conflict will have better tools to manage it in constructively. (Moran 2001) looks at conflict management as 'a philosophy and a set of skills that assist individuals and groups in better understanding and dealing with conflict as it arises in all aspects of their lives'. Sources of conflict within education can be poor communication from the institution, competition for resources that are limited, and conflicting goals. (Ghaffar, 2022)

Maynooth University – Conflict Example

For the reader to truly understand the types of conflict that occurs on third level campus, I have decided to explore a recent conflict that has occurred on the campus of Maynooth University.

This dispute might be to the larger end of the conflict scale however, it is a great example on how disagreements can be escalated when the correct mechanisms for conflict resolution are not in place. To give you some context, in 2015 Maynooth University introduced a student levy of €150. This was democratically agreed by the student population with the promise that the levy would be used to fund a large-scale student centre which would become the home of Maynooth Student's Union and clubs and societies. In 2015 the current population knew they would not see this student centre however, they agreed to fund it to enhance the future MU students experience. I, myself was one of these students. Not only did I contribute to the levy, but I also campaigned for its introduction. When elected to Maynooth Student Union, I worked closely with the university on the production of the new student centre. We agreed

the budget, met with architectures, and helped design this building. After my two-year term was complete the plans were handed down to the next team of representatives to work together with the university to complete these plans. Between 2015 and 2022, the university worked with different student union members on these projects.

In 2019, the student centre design was announced to the student body, and this became and exciting time for the university staff and students. Although conflict was present throughout discussions, MSU and MU continued to have a flourishing relationship however, the trigger was about to come that sparked major controversy on the campus.

In September 2022, Maynooth University Governing Authority approved the termination of the proposed student centre and with this decision, the chaos and outrage began. Maynooth University released a statement stating, 'The project has been adversely impacted by rapid escalating costs, linked to technical construction issues as well as hyperinflation' (Statement from Maynooth University on MU Student Centre project | Maynooth University, 2022). Maynooth Student Union condemned this decision and stated they were angered by the decision and the project was a flagship project that had been funded by the student levy since 2015. The also commented that this decision has indicated that Maynooth University was not prioritising its student population. (Your Levy Projects, 2022)

This news was covered by all the major Irish newspapers and media including RTE. Several counter and clarifying statements have been made by MU and MSU. Maynooth Student Union current president stated that the levy funding was contingent on funding three projects, one which included the new student centre however, the University claims that when the students endorsed the levy in 2015, a student centre was not promised.

According to the Irish Examiner, written communication from Maynooth University to Maynooth Students Union seen by the newspaper shows an agreement that the levy was to fund several projects that included a state-of-the-art student centre. In one letter from 2015, the University President wrote 'The University and the Students Union agree that the purpose of the levy is to fund a several specific set of projects' which were clearly listed and one being a student centre. (White, 2022). The University have decided not to comment on this new information.

On the 6th of October, Maynooth Students held a protest where they walked out of their

lecturers and gathered in the centre of the campus making their voices heard. Over 1000 students and staff gathered at the protest in support.

The termination of the student centre has escalated frustrations among the student body as currently students are reporting a lack of student space to study, eat lunch and relax with friends, and due to the growing student numbers, there is lack of accommodation which means students are commuting by car or bus which is putting pressure on parking facilities. Due to the lack of student facilities, students have vented their frustrations via social media, and some have deferred or quit college due to these ongoing barriers in their education.

This conflict is not the first of its kind and similar disputes among university and its students occur quite often and often escalate to the point where their students begin to protest. University College Dublin recently had a similar experience regarding their student centre however, this project did go ahead and now is built and fully functioning on the campus.

There is still a long way to go before conflict resolution training is implemented into education however, it is clear that not having any conflict within education is not constructive nor is it creative so campuses must find ways to manage conflict and stop frustrations from escalating to the point where the relationship has broken down and collapsed.

Research Methodology and Methods

Introduction

Defining your research methodology is enormously valuable as it allows us to explore techniques to develop our research and present it accurately. Methodology and methods hold subtle differences in meanings. The term Method refers to the tools you use to respond to your research questions and how you will collect your data to obtain your research whereas Methodology is the rationale behind the approach to this research. Another way of saying is 'general research strategy that outlines the way in which research is to be undertaken' (An Introduction to the Philosophy of Methodology, Howell 2013).

Maxwell (2012) implies that a quality research model is where the components of the research operate organically simultaneously, and which encourages effective functioning.

Whereas a weaker project causes failure. Francisco, et al. (2001) suggests that research models are the overall framework from which researchers gather obstacles about the value of the information collected. Thus, the methodology selected by the researcher is enormously crucial in guiding the research while also delivering a structure to satisfy the research question.

This chapter will explore the theoretical foundations of research and it will present the methods applied in this study. Qualitative methods of research in the form of surveys were chosen by the researcher in this study and this was considered as the most applicable method to utilise the research outcomes and objectives.

The aim of this chapter is to present the methodology and methods of my research and to describe and justify the steps that I will follow to achieve my aims and objectives

This topic of this research. covers several different areas of conflict within third level education. It explores relationships between student and staff and identifies students facing issues while researching ways to combat conflict within Irish third level institutions. For this research, a qualitative approach has been chosen and will take place by attaining information through voluntary surveys and research already conducted.

Research Paradigms

Patton (2002) explains that a paradigm gives the reader a complete view that is informed by theoretical assumptions such as the nature of social reality (ontology), ways of knowing (epistemology) and value and ethic classifications (axiology). A paradigm in terms of research is a philosophical structure that demonstrates the way in which scientific research can be achieved. (Collis and Hussey, 2014). Creswell (2012) states that paradigms are characterized by three distinctive phenomena. These are ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Creswell states further that the associated differences of these three terms impact on the engagement and approach of the research.

Ontology is the study of being (Crotty, 1998). Ontology concentrates on reality or what is considered reality. It looks at whatever is alleged as understood regarding the universe.

