

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)

	Very easy	Somewhat easy	Somewhat difficult	Very difficult
How easy did you find it to adjust to the academic demands of the university?	9.5	41.1	41.4	8.0
How easy has it been to develop effective study skills?	7.0	41.0	43.5	8.5
How easy has it been to manage your time effectively?	5.3	31.1	49.6	14.0



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)

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



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.

Lectures	Labs, Tutorials, Assignments	Reading	Other study/revision	Paid employment	Sports and Social	Family commitments
13.1	6.3	4.9	5.2	6.8	9.8	6.2

29.4 hours (v 40 hours)

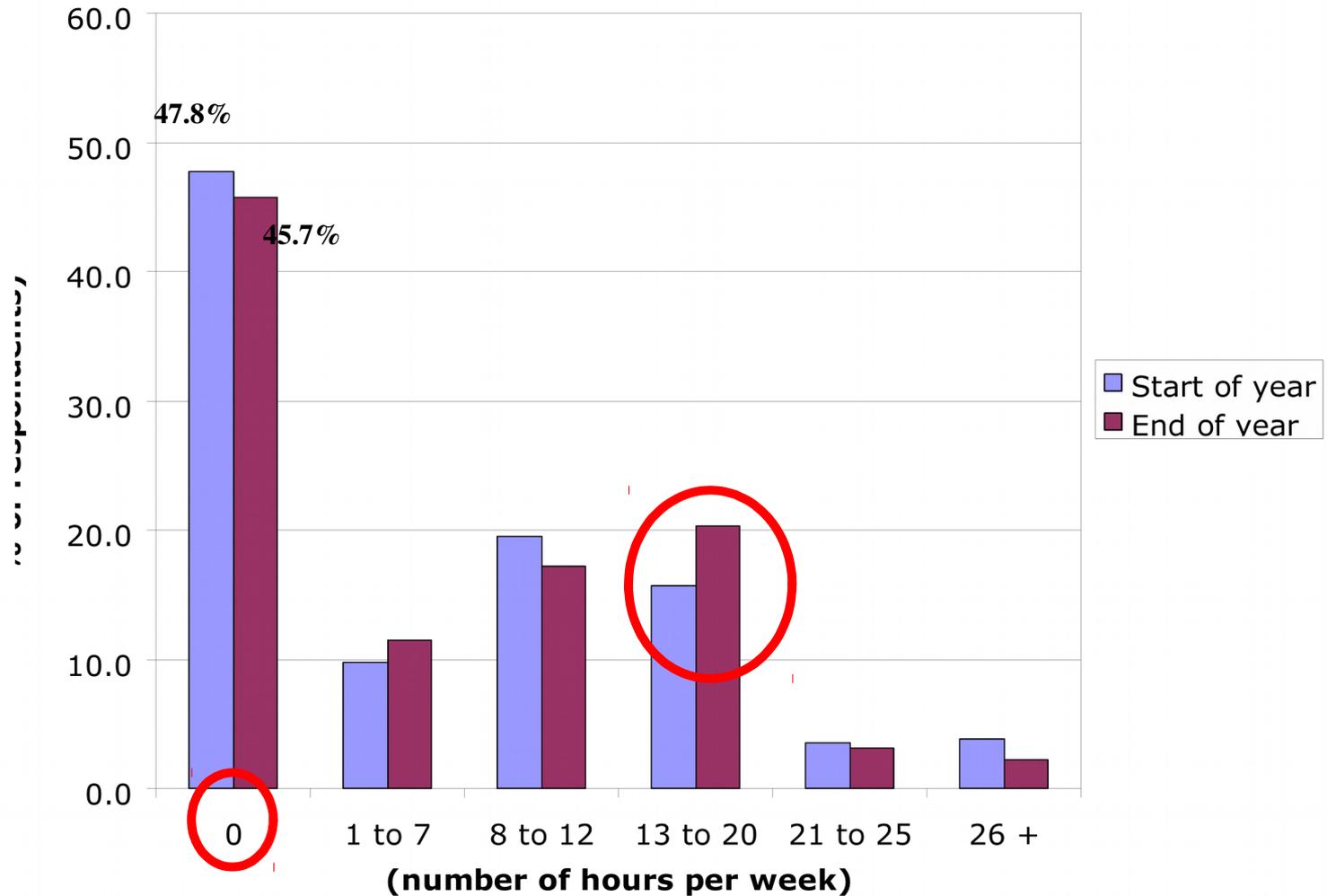
52.3 hours



- **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 (.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?

