# Staying the Course?

## A Study of Student Retention: UCD entrants 1999-2001

Nicole Mathews &
Susan Mulkeen

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# Registrar's Preface

A third level institution's retention rate is the subject of much copy and comment in the media and in education publications every year. It is perceived as an important reflection on the "quality" of an institution or indeed a particular course. It goes without saying that non-completion is a matter of serious concern to third level institutions. However, this concern is not based on ranking in an annual "retention table", but rather on the negative impact that "dropping out" of education can have on an individual student, especially where this is compounded by a bad experience while there. Higher Education Institutions have an obligation to ensure that they provide every support necessary for students to get the most out of their third level experience, both academically and personally, and to ensure that when students decide to leave, they do so for the right reasons and are happy with their decision.

With this said, however, it is also clear that no institution should hope for or indeed seek to attain a 100% retention rate. Among every intake of students there will be those who honestly feel that, having experienced it, third level is not for them or, as is highlighted in this report, that the particular course or vocation is not what they were looking for. Non-completion is a complex issue, where many factors come into play ranging from the academic to the personal, institutional or environmental.

There have been a number of excellent recent Irish reports on retention, including: Healy, Carpenter and Lynch, *Non-Completion in Higher Education: A Study of First Year Students in Three Institutes of Education* (1999); and Morgan, Flanagan and Kellaghan, *A Study of Non-Completion in Undergraduate University Courses* (2001). Generally, studies of completion rates must, by their nature, be retrospective, allowing time for completion of the longest courses, such as Medicine, and for students who transfer from one course to another, or take one or more years out, to graduate. Although retrospective studies have the strength of width and comprehensiveness, the data generated lack the impact of immediacy, particularly in a rapidly changing social and economic climate. It was with this consideration in mind that I commissioned this report into non-completion at University College Dublin, focusing on the most recent entry cohorts.
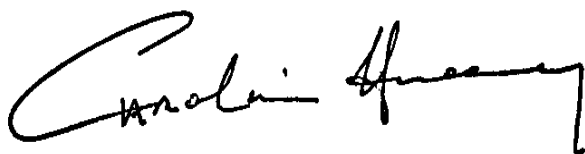
The aim of this study has been to map the profile of and to identify the reasons for non-progression of students through undergraduate degree programmes, to analyse and interpret the resulting data and to make recommendations on what Higher Education Institutions in general, and University College Dublin in particular, can do to ensure that those students who do leave before completion are doing so as part of

a positive experience. By identifying the reasons it is hoped to address any contributing factors that are within our control.

One of the most notable findings evident from this study is that the vast majority of students who make up the non-completion statistic in a particular year return to full-time education in the following or subsequent academic years. For the most part they enter a different area of study, and this is reflected in that "wrong course choice" is identified as the primary reason for non-completion. A minority will return to the same subject area but in a different institution, and it is these students' concerns that are most worrying for any individual institution.

I would like to put on record my thanks to the Higher Education Authority for providing the funding for this study under the Targeted Funding for Special Initiatives scheme. The work of the authors, Nicole Mathews and Susan Mulkeen, speaks volumes about their commitment to this project and I feel that for many years they will be quoted as having provided a major contribution to the understanding of, and development of policy in, the area of non-completion.

Caroline Hussey
Registrar

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# Executive Summary

## Who Leaves?

The students most likely to leave are:

➢ Students who enter with weak academic qualifications, both in terms of points and grades in Mathematics and English;

➢ Students in the larger, less vocational Faculties of Arts, Philosophy & Sociology, Science and Agriculture;

➢ Students from outside Dublin and, in particular, those within commuting distance of Dublin and those from other EU countries.

## How Many Leave?

The study covered entrants from 1999-2001; 15.9% of the entrants for this period are no longer registered in the faculty they first entered. In an international context this is an extremely low percentage. Ireland rated 2nd for student completion when compared with OECD figures published in "Education at a Glance"[1].

The trend seems to be towards a slight improvement over the three-year period.

## Why do they Leave?

Most students state that the strongest factor influencing their decision to leave was 'wrong course choice'. This is also evidenced by the fact that the majority re-apply through the CAO. However, significant numbers also rank 'size and unfriendliness' and related areas as important factors in their decision to leave.

## Where are they now?

It is important to note that a very small percentage of students are leaving third-level education entirely. It is estimated that over 95% of those who have left during the period of the study have already re-entered UCD or another third level institution or intend to do so in the near future.

## How can UCD identify 'at risk' students?

If a student's attendance record deteriorates, there is a high risk that they will stop attending. Some form of attendance record is essential – new technologies such as 'Blackboard' could assist with this. Follow-up for students who are not attending

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[1] Quoted in Morgan, Flanagan and Kelleghan

could come from a tutor or student advisor. Recognising the underlying philosophy of the university, that students are adults, follow-up should be of the nature of a friendly enquiry rather than an admonishment.

Students who are not attending are only one category of 'at risk' students. Students who are weaker in academic terms are also high-risk students. As the population of school-leavers declines it is likely that more students in lower points ranges will be entering UCD. Therefore there is a need to put measures in place to support these students at the start of their university career.

The peak time for student withdrawal is before 1st February of First Year and, in particular, during the month of January. Extra attention must be paid to 'at risk' students during this period.

## How can UCD improve retention rates?

While a number of positive steps have been taken in recent years, it is clear that there are further developments and improvements which can be undertaken. In particular, UCD has responsibilities with regard to:

➢ assisting students make the correct course choice,

➢ easing the transition between second and third level,

➢ providing academic and pastoral support for students, and finally,

➢ if a student decides to leave, ensuring that this is supported and the student leaves feeling positive about UCD.