Epistemology is focused on the theory of knowledge. According to Cohen epistemology focuses on how knowledge is communicated, created, and obtained (Cohen, et al., 2007; Scotland, 2012). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) define methodology as the practice of the researcher in accumulating the necessary information in research. The research paradigm that is selected is dependent on the current data base on any topic (Woodwell, 2013) and it is important that scholars can recognize the three categories of research paradigms: Positivism, post- positivism and interpretivism

Post Postitivism

Post positivism is reported to be created from positivism.. Scotland (2012) indicates that post positivism and positivism have comparable epistemological and ontological principles, however, there are numerous aspects in which the two paradigms are different. The major difference amongst positivism and post positivism is that post- positivists apply comparable approaches such as an experimental approach (Parahoo, 2014). The principles of post-positivist in research are neither objective or subjective or is there an inclination held over objectivity or subjectivity (Ryan, 2006). Post- positivism may be deemed a mixture of both positivist and interpretivist research paradigms.

Positivism

Positivism follows the view that factual information is achieved as a result of observation. Moore (2010) says that positivism indicates that scientific knowledge is the ultimate form of knowledge and that it derives from the analysis of perceptible and measurable experiences. Moore (2010) also includes that according to positivism, the earth involves standards and rules that are uncovered through direct observation. Cohen, et al. (2007) says that positivist researchers are autonomous individuals who look at the world objectively. Positivist academics use well-defined methodologies, such as questionnaires and focus group discussions, to allow duplication. Scotland (2012) maintains that positivism investigation is factual and informative, and the methodology of positivism is direct clarification of interactions between variables. The methodologies that are frequently used by positivist researchers are quantitative evaluation and confirmatory evaluation. Saunders, et al. (2007) says that the positivist methods are centred on processes which are created to generate

information and data not subject to being manipulated by human being interpretation and understanding.

Interpretivism

Willig (2013) describes that interpretivism derives from psychology and sociology. Interpretivism is a research paradigm that believes that societal realism is not objective but that it is rather influenced by human encounters and social perspective. Schwandt (1994) describes that interpretivism perceives a relativist position, in contrast to positivism's realism position. Hansen (2014) states that interpretivist investigators imagine that reality is not generated by exterior entities but rather in the point of view of the parties.

This research will deal with the philosophy epistemology and concentrate on interpretivism. My data will come directly from my conversations and interactions with students and the feedback they provide. From these interactions, I can get a greater understanding from a student's perspective from different cohorts and identify shared themes.

Research Strategies

The two most common methods researchers use when collecting and analysing data is quantitative and qualitative. (Park and Park, 2016). Both of these methods should be considered before beginning the collecting of research. Investigating both methods will also help in determining which method is most suitable for the collection of data for this study. Both methods are useful in the search for reliable and valid results. Quantitative methods consist of statistical and numerical data. The aim of this methods is to gather statistical information from bigger collections of statistics. This data is also collected under controlled conditions so that other interfering variables can be avoided. (Flick, 2014; Park and Park, 2016). On the other hand, qualitative research tries to achieve aims by looking at social setting and the individuals who are involved in these settings. (Berg, 2001). The objective when choosing qualitative research is to begin to understand people's experiences and with this what affects these experiences have on the individuals involved. (Willig, 2019).

Pilot Study

Very often researchers undertake pilot studies to test their design before they begin collecting their main research. This is to measure their ability to collect the data whilst getting used to the practicalities around it. (Seidman 1998). Kim (2010) stated that piloting your research method can be helpful for beginner researchers because it helps prepare and evaluate the methods chosen. Two students were asked to pilot the survey, this consisted of one undergraduate and one postgraduate's student. It was voiced by the pilot participants that some questions were unclear, and they did not understand the focus of the study. On reflection from the participants feedback, the researcher included definitions of mediation within the survey, so the future participants had a greater understanding of the topic.

Sampling

Sampling methods facilitates researchers to produce examples from specific populations and eventually use that sample population for their research analysis. Sampling techniques consist of two primary components; Probability sampling and non-probability sampling (Saunders et al., 2012):

• Probability sampling
• Non- probability sampling

I have selected a non-probability focussed sampling method for this study. Bernard (2002) defines that purposeful sampling as a non-random practice in which the scholar does not involve underlying principles nor a precise quantity of contributors. Patton (2002) describes that purposeful sampling is an efficient technique used in qualitative research to detect and choose information. This involves the researcher discovering and choosing specific contributors or parties that are knowledgeable (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Purposive sampling supports the relevant research study as it concentrates on the specific characteristics of the individuals (Etikan, 2016), however, there are particular challenges facing purposive sampling. For example, the researcher should be aware that the participants who take part in the research may be slightly prejudiced.

Approach

Research methodology can be defined as the process that information is collected when conducting research. Two different approaches are available for research. They are inductive and deductive. Inductive is based on observations and deductive is based on current theories. (P. Crowther, 2021). The approach chosen for this research is inductive, information and data will be collected through a different mechanism such as contact with students and research that has already been undertaken. Timeframe of research can be characterized as longitudinal and cross-sectional. Cross-sectional is the study of a topic at a precise point in time whereas longitudinal is the analysis of a subject throughout point in time. Cross-sectional is the time horizon for this research as I will be talking to students about their current experience and engagement with their institution.

Online Survey

The digital survey was issued to people who have undertaken or a currently studying an undergraduate or postgraduate course within a third level institutions in Ireland. Third level institutions include both private and public universities or institute of technology.

Surveys allows a large population to engage in the study and will allow me to gain a wide number of opinions. Questionnaires are cheap and simple to create and pilot before releasing them to the main target audience. (Cohen,et al., 2017). Surveys can also offer a high level of reliability as all contributors are being given the same survey that contains the same questions. Depending on the makeup of the survey, numerical data will be collected that will allow me to draw comparisons between participants to evaluate different viewpoints. Findings from the survey can be used with certainty to develop or indeed make changes within the third level education sector in Ireland.

