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# Why do students abandon programs prior to completion? Case study investigation of dropout students from the Diploma in Hotel and Catering Management DIT

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# **Why do students abandon programs prior to completion? Case study investigation of dropout students from the Diploma in Hotel and Catering Management DIT**

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## **Abstract:**

Not only are demographic changes taking place within the Irish population but in addition, significant challenges are being imposed on higher education providers to retain as many students as possible within the higher education system. Yorke (1999) noted that many students leave higher education prematurely and about one third of these students do so during, or at the end of their first year in college. Some non-completion of courses is unavoidable and should not be viewed as failure by the student, tutor or college. However, a lot of non-completion is preventable and is the responsibility of the college to help retain their students (Yorke, 1999).

Retention rates in Universities, DIT and other institutes have been the subject of a number of recent studies (Flanagan et al, 2000; Morgan et al 2001; Finnegan and Barrett, 2000; Morgan and Kelleghan, 2002). Morgan and Kelleghan (2002) raised the issue of lack of motivation and lack of preparedness of some students. This survey also highlighted the poor attendance record for some, and that other students were working during term time (McDonagh and Patterson, 2002). With less time on study, little time for reading for pleasure, and more time spent working and watching television student's decreased involvement in learning is well established by the time they reach third level (Eriksson and Strommer, 1991, Gallo, 1997 cited in Lindsay and Bolger, 2002).

This paper is a case study on the Diploma in Hotel and Catering Management program in the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism, DIT.

## **Retention and Progression**

*Retention is the process of helping students to meet their needs so they will persist in their education toward the achievement of educational aims they value. Retention can achieve this through the assembling of supports that enable students to be successful and the lowering or elimination of those factors that can disrupt the students' education and that can ultimately result in their failure to achieve these educational aims they want.*

(Moxley, Anwar and Dumbrigue, 2001; 37).

Each year a significant number of students withdraw from the higher education system. Each withdrawal represents for the individual an opportunity reduced, time lost, possible future funding problems and a lowering of morale. For the educational institution, each student who drops out raises questions relating to course information, admission procedures, tutoring and student care (Thomas *et al*, 1996; p. 207). In response to a possible mismatch of students and courses the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism recently went through a school review where subjects on courses have been modularized and courses themselves are now going to be taught on a semester basis. This is in part response to the needs of the future student and also to the McDonagh and Patterson study (2002) to allow the students have a much broader first semester in order to introduce students to the choices that are available and also part of the School's operational strategy. "The School's strategy provides an approach that ensures quality improvement and quality assurance in program design with core modules that offer flexibility and student choice through option and elective modules" (School Based Review, February 2003). This will include a more transparent ladder system of qualifications that will allow the student to progress from one level to the next and possibly across similar disciplines if they decide to do so. This also mirrors the attitude of first year diploma students interviewed this year as most aspire to continue onto degree level.

## **Transition from Second Level to Higher Education**

Going to higher education is a challenging time for most students and for many it is an intimidating leap into the unknown (McInnis *et al*, 1995; Lowe and Cook, 2003). The shift from the controlled environment of school or college and family to an environment in which students are expected to accept personal responsibility for both academic and social aspects of their lives will create anxiety and distress. Some students will eventually cope simply by avoiding the challenge (Rickinson and Rutherford, 1995) and when students fail to make this transition from one institution or level in their lives to another the result is usually dropping out or underachievement. Healy *et al* (1999) suggest that it is a combination of social, personal and institutional factors that contribute to early leaving.

Many students enter higher education with little or no preparation, not knowing what to expect and how it can change their lives dramatically. In practice many students literally wait and see what happens throughout the progress of the year but are ill prepared for some events (Lowe and Cooke, 2003; Costello, 2003). Johnston (1994) suggests that dropout statistics are far less important than the reasons behind the general lack of interest in college work that is associated with the detachment from the educational and social life associated with college. It is those students who struggle quietly with the changes involved in entering higher education who present the biggest and most subtle challenge for higher education.

This is where the college or institution has an obligation to enable their transition into higher education, ensure it is a smooth transition and one way DIT tries to be successful in this area is the use of induction or orientation days immediately after the student registers on a course. Despite various initiatives supporting the transition to college, some students start courses without fully understanding what is entailed. There is often pressure on administration staff in September and the availability of initial guidance at this time can be limited especially for part time students (Martinez and Munday, 1998).

