The First Year Experience at University College Dublin
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Overview

• Background and context
• Overview of fellowship scheme
  – FYE team project
• Methodology
• Adjusting to the academic environment
• Difficulties encountered
• Time allocation
• Some issues for discussion
Introduction to UCD Dublin

• The largest university in Ireland (1855)
  – 22,500 students
  – No student fees (but €1600 ($2000) registration fee)

• 2004 University appointed a new management team, President and Registrar
  – University modularised and semesterised Sept 2005
  – Rapidly changing institutional structure

• Large increases in class sizes since mid-1990s but funding did not always follow

• Patchy support for first years
  – 1 week orientation
  – No first year seminar programme

School-level initiatives
Fellowships in Teaching and Academic Development (see Noonan and Redmond 2008 http://www.ucd.ie/fellows/fellow_pub.html

- Funded by national strategic fund (SIF) for Higher Education
- Creation of a network of emerging leaders with T&L track record
- Fellows engaged in research on issues central to institutional agenda
- A way for academic staff to work with the change to improve the learning experience of students.
Overview of Fellowship Scheme

• 8 fellows appointed 2007-9.
  – 2 teams with 1 Working on FYE
  – Team project & individual projects (for details see http://www.ucd.ie/fellows/fellow_pub.html)

• All full-time academics working within the project framework at strategic and disciplinary level.

• Scholarship of teaching and learning approach (see McKinney 2007).
  – Policy dimension also
FYE Team Project
Gibney, Moore, Murphy and O’Sullivan

• **Aim:**
  – To enhance the first year experience of teaching and learning at UCD

• **Background:**

• **No culture of institutional research at UCD**
  – Need to develop evidence base to inform future developments (Harvey et al 2006; Krause et al 2005)

• **Reliance on anecdotal evidence about first year students**
  – Perception amongst staff that there was a problem with the first year experience, a problem that was defined as a lack of engagement and poor attendance.
Methodology

Capturing the student perspective:

1. Survey Stage 1 Nov 2007 (N=1227, 28% of cohort)
   - Repeated October 2008 [by Registry]

2. Survey Stage 2 Nov 2007 (N=565, 13% of cohort)
   - Repeated October 2008 [by Registry]

3. Follow-up survey Stage 1 April 2008 (N=831, 19% of cohort)

✓ Engaged group; 80%+ attended more than half of all their classes over year and 73% submitted all assignments.
### Students’ Evaluation of the Transition to University Life (end of year survey)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very easy</th>
<th>Somewhat easy</th>
<th>Somewhat difficult</th>
<th>Very difficult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How easy did you find it to adjust to the academic demands of the university?</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How easy has it been to develop effective study skills?</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>41.0</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How easy has it been to manage your time effectively?</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>49.6</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Adjusting to the new academic environment

• 53.6% of respondents found the workload heavier than they had expected.
  – a link to semester 1 GPA with students achieving lower grades more likely to report surprise (-0.201 sig at 0.01 level), as were female students (0.138 sig at 0.01 level).

• The type of work was also a surprise, with 54.6% of respondents reporting that there was more independent work than they had expected.
  – Again a small correlation with semester 1 GPA was found (-0.199 sig at 0.01 level).
Extent to which students enjoyed classes early in semester 1 by Programme Area (average response on Likert Scale where 1=strongly agree and 5=strongly disagree).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme Area</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Radiography</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physiotherapy</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.805</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Mgt and Health &amp; Performance Science</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>0.913</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>0.782</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0.861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>0.873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vet Medicine</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0.915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>1.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>0.903</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0.987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agrifood and Agricultural Science</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0.982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>1145</td>
<td>0.976</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Adjusting to the new social environment

- 26% reported that they do not feel part of a community at UCD
  - ‘I never felt part of it’
  - ‘there is a very poor community on campus, this needs to be rectified’
  - no significant link between class size and feelings of community.

- 32% found it somewhat or very difficult to make friends
  - ‘its very hard to make friends in such large classes’

- 33% have considered withdrawing from UCD
  - ‘I found the first semester the worst and almost dropped out’
A consequence of modularisation?

- More consideration needed of the implications for the first year experience.
- Negative experience of being one of a large class
- Increased individualisation can impact negatively on the student experience, particularly during the first semester of first year (see also Nathan 2006).
Difficulties Encountered

- Inadequate support services
  - ‘More help in showing new students how to adjust in UCD because in the first semester I was lost about a lot of things’
  - ‘Make more help available to first years especially in the first few weeks’
  - ‘More feedback and help with writing essays’

- Big classes/ not enough tutorials
  - ‘More tutorials, sometimes some lectures are difficult to understand, and they would be clearer in a smaller group’
  - ‘More tutorials. The intimate setting makes it easy to learn’
  - Attendance reported as better at tutorials/ labs 66% attending all or nearly all (v 48% lectures)
• Not enough group work
  ➢ ‘...encourage more group work within modules, this would encourage more class participation and hopefully help in the formation of new friendships’
  ➢ ‘...more chances to work with other students’
  ➢ ‘More team work activities in classes to improve the relations between classmates’.

• Not enough social activities esp. within class; class/tutorial outings.
  ➢ ‘In the first few weeks of the first semester have more social activities’
UCD Students’ allocation of their time

- Increase over year in time spend on academic activities (up from 24.1 hours)
- Gap between student and staff expectations
- Standard deviations very large and suggestive of very different student experiences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lectures</th>
<th>Labs, Tutorials, Assignments</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Other study/revision</th>
<th>Paid employment</th>
<th>Sports and Social</th>
<th>Family commitments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

29.4 hours (v 40 hours)

52.3 hours

- Comparable to Eurostudent III figures for Ireland (2006 and 2007)
  - 27.1 hours study-related activities and 6.2 hours work-related activities
Stage 1 Students
Time spent in paid employment (hours/week)
The Ebb and Flow of the First Year

• Survey 1 some ambivalence about the experience.
  – 60% agreed or strongly agreed that they had enjoyed classes so far
  – 13.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed
  – 26.6% unsure

• In the end of year survey 82.8% either agreed or strongly agreed that Stage 1 at UCD had been a positive experience overall.
Becoming a university student: changes over the academic year

- 28.2% of UCD students felt on top of their studies in week eight.
- 71.5% reported having the necessary skills to be successful in their programme of study (end of year data).
- Correlation with grades here (r = .235 sig at 0.01 level), so particularly true of the better students.
- 43.5% of students reported it was difficult to develop these skills, with a further 8.5% reporting it was very difficult.
- Q: Is UCD holding first years responsible for their own fate once they enrol?
Some outcomes/ changes at UCD

• The dissemination of FYE project findings internally has contributed to an increased focus on the first year.

• The research informed the 2009-2013 UCD Education Strategy.

• Currently the structure of the first year is under review in three of the five colleges, with particular attention being paid to the critical first semester.

• On-line study skills module to be piloted 2010-2011.
Can we talk about the first year experience?

• Kift (2004) argues that unlike in the past, current students no longer study and play together throughout their careers as students (see also Nathan 2006).

• Heterogenous student population
  – Diversity in behaviour e.g. paid work, time spent studying
  – Modular curricula

• Individual experiences involve adaptation and change over the year.

• ‘a multiplicity of first year experiences’ (McInnis 1995).
Key question:

• This research has found that many international concerns in relation to the first year experience are mirrored by students studying at UCD.
• Why are student concerns so similar across different types of institutions and national contexts?
• Irish exceptionalism/ institutional level factors or features of a globalised system of education?