Unlike other research methods, surveys offer the participant privacy and confidentiality. This was made clear to the respondents before undertaking the questionnaire via google forms. None of the answers given via the survey can be traced back to the respondent. There is a risk that students may identify themselves via their answers however, this is not evident from the research collected.

A risk with online surveys is that there will be low return rates (Payne, 2018) however, due to the COVID-19 implications, this has become the new norm to collect research. Once the survey was distributed and a fair amount of time was given for response, a reminder was sent to all participants regarding the surveys relevancy and requesting completion. Obviously, due to the survey being anonymous, participants who did not complete the survey could not be contacted directly.

The survey was issued to over 80 participants all who have taken undergraduate or postgraduate courses. The response rate was approximately 55%. While this may appear low, it is in line with the expected response rate.

The survey was created with an overall length of time required for completion, question style, legibility, and ease of completion in mind. Participants needed to understand the purpose of the survey, how their information will be used and who to contact if they had a query about the questionnaire.

Insider Research

As I am the Head of Student Services within a third level institution and I am conducting research within this environment, there is questions around the research perhaps being compromised. This may be referred to as insider research.

Insider research can be defined as 'the term used to describe research in which the researcher has a direct involvement or connection with the research setting. There are challenges for the researcher related to interacting with one's own peers, colleagues and study participants (e.g students) which must be addressed' (DCU Research Ethics Committee Guideline Statement on Insider Research, 2021)

The risk surrounding insider research is that being part of the community, the legitimacy of the research is compromised. This is at odds with the view that research must be separated or distant from the subjects of their examination.

Action research is often used to try to bring change or development through influencing and

bring effective change in the position and direction of others. Where a staff member is conducting research partly through their own workplace, the dual roles of being a staff member and a person conducting research can open numerous opportunities that can have a substantial impact on the participants involved whether that be the staff, students or third level institutions. These opportunities empower contributions to meaning, knowledge and understanding that is related and relevant to the practice involved. (Fleming,2018)

I don't worry about compromising this research as I have not conducted focus groups and therefore there can be no influencing or bias present. As I have chosen a questionnaire as my primary form of research, the participants will be anonymous and therefore no bias can be introduced.

Benefits

Fleming (2018) recognises that insider research does have its advantages. As I work in a third level institution, I have knowledge of the system and its structures. As I have worked within a private and a public institution, I have knowledge of both styles these different types of institutions conduct themselves in. Participants can be more likely to engage in with me as some will already have a relationship with me and with that comes a degree of trust.

Ethics

Regardless of the research being undertaken within institutions I have worked at or external campuses, ethical standards should be met. Research must not put any participants at any risk and their contribution is on a voluntary basis. Each participant has been given enough information before contributing so they can make an informed decision as to if they wish to participate and will have the right to withdraw their participating at any time.

The relationship between the researcher and the participants could raise ethical concerns. The researcher might encounter issues such as relative honesty, respect of confidentiality, communication, and circumventing misrepresentations. It is crucial for the study to respect the contributor's right to informed permission and indeed the participants keep the right to remove themselves from the study at any moment (Saunders et al., 2009). Informed consent has been considered a critical piece of ethics within the research. Thus, to guarantee that the rights of the participants were respected while overseeing the survey, all participants were

knowledgeable via a written account of the aims and objectives of the research study and communication was supplied on how the data would be saved.

Quinlan (2011) defines that the ethical criteria should be evident throughout the progress of the research study and also in the researcher's engagement with the parties.

 As the researcher decided to use qualitative research practices in the form of surveys, a degree of competency was necessary to guarantee that the approaches of the researcher in all phases of the study were morally sound. To guarantee privacy, the participants were not asked for any information that may identify themselves to the researcher or the reader. (Cohen, et al., 2000). I have also completed ethics form A as it was sufficient. This can be found in the appendices.

Reflexivity is known as a crucial pillar in qualitative research. Reflexivity is the unremitting method of reflection and relates to the point in which the researcher impacts, deliberately or inadvertently, the results of the research (Jootun, et al., 2009; Parahoo, 2006). The researcher maintained a reflective diary to verify an unbiased perspective. Throughout the research study, the researcher also documented some of the obstacles faced such as getting participants to engage in the survey without incentivising them. Impartiality was guaranteed during the research gathering and evaluation stage as the researcher kept in frequent communication with their assigned supervisor. The researcher also conducted debriefing sessions with expert colleagues who often assessed the research study to make sure the researcher's opinions and emotions were not interpreted in the conclusions. Furthermore, this supplied further viewpoints in the different phases of the study (Long and Johnson, 2000, Roberts- Holmes, 2011). Reflexivity, as well as constant evaluation of personal participation, allows the process to be more open and transparent (Jootun, et al., 2009).

Data Analysis

The research study implemented an inductive method and thematic analysis to evaluate the qualitative data. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as a process which detects, analyses, and produces patterns and themes within data. The result of an inductive analysis refers to the development of themes and patterns which arise from the research accumulated (Thomas, 2006). Roberts et al (2019) also examine thematic analysis in their texts and

describe it as a direct method of conducting 'hermeneutic content analysis which is from a group of analyses that are designed for non-numerical data'.

Summary

The overhead section has given a comprehensive report on the methodological methods that were utilized to gather the information necessary for this research study. The researcher found a qualitative approach of research to be the most suitable methodology having involved the literature review with respect to research perceptions. The information was collected through the use of surveys. It was shown that a non- probability purposeful sampling technique was applied to choose the participants for the research study. Independent College ethical guidelines were always obeyed to, to guarantee the participants were happy when completing the survey. Furthermore, to make sure reliability and validity in the research, the researcher used four methods of data gathering including: piloting, reflective journal, peer debriefing with expert colleagues and supervisors.

In conclusion, after discussing my methods, ethics, and insider research, we can now move to discuss and consider the findings of the questionnaire.

Presentation of Data

Introduction

This chapter aims to present the findings of the research study established. As previously discussed, the method chosen was a qualitative method, through a questionnaire on Survey Monkey. Participants were sent the survey through various mechanisms such as LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and other social media platforms. The survey took approximately 6 minutes to complete.