## **Induction**

Induction is sometimes the first tangible contact that undergraduates have with the university or college, if they have not attended 'Open Days', and forms their impressions. Induction literally means 'lead in' and in many ways to succeed in their studies students must be motivated, accustomed to the college or university culture and feel part of the community (Edward, 2003). The cultural aspects of the higher education organizations are often overlooked or taken for granted by academic staff, such as the formal lecture, and study skills, study time, note taking, time-management, financial management and budgeting, team work or project work and IT (information technology) skills, and it is assumed that these will 'happen' over time (Lowe and Cook, 2003). For the new student entering the academy such practices can seem alien and unsettling especially for those who lack prior knowledge of higher education culture through the related experiences of friends and family. Leathwood's study (2001) also outlined that for many students their encounter with new styles of learning and teaching, such as independent learning and lack of supervision from lecturers came as a shock. Lack of familiarity with academic culture and the effect of the unequal power relation between lecturer and student, can work to increase students' conceptions of isolation and alienation, (Read *et al*, 2003). New curricula, the process of adjustment to the new context and anxiety about the transition have also been factors of student dropout (Hargreaves *et al*; 1996).

The induction process can cover items such as the opportunity to blend group formation, information giving, hands-on activities, initial assessment and some early work on study skills and course work (Martinez and Munday, 1998; 86). Group cohesion is recognized as an important factor in student retention and effective social and working relationships need to be fostered. Students seem to appreciate induction exercises which contribute to team building particularly where they have clear objectives and provide feedback on individual and group performance (Martinez and Munday, 1998; 87).

Unfortunately, a lot of students make a hurried decision straight after their college induction (if provided) and subsequently leave college. This has been part of the problem with the retention of students in the past (Costello and Russell, 2001; 13).

Students therefore need support when they arrive in a college but this support network must remain visible to the student throughout their time in college. When the student arrives at a crossroads in their college life when they ask themselves ‘should I stay or should I go’, it might be logical to discuss their options before they leave rather than asking ourselves afterwards why they have left.

## **Supports**

Owen (2002) suggests that the support given to a student is a priority and that they need to have a reliable and open support network in place to deal with the issues students are faced with in colleges and universities today. Many issues such as prior educational attainment, finance, part time work, institutional services and facilities, information guidance and support in addition to the labour market and policy issues impact on student non-completion. (Tinto, 1987 and 1993; Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1997; Costello and Russell, 2003) Also it was felt that even with these considerations, a number of students lacked a competency in numerical and technical subjects that would increase the stress of surviving through their first year (Finnegan *et al*, 2000; Costello and Russell, 2001; Costello and Russell, 2003; 3).

The Heist Research (Roberts and Higgins, 1992: 95) found that finances came top of the list of problems faced by students in higher education, with 71% stating that finances were the most severe problem encountered. In Ireland there have been increases over the last two to three years of student marches to the Department of Education protesting against the reintroduction of college and university fees and, what they refer to as, the “terrible grant packages” that they get. A survey by the Union of Students of Ireland (USI) found that an average student living a “fairly miserable” life spends almost €700 a month on the basics such as accommodation, food, phone, course materials, medical expenses and socializing (Coates, 2004). Many students then have to work part time to finance their studies. More often this part time job might be the reason for students leaving college early as they end up going into full time employment instead of full time education.

Also students suffering personal problems sometimes require the services of a qualified counsellor in order to help them to deal with the problems being experienced (Thomas *et al*, 1996). Sometimes it might be a problem when students do not want to use the facility of the counsellor because of the stigma attached (Owen, 2002) or because they do not want to be seen going in or coming out of the office by others.

The recognition of the importance of the student union and student services is evident on the induction committee where representatives of the student union, student counseling, and student chaplain and careers office are present. The student union has a facility where students can go and talk about budgeting to someone in the student union, but not all students know this exists? In fact most students may know about the services provided to them and for them but they may be unaware as to how to contact them. This is where the tutoring network steps in.

Tutors of courses and years within course are mostly members of lecturing staff on these courses. The support of these members of staff can be a major factor in retention. Tutors who are seen as easily accessible, eager to help and able to make things happen for a student have been viewed as very positive, and where this relationship has been built up to a positive rapport between the student and the tutor personal problems and other issues can be discussed in confidence. Where a more professional support or advice is needed the student can then be referred to this specialist in the highest form of confidentiality necessary. The tutoring network and support network are also closest to the students and can see if there is a problem before the student approaches them. Moxley, Anwar and Dumbrigue, (2001; 26-27) identify five forms of supportive retention practices to help retain students in higher education. I have related these to what DIT has implemented as part of their retention program in the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism (this can be located in appendix A, Table 1).

