



Student retention among new entrants to undergraduate degree courses at Trinity College Dublin

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Learning Resources and Student Supports

Abstract

In 2005 the Quality Office, Trinity College Dublin (TCD) initiated and led a study that tracked the status of new entrants to the first year of all undergraduate degree programmes as they progressed through their studies. This study charted the progress of the 2001/02, 2002/03, 2003/04 and 2004/05 new entrant cohorts at student level (approximately 9,700 students). A report on the findings of this study, as well as national and international studies on retention, was prepared for consideration by the TCD University Council. A number of key findings were highlighted, namely: of those students who leave College before completing their studies, the majority do not progress to 2nd year. The most common reasons cited for non-completion in 1st year is 'wrong course choice' and/or 'lack of commitment to studies'. Taking measures to provide appropriate information on course content and to improve the 1st year experience is an important step in addressing 1st year non-completion. Trinity College developed a policy on student retention arising from this study. Trinity College's policy on retention encourages greater School involvement in tracking students' participation using various methods including performance in term tests/essays, student evaluation feedback, and the Tutorial System. We are now investigating on-line student survey tools for module/course evaluation, and developing a policy to ensure that there is proper student feedback after evaluations have been conducted. In 2009-10 we will analyse the progression pattern of the 2008-09 student cohort and will take measures to address issues at School and College level. The quality of the student experience depends on many factors, including social and academic integration and ease of access to central student support services. The University's ability to maintain and improve the 1st year and overall student experience will be seriously challenged in an environment where student numbers are increasing, the core grant has been reduced, and, because of the public sector employment moratorium, staff numbers are decreasing.

Introduction

The Quality Office at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) completed a study which tracked the registration status over four years of new entrants to the first year of all undergraduate degree programmes for the 2001/02, 2002/03, 2003/04 and 2004/05 cohorts with a view to determining the level of student non-completion for these cohorts. Student non-completion is a cost to both the student and the university, and the findings of this study and other national and international studies have informed College policy on student retention.

Aims & Objectives

The aim of the study was to analyse the results from the comparative study of four cohorts of new entrants to undergraduate programmes and to use the results, along with the findings of other TCD, national, and international studies, to make policy recommendations to the University Council.

Methods

- Data from the Student Administration System was analysed using the SPSS statistical package;
- The results of this analysis were used to calculate overall levels of student non-completion for each cohort and to identify trends in the data which could be used to inform College policy on retention;
- A Report on the findings of this retention study and other national and international studies on retention was considered by University Council;
- The recommendations arising from the study were used to develop a College policy on student retention.

Key findings

- Approximately 15.4% of new entrants do not complete their undergraduate studies at TCD;
- The majority of students who withdraw from College do so while registered as Junior Freshman (1st year) students;
- The most common reasons cited for 1st year non-completion is 'wrong course choice' and/or 'lack of commitment to studies';
- Of the EU students that withdrew from the 04/05 cohort, 53% had received their first preference CAO course choice;
- Proportionally more females than males complete their undergraduate studies at TCD.

Table 1: New entrant student withdrawals from the 01/02, 02/03, 03/04 and 04/05 cohorts

	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
Total registered new entrants	2,407	2,406	2,507	2,451
Number and percentage non-completion	365 (15%)	358 (14.9%)	397 (15.8%)	380 (15.5%)

Figure 1: CAO points range/student category for 04/05 new entrants who subsequently did not complete

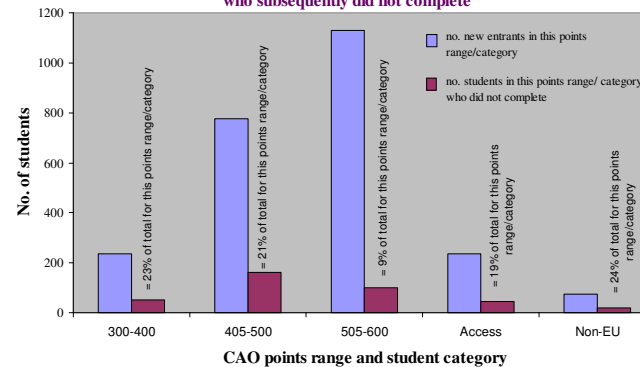


Table 2: Breakdown of withdrawals from the 04/05 cohort by geographical region

	Total registered new entrants	Number non-completion	Non-completion as % of total registered
Total Irish	2,163	334	15%
UK (excluding NI)	146	16	11%
Other EU	67	12	18%
Non-EU	62	12	19%
Other*	13	6	46%
Total non-completion	2,451	380	15.5%

* This student group participated in a pilot project

Table 3: Average gender breakdown of student withdrawals from 01/02 to 04/05

	% males	% females
% of new entrants by gender over the four years 01/02 – 04/05	38%	62%
% of registered new entrant males & females who did not complete their studies	17.5%	14%

Summary of Recommendations

- Programme literature, School websites and College prospectus should be reviewed to ensure that they realistically describe courses and expectations;
- Organise discipline-specific open days and have podcasts of sample lectures on-line;
- Put early warning mechanisms in place to detect 1st year students at risk of withdrawing;
- Implement new student administration system to facilitate tracking and monitoring of student progress;
- Student learning and personal supports should be integrated;
- Schools should conduct student evaluations of modules, provide feedback to students and address substantive issues.

Future work

- On-line survey tools for module/course evaluation and student feedback;
- Analyse progression of new entrants each year from Junior Freshman (1st year) to Senior Freshman (2nd year).

References

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