I received 44 responses to my survey overall and participants came from various backgrounds and ages. From the answers, it was clear participants came from different parts of the world however, they all studied at a third level institution within Ireland. The survey was sent to approximately 80 people and the response rate was 55%.

Invitation Sent	Number of Response	Total (%)
80	44	55%

Although I argued with myself over my research method for some time, the response rate was successful, and this proved that a confidential survey was the correct option to use to reach the desired audience.

Online tools such as Survey Monkey are popular as they contribute to gaining a greater reach and for their flexibility in returning statistics for research. They also have a zero cost for use and allow the researcher to present their data using several different forms.

Question 1

Q1 What is your age?
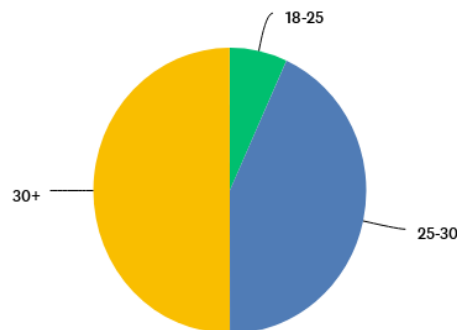
The first question asked used to identify the different age groups of the participants. Although a personal question, it did not allow me to identify any further personal information of each participant and therefore kept in line with the confidentiality aspect of the research. The reason I asked this question was due to the different life experience between diverse age groups. As people grow older, their behaviour and opinions can change. The characteristic of age like the generation people were born in can typically share some similar opinions and ways of thinking. Allowing that this research is not based on relationships of feedback and their age, it can reveal a strong connection between age, opinions, and behaviours.

We can see from the results that majority of the contributors were within the 30+ category. 50% of the participants came from an older generation while 43% were between the ages of 25 and 30. The smaller number of participants came from the 18 to 25 group and only accounted for 7% of the overall respondents.

Typically, the age range of students completing an undergraduate degree in Ireland are between the ages of 18 to 25 so it was interesting to see that majority of my survey takers were somewhat older.

I concluded that this was due to my own age. Being nearly 29, I targeted friends and previous students I knew and therefore the data came from people of an older generation. This is something I should reflect on in the future when conducting research.

Question 2

Q2 What third level Irish Institution did you attend?
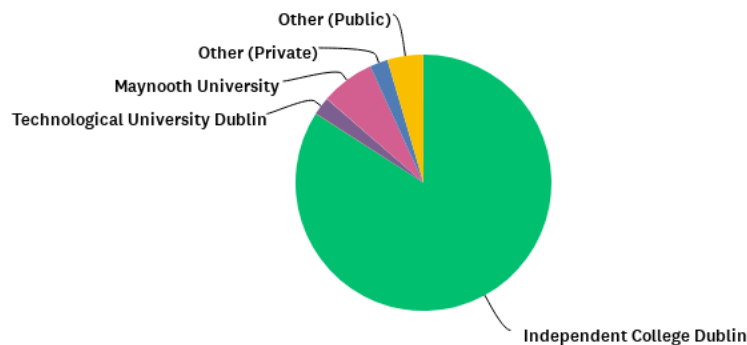
Secondly, I wanted to find out what Irish institute my participants studied at. This is vital for my research as we can use their feedback and perhaps find trends of how conflict management in different campuses in Ireland. From the above the majority of students came from my own college, Independent College. 84.09% of participants studied at Independent College, this is to be expected as I contacted my previous and current classmates to complete my survey. Second most participated college was Maynooth University. Again, this being my

Alma Mater, this is to be expected. The percentage was broken down as follows:

Name of Irish Institute	Response (%)
Independent College	85.9%
Technological University Dublin	2.27%
Maynooth University	6.82%
Private (Other)	2.27%
Public (Other)	4.55%

Question 3

Q3 In your opinion, what are the main causes of dissatisfaction for students in Third level Education?
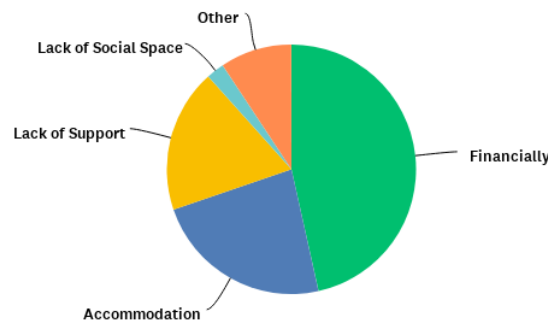
From my previous research, I identified what is currently upsetting students that are studying at third level college in Ireland and used these to help participants answer my third questions.

Participant stated that the number one cause of dissatisfaction for students studying in Ireland is the financial aspect of this. 46.51% of students stated that the cost associated with going to college was a cause of concern from them.

Ireland has been dealing with a growing accommodation crisis for many years. Due to the increase of people going to college in Ireland, students have stated that they find it extremely difficult finding suitable accommodation for them to attend their chosen university. It is no surprise that 23.26% of my participants stated this as a dissatisfaction when going to college in Ireland. (Griffin, 2021)

Thirdly, lack of support received 18.60% of the vote. This indicated lack of support of the college institution itself and not from the participants external surroundings. Support within college has a broad meaning, however, usually means that they did not feel supported academically or personally during the duration of their studies.

Due to the education accessibility in Ireland, many school leavers predominantly move on to third level education. Although third level education popularity has grown, infrastructure has been unable to keep up. 2.33% of participants who took my survey stated lack of space as a dissatisfaction when going to college in Ireland.

The remainder 9.30% choose other when completing the survey for this question. In the next questions, the researcher asked participants to explain their answer which will give us an indication of what students feel are a cause for dissatisfaction when studying a third level degree in Ireland.

Question 4

To get a better understanding of the answers received in question three, I asked the participants to explain their answer. I left an open text box to give contributors plenty of space to express their thoughts and opinions on their answers given.