A problem is most obvious in their course work and their academic ability especially as recent reports have indicated (Costello, 2003) in the areas of numeric and technical subjects. Students' academic ability has had a huge influence over the retention of students in the past.

## **Academic Ability**

Students' academic ability is of considerable importance for continuing success in college (Chapman, 1996; Morgan *et al*, 2001; 12). Yorke (1999) indicates that the influences contributing most to inability to cope with the academic demands of a program for students are stress related to the program, difficulty with the program, workload being too heavy, lack of study skills and insufficient academic progress.

It was discovered in the Faculty of Tourism and Food that 17% of the first year cohort entered with less than 250 points (all courses i.e. certificate, diploma and degree courses were surveyed) (Costello and Russell, 2003; 3). Study and management skills seem to be part of the fabric in high points students but are certainly lacking in low points students. The change from a second level school style of education with its structured didactic approach to the more open self disciplined and self motivated education style left some of these low points' students floundering. (Costello and Russell, 2003; 30)

Tinto's (1993) model of student departure has been widely applied to student withdrawal and the transition between schools to higher education and was a reference for this study (see appendix B). It highlights the fact that only positive performance, motivation and commitment and negative departure decisions lead to progression and completion whereas academic failure (Edward, 2003) and anxieties of being under-prepared for the course or unsuited for the course may lead to termination (Billing, *N. D.*). What were the experiences of our students from the Diploma in Hotel and Catering Management?

## **Research**

The central aim to this research is to investigate if educators in DIT are delivering to our students' expectations. If their expectations are not being met, how can the progression through college be made easier for our students so that they are retained in the college system?

Costello (2003) illustrates through research carried out through the DIT retention office that, 85% of the total number of students failed to complete or withdrew within or during their first year.

## **Objectives and Outcomes of the Research:**

1. To provide information to the admissions office within the DIT, especially the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism, to enable them to market more effectively to students in the future;
2. To assist the retention office of the DIT with their efforts in the future maintenance of students.
3. To highlight the recurring issues affecting the influence of 'drop-out' students or students who progress onto other education or employment, and to assist students when making this choice.

The Dublin Institute of Technology through its strategic plan, *A Vision for Development 2001 – 2015*, has as one of its seven objectives to embrace a 'supportive and caring ethos' which include in its goals such practical issues as to 'provide retention support for students' and to 'develop an appropriate and effective mentor system.' (Costello, 2003)

## **Methods and Methodology:**

White (2000; 20) suggests that when conducting research the selection of an appropriate methodology and choice of suitable techniques are of paramount importance. It is clear that student surveys, focus groups and interviews are effective in eliciting the complex reasons behind students' education choices to stay in a course, change courses and so on (Robinson, 2004) and this is one of the reasons why the following methodologies have been chosen.

### **Methods**

For this research I have employed two types of data collection and these are focus group interviews and case study interviews.

#### **1. Focus Group Interviews**

*Focus groups are contrived settings, bringing together a specifically chosen sector of the population to discuss a particular given theme or topic, where the interaction with the group leads to data and outcomes.* (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2001: 288).

Research has been conducted through focus group interviews with full time students on the Diploma in Hotel and Catering Management program. This was used as pilot research for this thesis (focus groups 1 and 2 2003) and raised some interesting issues such as timetable workload and lack of integration of some subjects leading to increased workload, the lack of student union involvement in the induction process and lack of study skills provided up to exam time or assessments. They also illustrated some reasons why they are staying, such as the staff are friendly and approachable and the class is fun, and what would influence them to consider leaving, such as not being able to cope with workload or assessments.

I have also conducted a follow up focus group interview with current first years on the program to evaluate if these issues remain the same. This interview took place at the end of February 2004. Focus groups can be used at the preliminary or exploratory stages of a study (Kreuger, 1988); during a study, (Race *et al*, 1994), or after a study has been completed, to assess any other issues arising from the research. The recommended number of people per group is usually six to ten (MacIntosh, 1993) but some researchers have used as few as four (Kitzinger, 1995). In all my focus groups the numbers were never higher than ten or less than four students.

