



## ■ Analysis

# I told you so . . . survey adds weight to those tales of undergraduate woe



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STUDENTS are bound to say, "I told you so."

Parents will be familiar with cries such as "college is stressful" and "I don't have enough money". But now the results of new research focusing on, among other things, their psychological well-being and finances, add weight to their complaints.

The scale of the research and methodologies used provides robust information about aspects of life for university students in Ireland today.

One measure used was the World Health Organisation's WHO-5 psychological well-being scale, an international standard in this area. According to this, about one in three Irish university students scored below a point at which their psychological health could be considered to be at risk. Researchers at University College Dublin's Geary Institute say more work needs to be done to understand the reasons, but point to a possible link with high levels of financial strain experienced by students.

One in three students runs out of money regularly.

Apart from the money available to them, how students manage their finances also needs to be explored, according to the Irish Universities Study.

Other possible factors

identified for further exploration are living conditions and the more unstructured environment that students transfer to when they leave school for university.

### Questionnaire

The WHO-5 questionnaire sets out five statements and students were asked to indicate on a scale, from "all of the time" to "at no time", scoring from 5 to 1, the closest they felt to each of them in the previous two weeks.

The statements are: "I have felt cheerful and in good spirits; I have felt calm and relaxed; I have felt active and vigorous; I woke up feeling fresh and rested; My daily life has been filled with things that interest me."

The questionnaire is used in general-population studies, including in Ireland, but there is no comparable research with other student populations. Its purpose is to give a general overview and it would not form the basis of a referral of a student for professional help.

However, it does appear Irish undergraduates are not alone.

A parallel study conducted by the Geary Institute among international students found that the level of psychological well-being among students from other European countries in Irish universities was similarly low.

Interestingly, students in Irish universities from non-European backgrounds scored better, with 23pc of them below the level at which their psychological health was considered to be at risk, compared with over 30pc for the Irish and Europeans. No explanation is offered for this.

If money is a large part of the problem, other studies

pinpoint the most likely causes.

The Eurostudent survey conducted in 2006-7 in 31 higher education colleges - also by the Geary Institute - found that the expense and quality of rental accommodation, for those who have to live away from home, is a major cause of stress. It also reported a lower quality of life in college for students from lower socio-economic and parental education backgrounds, particularly in areas such as accommodation and finances.

And today, 30pc of undergraduates in Irish universities are from non-traditional backgrounds.

In light of the probable re-introduction of some form of college fees, history may show the class of 2008 covered in this survey to have been relatively well-off.

The expense and quality of rental accommodation is a major cause of stress