 I have summarised the answers below.

- No houses to rent.
- Too difficult to finish their course due to finances
- Lack of spare time to work while studying.
- When accommodation was found, the rent was too high.
- College timetables did not give them work experience or time to find work experience outside of their study hours.
- Lack of assistance from college when asking for help.

- College did not listen to the student voice and was rarely involved in decision making within their institution.

- Lack of communication from institution.

- Dissatisfaction around teaching and learning.

- Insufficient resources to support their learning process.

- Work/college/ life balance.

- Lack of time for extracurricular activities.

- Lack of internship opportunities and career support.

- Exam/assessment pressure.

Question 5

Q5 Have you experienced conflict (personal or otherwise) to the point where you considered leaving the college and quitting your course?
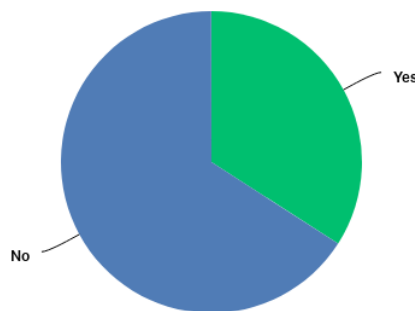
When asked during the survey if they experienced conflict personal or otherwise, only 34.09% of participants said yes while 65.91% said no. In question 6, I asked the participants who answered yes to explain their answer and describe the conflict they suffered.

Question 6

34.09% stated that they did experience some sort of conflict during their time studying at a third level institution. I have summarised their answers below.

- Family conflict which left them having to drop out of their degree. Due to lack of support from their college, they were unable to return to college to finish their course later.
- Lack of support from college when it came to conflict surrounding group work.
- Dropping out due to accommodation issues.
- Lack of understanding from college on student facing issues.
- Conflict between roommates within student accommodation.
- Mental health issues.
- Lack of social space to sit, study, eat and socialise.
- Conflict between student and their institution regarding resources.
- Non-communication or poor response from institution.

65.91% of participants answered no which means majority of students did not suffer conflict issues when studying their degree.

Question 7

Q7 Did you contact your college about your issue?
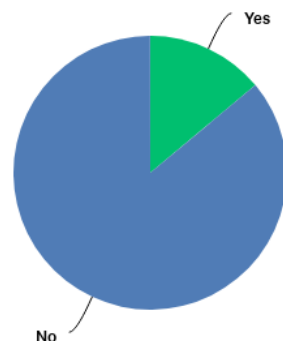
A surprising outcome from my research is that majority of participants stated that they did

not contact their college when the conflict arose. Only 13.95% of participants reached out for support from the college supports team whereas 86.05% said they did not contact the college when in crisis. As I work within pastoral care within third level education, I found this result to be very disappointing.

Question 8

Q8 In hindsight, do you believe the college handled or were equipped to handle this conflict correctly and efficiently?
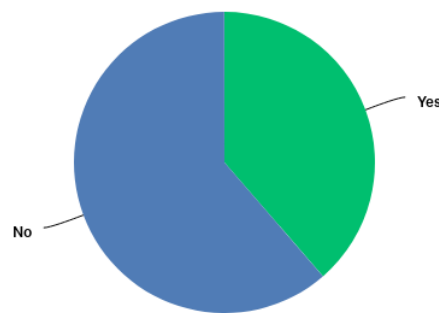
Following on from question 7, I thought it would be interesting to know if the participants felt that their institution was capable in handling the conflict that arose throughout their studies. The results show that 37.78% of people felt confident that their college would be equipped to support them with their issues however, the majority, 66.22% believed that their institution would be unable to handle their conflict efficiently and correctly.

Question 9

Q9 Do know what the term 'Mediation' means?

No

Yes
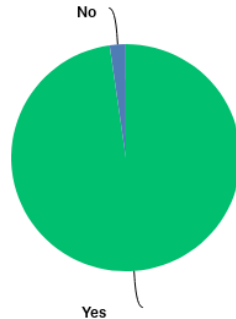
As we know alternative dispute resolution is a growing way to solve disputes however, it is still an unknown method by many. It is still quite a rare profession to study and only beginning to enter the corporate and education worlds.

As a student studying dispute resolution, I was happy to note that 95.56% of participants already understood what the purpose of a mediator was within conflict whereas 4.44% of peoples stated they didn't understand or hear the term before.

Question 10

Q10 Mediation is defined as "a confidential, facilitative and voluntary process in which parties to a dispute, with the assistance of a mediator, attempt to reach a mutually acceptable agreement to resolve the dispute."Do you have a greater understanding of what the term means after reading this definition?

No

Yes
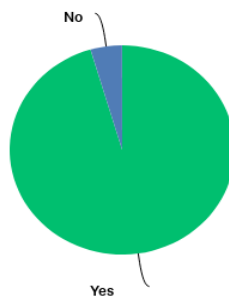
After defining the term mediator, 4.44% of people still felt that they didn't have a greater understanding of the practice, but it was still positive that 95.56% felt they had a clearer

understanding of the term of reading the definition.

Question 11

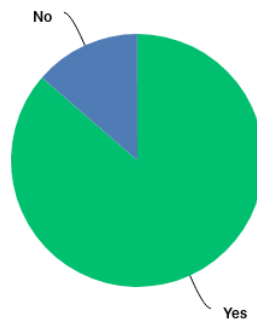Q11 Do you believe a mediation service would of been something you would of availed of, had it been available to solve conflicts that arose during your degree?

After explaining mediation to my participants, 84.44% felt that mediation service would have been something they would avail of if it had been available within their higher institution when the conflict they endured arose during their degree. Only 15.56% of people believed that mediation would not have helped them during their conflict, and this was a service they would not have considered to help them during their degree when a dispute occurred.

Question 12

As 84.44% of people stated that they would have opted for a mediation service if it was available within their institution, I asked these people how they thought mediation would have helped to solve their dispute. Within these questions, participants also opted to tell me why they thought this method would not have helped them in their situation. I have summarised the findings below:

- Mediation may be able to stop a dispute from escalating and make the people involved feel calmer and be able to face the dispute in a more positive way.
- Participants felt that having someone impartial to their dispute would have helped.