All students from the first year cohort of the Diploma in Hotel and Catering Management were invited to take part. In this way I was ensuring their interest and motivation to take part in the study but also ensuring their comfort while being interviewed and hopefully their trust. All interviews took place within the college at a time that was agreed to by the student, as this was convenient for both the students and myself. Students were invited to take part in my focus groups and were asked to read the ethics statement and sign an ethics form. (See appendix C).

## 2. Case Study Interviews

As Cohen *et al* (2000) states:

*Case studies can penetrate situations in ways that are not always susceptible to numerical analysis.* (Cohen *et al*, 2000)

In general, case studies are the preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context. (Yin, 2003; 1)

One of the most important sources of case study information is the interview. The interviews are more guided conversations than structured queries (Yin, 2003; 89). Although a consistent line of inquiry is pursued, the actual stream of questions in a case study interview is likely to be fluid rather than rigid (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). The point is that case study data collection is not merely a matter of recording data in a mechanical fashion, as it is in some other types of research. You also must be able to interpret the information as it is being collected and to know immediately if several sources of information contradict one another and lead to the need for additional evidence, like a good detective, and then you must make inferences about what actually transpired (Yin, 2003; 61).

The interviewees chosen for this element of the research were simply all those students who had left the course. After weeks of looking for students who had left the course I then resorted to asking the class reps of the first year course to approach these students for me, as I was not getting much response from my enquiries. After a week the class rep gave me two phone numbers and said the interviewees were working. It was then agreed with the two participants that I would conduct the interview over the phone. The class rep also indicated that the other students who had left or had been missing from class did not want to participate.

## **Methodologies**

This is the philosophical basis on which the research is founded (White, 2000; 20). Qualitative research takes the view that it is very difficult for researchers to stand back and be objective since they are really part of the process being researched, (White, 2000; 24) as the practice of doing education and finding out about education are inextricably bound together (Scott and Usher, 2000). This is referred to as phenomenalist or interpretivism. Interpretivism contradicts and distinguishes itself from positivism in an attempt to understand and explain human and social reality (Crotty, 1998).

An interview is representative of this type of research as the researcher not only aims to acquire information from the subject, but also can observe the interviewees facial expressions and body language, or tone of voice, all of which contribute to the overall experience of the interview and / or observation. Hence the presence of the researcher in this situation is central to the research taking place. As Hussey and Hussey (1997) point out,

*“Researchers have values [which] help to determine what are recognized as facts and the interpretations which are drawn from them, [that is] the researcher is involved in what is being researched.”* (1997; 49)

The interview varies on continua of formality-informality, openness-closedness and flexibility-rigidity. Some interviewing is done according to fixed schedules of questions all of which are asked in exactly the same way in all interviews. (Ball, 1984; 91; Hammersley, 1984 cited in Spiggle, 1994) Unstructured interviews on the other hand are less likely to follow a question and answer session but are more likely to be formed by the basis of a conversation between the researcher and the participant (Kwortnik, 2003; 118). The objective of the depth interview is to obtain rich, detailed data that reflect the informants' language, experience and perspective “in depth” (Spiggle, 1994). The interview is characterized by the use of general, descriptive questions that facilitate the dialogue, but which let the informant direct and provide the content of the interview and which involves the researcher as interpreter mostly during and after the interview has been conducted (Kwortnik, 2003; 119).

I have considered that the qualitative approaches (outlined above) will give me a holistic view of the student and more personal opinions of the college system as perceived by the student. As the interviews had to take on a semi-structured approach, as these are individual cases, I can only offer a general area within which to direct my questions, such as college life, classmates, induction procedures, subject material and the college location and facilities.

The numbers of dropout students from this course for 2003 and this course and the part time cohort for 2004 are located in appendix D.

### **Summary of Findings of the Research**

The following comments I have chosen from the above research I feel present a summary and brief account of some of the key findings from all the interviews in relation to the outline of the chapter adapted from Martinez and Munday (1998). The cases of individual dropouts will be covered during the presentation.

