

## High drop-out figure the result of not understanding options - IIE

Time is running out for students to register at most public and private tertiary institutions. Many are still unsure of their future paths and will find it hard to settle on either course or campus, or even both.

But even though the pressure is on, an education expert has warned that decisions still need to be made with extreme care, as the high first year attrition rate can often be in part attributable to making the wrong decision about where to study.

A recent random survey of 2 670 first year students from Varsity College, the largest division of The Independent Institute of Education (IIE), found that 51% of students had not come to the institution directly after completing their schooling. Of these students, 43% had been enrolled elsewhere the year before.

Presentations at schools, career exhibitions and friends were cited by a third each of students as having been their primary sources of information when they made their first choice on where to study. Fewer than 15% of students cited guidance counsellors as having provided them with the information they needed.

### Wrong choices are not surprising

"Making choices about your life as an 18 year old is already daunting, but when you are making those choices based on options you do not fully understand, it is not surprising that the wrong choices are in danger of being made," says Dr. Felicity Coughlan, director of the IIE.

She says that, just as it would be fallacious to lay the full burden of first year drop-out rates at the door of the schooling or student finance systems, it would be equally fallacious to dismiss these findings and the insights they give in relation to decision making by young people. "The information to which young people are exposed at schools and at home is limited and informed by what the adults know, which is normally not much more than what they were exposed to as young people," says Coughlan.

Because the private higher education sector is relatively small, it did not generally feature in the mainstream school conversations where what was already known was repeated year in and year out in the discourse of students and young people alike. "Yet, when the lack of match between these choices and the expectations and needs of the young people happen, the second round of choices is often more inclusive and includes the less conventional, more niched and specialised spaces."

### High retention rate

Anne Whaits, academic manager at Varsity College, says the fact that students on these campuses achieve a success rate of more than 70% and a retention rate in excess of 80% demonstrated that it was not the capacity of students that resulted in the initial lack of fit.

Waits goes on to explain that all final year level courses at Varsity College campuses are externally moderated while all other courses are internally moderated in line with the policy of the IIE. This ensures that results reflect comparable standards to those of the public institutions meaning that they are real measures of competence. And this is true for many institutions in the private sector - not only the IIE.

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