- A professional mediator would have helped people understand Irish law and regulations around their rights especially in the case of an international student.
- They felt mediation between a student and lecturer would help students progress in their studies with better grades as they believe that face to face interaction is helpful and would help each party understand the others struggles and build a better relationship between student and teacher.
- Mediation would ensure a positive and fair outcome for both parties involved.
- The mediator would be able to guide parties toward a positive outcome that they may not be able to realise themselves.
- Mediation would help improve communication and find common ground even if a solution was not found.
- Mediation would give student an alternative method to resolve a dispute before they begin to resent their institution.
- Mediation service would help students engage with their college more positively and efficiently.
- Mediation would make the parties feel listened to and supported.
- Help assist a student services team within a college to resolve student conflicts quicker through a professional.

Some student voiced their opinion on why they believe a mediation service would not work within higher education. The feedback received is summarised below:

- They don't believe a mediation service is a priority for institutions.
- They don't trust institutions would employ an external to deal with these conflicts.
- Even if an external mediator was employed, they believe the mediator would still be easily influenced by the institution that employs them.
- They don't believe mediation is worth investing student fee's in.

Question 13

Q13 What reasons would you consider not availing of a mediation service to solve disputes within third level education?
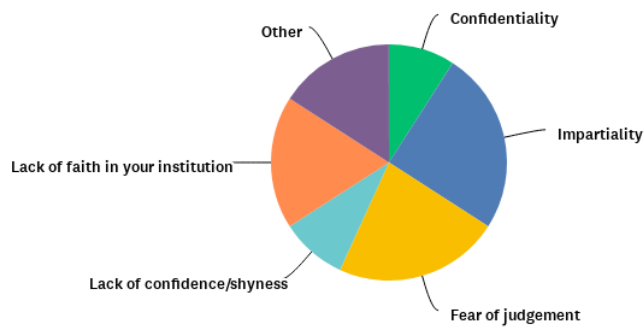
A mediator must follow certain rules when practicing, the main aspect of mediation is that the practitioner is impartial, information remains confidential and should not show bias toward one party over another. A mediator can guide the parties to a resolution, however, can't give a personal opinion on the conflict they are mediating.

In question 13, I asked participants why they consider not availing of a mediation service if it was provided by their institution. 9.09% of people said they were afraid the information they provide would not be kept confidential. 25% stated they felt the mediator would not be impartial in the decision. 22.73% said they would fear they would be judged by the counterpart or the mediator. 9.09% of people said they would not feel confident or were too shy to seek help from a mediation service. 18.18% stated they did not have enough faith in their institution to avail of a mediation service within their institution and 15.91% choose other as their answer. An explanation for these choices was asked in question 14.

Question 14

The last question, I ask participants to explain their choice in question 13. The results are summarised below.

- If a mediator was hired by an institution, the mediator would not be able to be impartial and would show bias.
- Students would be forced to 'give in' and side with their institution's perspective.
- Lecturers would show bias to the student they are conflicted with, and the student would worry it may affect their grades and relationships at their college.

- Fear of exposing themselves in front of college employees.

- Mediation being uncomfortable.

- Participants are afraid that the service would not be free.

- They don't believe that if a resolution was found that their institution would follow through on the agreement found in mediation.

The most common answer reported by their institution was that they believe that an external mediator employed by the college would be unable to be impartial and would be coached or influenced by the institution as they are paying their wage.

Discussion

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the findings from my primary and secondary research that I have presented in previous sections. Now that primary research has been undertaken it is helpful to discuss the similarities these results have to the research that has already been embarked on.

The research question behind this study was to evaluate whether alternative dispute resolution methods could play a part in enhancing student retention, manage conflict and engagement within third level education.

Student Finances

From my primary research we can see there is many roadblocks facing third level students in Ireland today. Due the cost-of-living crisis as well as the shortage of accommodation, financial stability seems to be the number one issue for students progressing into higher education in Ireland now. 46% of participants stated in my survey that finances associated with education was the largest factor causing them dissatisfaction in college at the moment and when probed more about their finances, the respondents repeatedly stated that the high cost of rent, finding suitable accommodation and the cost of living was a massive roadblock for them when studying their degree.

Although, this is not up to the individual institution to fix as this is a national issue, these results come to no surprise to anybody. According to Bernard Longden (2006), higher

education has grown massively over the years and although it has become more accessible, the culture within universities has remained unchanged and there is very little development on systems in place to support students in these areas (Longden, 2006).

In 2016, the higher education authority released a report with various recommendations to combat the fee's associated with higher education. The report proposes three resolutions to the funding issues faced by Irish higher education institutes (Cassells, 2016).

- The first option was to eliminate the student contribution and to introduce of a predominantly state funded education system. The student contribution was introduced in 2011 and represents the seconds highest fees in Europe.
- The second option was to leave the student contribution unchanged and instead increase the state funding into third level education.
- The final options outlined in the report was the introduction of an income-contingent loan scheme

As expected, the option of an introduction of loan scheme into Ireland was not welcomed by the students and young people of Ireland and on the 19th of October students travelled to Dublin in protest of this option alongside their local and national student union. Led by the Union of Student in Ireland President, Annie Hoey, over 5000 thousand students marched to Leinster house to show their support against the loan schemes and called on the Irish government to consider a publicly funded education system to be introduced (Connell, 2016).

The lack of funding in third level education has been a discussion between students and staff for many years. The report written by Peter Cassells stated that the third level education sector in Ireland was in urgent need of investment. He recommended that an investment of €600m was needed by 2020 and a further €1bn was needed by 2031 to help cope with the expanding numbers, student accommodation, infrastructure cost and other shortfalls. He reported that the proportion attending college is estimated to reach 30% by the end 2026 however, even with this increase the funding for third level education has fallen from €1.4bn in 2007 to €860m in 2016 (Connell, 2016). Union of Student in Ireland President in 2016, Annie Hoey stated that 'The loan scheme option put forward in the Cassells report is unsustainable. It will increase emigration, saddle young people with a mortgage-modeled debt, and widen the gap between the rich and the poor' (Hoey, Annie 2016).