**Pre-entry, Guidance and Admissions Procedures**     *I didn't really know much about the course, but I put it down on the CAO [application form] and then I got it.*

*Well I had no 'push'. It was all left up to yourself. I guess I was a bit immature and I had no motivation.*

*The prospectus has to be more detailed.*

*It [CAO form] was filled out too early in school and I hadn't a clue what I was going to do.*

*Yeah I came into the college to get a feel for it before deciding if I liked it or not; the staff seemed very friendly and helpful*

*If someone came [from the college] I think it would be brilliant because you could ask them questions about the courses you want to do and they might give you a few more ideas*

**Curriculum,  
and Learning**

**Teaching** *I was really looking forward to starting college and meeting new friends and people. The first couple of weeks are important. The first year can be tough.*

*The induction days were really good...and the event that was great fun, but no, the reason I've left was because when I got in to the subjects I just really didn't like it,*

*Well study was on your own and you got all the assignments, but I got all them in and that, but the time table was a mess some days....*

*The bits that I did I really enjoyed and all, well most of the lecturers were really friendly and very approachable and you were treated like an adult, which is what you want when you come back into college at a later stage.*

**Student Supports**

*And this was helped in a big way with the student union and their social events. This was really good in 2001-2002. It was crap in 2002-2003.*

*The career guidance is not the best though. In college. We did some tests but they are not much use. And it's located over in another building, I think on the south side so there is not much free time for the students to go there and get back for the next class.*

*Oh yeah, that would have been a much better option if I had been more financially secure. If I didn't need my salary every month, if I could have survived on half of it then absolutely I'd still be here.*

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

I have some final suggestions to make taken from this study for a retention strategy. These are:

1. Getting to know our students is important and this is assisted through induction;
2. Study programs and 'Buddy' systems can help prevent isolation and stress developing;
3. Becoming motivated ourselves helps students feel they are in the right place;
4. Student-lecturer interaction outside of the classroom through social networks;
5. Student support networks such as the student union, chaplain and careers services need to be more obvious and open to the student;
6. Liaising with secondary schools is important when the students are making their initial decision about which college to choose and for the correct information to be disseminated to them;
7. Allocation of lecturers as tutors can help alleviate problems before they start;
8. Recognition of the individual needs of students as no two students are alike in their needs or their problems;
9. Attendance and tracking of students can highlight a problem before it starts;
10. Retention studies must be focused on a course-by-course basis as individual courses may have problems that are distinct to that course alone;
11. Course information must improve as a lot of the students indicated that they expected something different from what they receive from the course and found that not a lot of information was available to them before they decided to go to college.

In conclusion a retention survey could be staggered throughout the year to pinpoint what happens to students that triggers their choice of staying or leaving and therefore may highlight retention issues. This can be done after induction, before Christmas, after Christmas and before or after exams. However it must be noted that a move to make this course a degree from September 2004 will impact on the retention, dropout or progression rate of this course from now on and therefore this study should continue.

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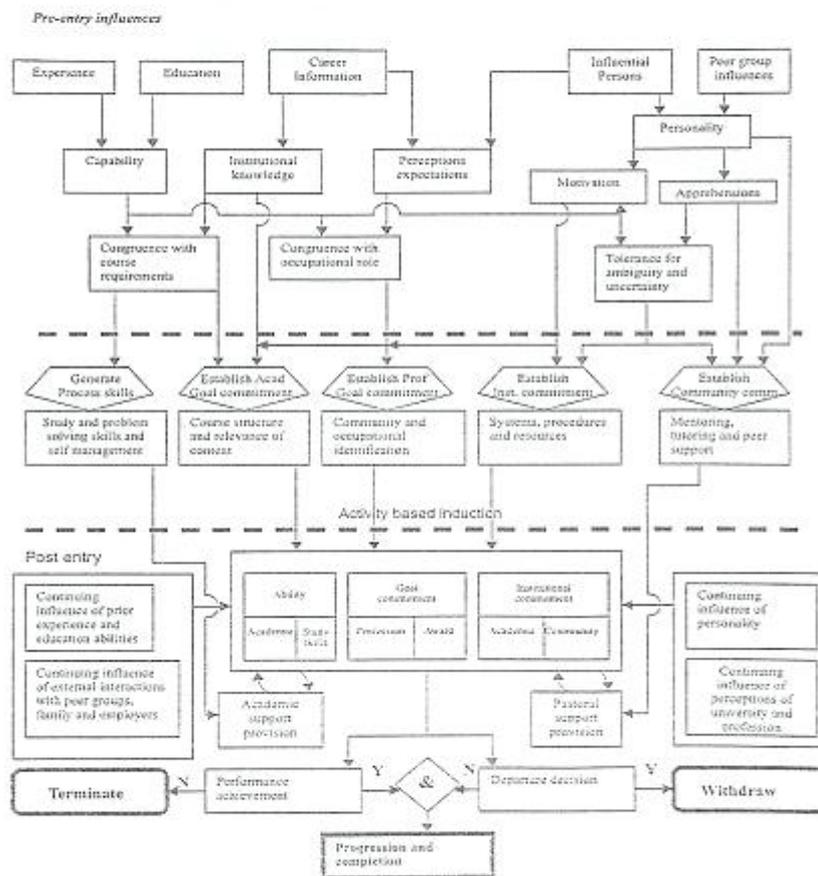
## **Appendices**