Still today, a verdict has not been published on the Cassells report although in November 2021, it was brough back to Dail by Minister Simon Harris for discussion with his sub-committee (Casey, 2021).

Student Accommodation

Leading on from finances associated with higher education in Ireland, student accommodation must be discussed as dissatisfaction for students in Ireland today. Although, we have been listening to reports of a housing crisis for many years, colleges around Ireland are reporting large numbers of deferrals from students due to the student accommodation crisis. From my primary research, 23.26% of participants cited accommodation has a reason for their dissatisfaction studying at college at the minute.

In September 2022, colleges in Ireland continued to offer places and acceptance for their courses through the CAO and through private admissions processes but a large number of students had to defer their places as they could not find anywhere suitable to live. One-third of the students who have been granted a deferral at the University of Galway did so due to the lack of accommodation available whereas in Trinity College Dublin reported that its deferral requests are up by 20% and 10% of these students' reported accommodation as reason for seeking a deferral. This year, Dublin City University appealed through its alumni network to consider renting rooms to their current students. Due to these 100 rooms were offered. DCU also cited that nearly seven applications were received for each bed for their on-campus accommodation (Molloy, 2022).

Other private colleges stated that they do not grant deferrals for accommodation reasons and only grant them under exceptional circumstances such as medical or bereavement.

A case study told by the Irish Examiner reports that a minimum of 100 students at the university of Limerick face the choice of being homeless or continuing their studies according the University of Limerick Student's Union. It has been reported that students are living in camper vans on the campus carpark or modifying their car boots so they can live in it.

University of Limerick said that in addition to getting calls about accommodation, they also are receiving calls from students who have somewhere to live but can't afford the rent and the cost of commuting to the college campus. UL have over 18,000 students and 3,200 of these

are incoming first years in September 2022. There are only 2,850 rooms available for students on campus and approximately 50% of these are reserved for incoming first years (White, 2022).

As of November 2022, the accommodation crisis has still not been addressed for students and due to this young people around Ireland have been blocked from pursuing their education.

Student Feedback and Engagement

In my primary research, I asked my participating students three questions to get a sense of engagement with their institution. The first question I asked was if they experienced conflict while studying their degree. Only 34.9% stated yes however, I don't feel this to be a true representation of conflict within higher education. When engaging in further research, I must consider what the term 'conflict' means to my participants and perhaps expand on examples that could be considered conflict. When I asked if they contacted their college when they experienced an issue, 86% of respondents stated no. This showed lack of communication and engagement between colleges and their students. Following on from that 66.22% of participants stated they didn't believe the college could adequately support them with their issues and conflict.

From these answers, we can see the importance of student engagement on an institution and the effect it can have when student don't feel the supports are available from their institution. The primary research reflects that students don't believe their colleges have the supports they need or require to help them with their issues and therefore they don't see the benefit of reaching out to their support team.

As a person who works as a Head of Student Services, I am not shocked by the answers received as I have been combating student engagement for years and students have reported to me before that they don't reach out to the college as they believe they couldn't be helped. I believe institutions must do better at communicating the supports and policies available to support students in crisis. From looking at institutions, the policies that colleges must abide by are created and in place to support the student body and not hinder. Examples of support policies available in Irish institutions are:

- Group Work Policy

- Extenuating Circumstances Policy
- Deferral Policy
- Complaints Policy
- Appeals Policy
- Rechecks and review policy

Students and staff have a lack of understanding of the policies available to them and therefore students withdraw or fail to complete their courses due the lack of knowledge of what their institutions can do to support them. When the supports are not communication to students in a student friendly way then crisis and conflict occurs.

As stated in my secondary research, we can see many publications that highlights the benefits of student engagement. In 2016, the HEA working group constructed an evaluation of learner engagement in Irish higher education (2016).This study found positive outcomes to students wellbeing and overall success in education when they felt they could communicate with their college and receive viable support. In cases where their college couldn't solve their issue, students still reported that they felt listened to and supported. (Boulton, et al.,2019)

According to Byrson, learner engagement and the student voice in decision making has many benefits for both the student and the institution and should be implanted further as colleges grow across Ireland. (Bryson, 2022).

From my primary research, students reported lack of communication and dissatisfaction with the response they received from their college when reporting issues directly or through feedback mechanisms. A major concern reported in secondary research was when happens to student feedback. Closing the feedback loop has always been an issue for college and for students it has resulted in survey fatigue. According to a study conducted at University College Dublin (UCD) 'A major criticism of student evaluation of teaching is that generally, it does not close the feedback loop.' (Watson, 2003) After feedback is evaluated, actions should be communicated back to the learners and should occur as soon as possible. 'By closing the loop students appreciate the value of the importance are more likely to participate constructively in future evaluation surveys rather than using the process to vent frustration (Tucker, Jones, & Straker, 2008).

It was also reported in my literature review that it is very important for colleges to engage with their students on they feedback that they give and engage with them in problem-solving This will help students have a better understanding of their college and therefore will lead to fewer disagreements and disputes. (Surgenor, 2010)

Alternative Dispute Resolution in Higher Education

As we know, conflict occurs in our everyday life and unless trained professionally it is rare to have the correct tools to successfully deal with disputes. As per my secondary research, conflict can come in many different forms but people's reactions to conflict is key to solving a dispute.

There are many different forms of reaction to conflict and these terms are all explained above but as a reminder these are known as:

- Avoidance
- Competitive
- Collaborative
- Compromising

From my primary research, 84.44% felt that mediation service would have been something they would avail of if it had been available within their higher education institution when the conflict, they endured arose during their degree however, as we know mediation only works when an external mediator is present that has no involvement in the dispute itself.

Although informally, college campuses do try to face conflict through forms of mediation however, in cases this is not satisfactory. Where staff try to engage with students in dispute, certain mediation fundamentals are not met. I have explained some of these below:

- **Power:** when staff engage with students in conflict, a power shift occurs. Before entering discussions, it is portrayed that the college authorities hold the power in the dispute instead of it being viewed as a collaboration between the university and the student. An external mediator prioritises equal power among its parties.
- **Bias:** Automatically, bias occurs when students and staff engage in dispute resolution informally. The university are there to defend themselves and the students are there to represent their own interests. Without a mediator to engage the parties in active listening and understanding, the students and staff will favour their own interests.

- **Avoidance:** As we know from both the primary and the secondary research, colleges tend to avoid conflict or don't communicate to their students about their actions on feedback received. Due to this, students feel unheard and disengaged.
- **Competitive:** It is common for staff to become defensive when faced with student conflict or complaints. Instead of understanding the student's perspective, colleges tend to use meetings with students to justify their actions.

According to my primary research, students raised many different reasons as to why they would not engage in mediation if it was available to them in college. They believe that the college would not employ a mediator and if they did the mediator would not be truly unbiased. Ideally, what we want to see from mediation in higher education is a more compromising and collaborative response to conflict.

It is crucial when engaging in mediation in education that the relationship between the college and the students are preserved. To do this an external mediator can focus on the issues instead of the positions of the people involved. It should not matter who is the student and who is the employed by the university when resolving conflict in education. All that matters are the issues the parties are facing (Gmelch and Carroll, 1991).

If alternative dispute resolution such as mediation was introduced into education, these fundamentals must exist form the outset to encourage students to use the process. From the primary research, when asked about why they would not consider using a mediation service it is clear that participants were worried that they would be met by a biased mediator who would not prioritise their interests and the relationship between the student and the college would not be preserved.

The primary research did show positivity toward the idea of mediation in education and the respondents believed that if the college provided an unbiased and confidential mediator that it could be successfully in making the students feel heard and involved in the decision making of their campus.

The secondary research also showed us that third level campuses are beginning to use mediation for their staff members, and it has been successful in managing staff disputes more

effectively. Educators and students who have a greater understanding of conflict will have the tools to manage it better then others. Understanding and active listening are just two of these key concepts that can be adopted by educators to solve disputes with their students (Moran 2001).

As we note from my case study on Maynooth university, conflict on third level campus can escalate very quickly when the students needs are not met. Mediation and other forms of conflict resolution can prevent escalation and can help students and college communicate more efficiently.

Conclusion

From the outset of this research, I aimed to prove that there is many different problems facing students engaging in third level education in Ireland today. From my secondary research, we can see student engagement and student retention has been an issue for colleges for many years and still the perfect solution has yet to be found. This was also proven when I conducted my primary research although some of the issues facing students are national topics however, this does not let individual institutions off the hook.
Students are crying out for their voices to be heard and to be more involved and engaged in the decision making processes with their colleges. Although, not every issue can be resolved by the college themselves, communicating with the student body is key to avoid conflict, negative feedback and low retention rates. It is important that college authorities don't forget that without their students, their institution becomes redundant, and students are one of the key stakeholders within an institution.

My recommendation is that alternative dispute resolution is explored more by Irish institutions. My research proves that there is a want and an interest in using a service such as mediation if it was implemented correctly while still abiding by the key principles of mediation such as confidentiality, impartiality and voluntary.

There is a need for a review of the current feedback systems in place within colleges and that students are brought to the table throughout decision making, not just as a tick the box exercise but as a key stakeholder where their voices and opinions are considered and understood.

Communication is key within college institutions and communicating on a regular basis with the student body can help the student feel more engaged, avoid conflict, and bring a campus together as a community. The relationship between a college and its students should be a priority and communication can help preserve this bond.

Not only do I consider mediation helpful on local campuses but as we can see from the primary research, there is a lot of national issues blocking students from progressing in education today. Mediation is mechanism that can be used within national disputes also and could be considered when government officials are dealing with student national representatives who speak for the learners in Ireland.

Reflection

The complete dissertation process was in the end exceedingly fulfilling and symbolized my highest academic achievement to date. Finishing this dissertation has given me abilities that will support me as I progress through my career path in education. Though difficult at times, the experience of finishing this dissertation has been rewarding. Finding a balance in managing a full-time job and completing the dissertation proved to be equally overwhelming and challenging at times; however, the twin pillars of ambition and dedication empowered me to triumph over all obstacles. From a self-learning viewpoint, I have unquestionably discovered the significance of determination and patience. Unquestionably, my learning style

has developed since the beginning of the course. All the way through this dissertation, I have come to know more about both my strengths and limitations as a researcher.

I really enjoyed conducting this study as it has taught me so much about higher education in Ireland and the conflict management styles institutions have adopted. I thoroughly enjoyed learning about retention in Ireland the importance it has in Ireland within third level education.

During the dissertation process I have faced numerous challenges. The largest challenge I had to conquer was time management. As I selected a qualitative research method, I misjudged how time-consuming the collecting my research was going to take. On reflection, I believe a different form of method would have been appropriate. If I was to collect my research again, I think I would consider using interviews or focus groups as my means of collecting research

One key piece of the research process that I got the most from is the area of self-discipline. Over the course of the two years, I have focused on both my master's and career. Originally, I found the combination of both difficult, but over time it became a natural. Due to the time given back to me because of COVID-19 I had more time to focus on my master's however as the world began to open back up, I struggled to find the time to balance going back to the office to work, studying and my social life. After two years without having to worry about this balance, it was shock to the systems when life went back to normal.

I am thrilled with my research study as I find it to be possibly current and interesting for the reader. This dissertation has allowed me to improve my understanding of the topic of conflict management and retention and has supplied me with abilities that will assist me in my career path. This dissertation has been the very fabric that has strengthened my own professional career and the skills I have development through the study will unquestionably be woven into my professional ventures in the future.

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