## Appendix A:

**Table 1: Five Forms of Supportive Retention Practices adapted from Moxley, Anwar and Dumbrigue, 2001; 26-27**

<b>5 Forms of Supportive Retention Practices</b>	<b>What DIT does:</b>
<p><b>1. Emotional Support and Sustenance –</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognizes anxiety in students when entering higher education</li> <li>• Anticipates stress in new students and helps reduce this stress</li> <li>• Staff offer sympathetic advice and support to help students</li> <li>• Institution establishes a warm and supportive atmosphere</li> </ul>	<p>Induction committee of tutors, career guidance, chaplain, counsellor, staff, and retention officer, organize the induction at the beginning of the term, and plan to introduce further stages of induction throughout the first and second terms, to cover these issues</p>
<p><b>2. Informational Support –</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The program recognizes that most students may not realize the demands put upon them entering higher education</li> <li>• Students get the information they need</li> <li>• Students meet other students who have been successful in higher education who can give them advice</li> </ul>	<p>All of this is covered in the induction days and through the student services support network made aware to them in their first week; It is also provided in Open Days and information provided in the college prospectus or through tutors and administration personnel</p>
<p><b>3. Instrumental Support –</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students can get practical assistance</li> <li>• Students get help in the areas of financial, accommodation, health, stress and transport</li> <li>• Students get practical technical assistance in persisting in higher education</li> </ul>	<p>Student counsellor in situ in Cathal Brugha Street helps students with this but they also have the tutor of the course and year tutors</p>
<p><b>4. Material Support –</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial assistance</li> <li>• Loan arrangements</li> <li>• Emergency loans</li> </ul>	<p>Financial assistance and budget advice is given through the student services office</p>
<p><b>5. Identity Support –</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Valuing of diversity and cultural affiliation</li> <li>• Mutual support groups</li> <li>• Opportunity to express identity through social and cultural activities</li> </ul> <p>Provision of self help opportunities</p>	<p>These are all covered through the student services office and students setting up their own societies with the aid of the student union</p>

**Appendix B: Tinto's 1975 Model of Post Entry Processes included in Edward's 2003 model of academic progression and the role of induction in the transitional process from secondary to higher education.**



## **Appendix C:**

### **Ethics Statement from Students**

#### **Ethics Declaration from Students Participating in Focus Group Interviews with Ann Conway during February & March 2004**

I \_\_\_\_\_(block capitals) of the Diploma in Hotel and Catering Management year 1 course (DT402 /1) being held in the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) 2003/2004 hereby agree to be involved in a focus group interview with Ann Conway to assist her with her research on The mystery of drop out students, retention and progression. I will hereby give her permission to record this interview and to use any information disclosed to her in this session and any subsequent sessions to support her research. I understand that any information disclosed will be of an anonymous nature. I have read and understood this statement and her accompanying statement regarding her research.

\_\_\_\_\_ (Signature) \_\_\_\_\_ (date)

**Appendix D: Student Performance by Course (DT402/1) adapted from Costello and Russell (2003)**

(Data received after both the summer and supplemental exams)

	Students' Result			Total
	Pass	Refer	Withdraw	
<b>DT402:</b>	31	17	23	71
Diploma in Hotel and Catering Management	43.7%	23.9%	32.4%	100%

**Figures for 2004 (June 2004)\***

(Data received after the summer exams)

	Students' Result			Total
	Pass	Refer	Withdraw	
<b>DT402:</b>	21	36	14	71
Diploma in Hotel and Catering Management	30%	51%	19%	100%

**Figures for 2004 (June 2004)\***

(Data received after the summer exams)

	Students' Result			Total
	Pass	Refer	Withdraw	
<b>C419:</b>	5	13	0	18
Diploma in Hotel and Catering Management	28%	72%	0%	100%

\*My thanks to Stuart Wilson in the exams office DIT Cathal Brugha Street for providing me with these figures after the summer exam boards were completed on the 16<sup>th</sup> June 2004.