Firm proposals for achieving these aims are included in Chapter 7.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

The Registrar of University College Dublin, Dr. Caroline Hussey, initiated this study by drafting a proposal following discussions with relevant personnel and departments within the University. The proposal was submitted to the Higher Education Authority for funding under the Special Funding for Targeted Initiatives Scheme, and funding was allocated for the duration of the study.

The object of the study was to compile comprehensive information and statistics on the profile of students not completing their undergraduate degree in University College Dublin, and to review the reasons behind a student's decision to leave prior to completion of their first year in college. The results of the study should lead to recommendations on how to improve UCD Support Networks and UCD's approach to enabling prospective students to be successful in both choosing and completing their courses in the future.

Studies of completion rates, in order to be comprehensive, must be retrospective, allowing time for completion of the longest courses, such as Medicine, and for students who transfer from one course to another or take one or more years out to graduate. Although retrospective studies have the strengths of width and comprehensiveness, the data generated lack the impact of immediacy, particularly in a rapidly changing social and economic climate.

Therefore, UCD decided to attempt a study of the situation contemporaneously. It was decided initially to undertake a study of the entry cohorts for two consecutive years. The students entering UCD in September of 1999 and 2000 were chosen as the study population as up-to-date information on each student was recorded in the student registration system, and they were the two most recent entry cohorts that could be targeted. The study has since been extended to include 2001 entrants and to update the information about the 1999 and 2000 entrants. All figures have been updated to February 2003.

Approximately 3,600 students enter First Year of UCD undergraduate degree programmes annually. The majority enter via the CAO system, but some students enter by direct application (e.g. Overseas). A number withdraw formally during first year (<6%). A small number do not officially withdraw but do not present for examinations or re-attend the following year (<2%). More than 90% of the entry cohort sit summer and/or autumn examinations and over 75% advance directly to the Second Year of the same course.

Of the students who do not advance directly to Second Year, some obtain permission to re-attend their First Year course; others register to repeat their First Year Examinations without re-attending[2]. Some students transfer to the First Year of other UCD courses and a very small number may obtain permission to transfer to the Second Year of an alternative course (e.g. First Engineering to Second Science). Although some courses have built in a 2nd year transfer mechanism, this is not widely availed of.

Therefore, it was important to identify the groups into which students could be categorized at the year-end, having registered for a UCD course in September of 1999, 2000 or 2001. Once the students were categorised on the basis of the information held in the UCD system, those who were to be the target for the study could be identified.

## Methodology

The status of students at the end of the Academic Year following entry can be classified by programme or Faculty into the following categories:

1   Registered for Second Year of the same programme.
    (a) Continuing
    (b) Subsequently withdrew*
2   Eligible to register for Second Year, but not registered.*
3   Registered for First Year of same programme.
    (a) Repeat (Failed or withdrew during First Year)
    (b) Pass Repeat (e.g. Psychology in Arts)
4   Eligible to register for First Year of same programme, but not registered.
    (a) No Exams* (Assumed left but no official notification from student)
    (b) Fail*
5   Registered as "exam only" for First Year.
    (a) Registered for First Year of a different UCD programme.
    (b) In a different Faculty*
6   In the same Faculty
    (a) Registered for Second Year of a different programme within UCD.
    (b) In a different Faculty*
7   In the same Faculty
8   Formally withdrew from UCD during First Year, and not registered for a UCD Programme*

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[2]   For students entering from 2001 onwards the option of repeating 'Exam Only' is no longer available. All students must register fully or as 'Exam repeat'.

9    Not eligible for further registration[*]

10  Leave of Absence/deferred year.

The need to generate the basic data on all entrants was vital for comparison purposes and in order to distinguish any particular trends. Using the report-writing software "Business Objects", a suite of reports was designed to access and record as much information as possible from the "Banner" student information system about all of the entrants to UCD for a particular year. The search yielded all general data that was necessary such as age, gender, location, etc.

Where certain information could not be generated automatically, data was generated and reported manually. A search of CAO information revealed other basic information with regard to their leaving certificate records, grades and points score at time of entry. The data compiled as a result of the investigation on each entrant consisted of the following:

➢ Personal Information
   o  Student identifiers (Student number, name, date of birth)
   o  Age at 1st October following entry – necessary factor for statistical purposes
   o  Gender – for comparison purposes
   o  Socio-Economic Group – to identify background. This is based on the HEA defined Socio-Economic Groups
   o  Accommodation type – Where they lived while at UCD
   o  Home – Where in Ireland they were from, geographical spread
   o  Country of Birth – If different from above

➢ Academic Qualifications
   o  Leaving Certificate year – year of last 6 subject Leaving Certificate
   o  Mathematics grade – Their highest attained Leaving Certificate Mathematics grade
   o  English grade – Their highest attained Leaving Certificate English grade
   o  Repeated – How many times, if any, they repeated their Leaving Certificate
   o  Points – Points on entering UCD

➢ Course information

➢ Current Status – 'Continuing Student' or 'Non-Completer'

The information was initially drawn from the system in June 2001 for the 1999 cohort and basic information was added to it. The data were refreshed in March 2002 preparatory to mailing questionnaires. The 2000 cohort was taken from the system in March/April 2002. Such information is always 'snapshot' as students continue to register, submit exam entries or withdraw quite late in the academic year. However, it

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[*] 'Non-Completer' categories

was necessary to go ahead with data available at that stage; a later survey would have been likely to yield a smaller response. The figures were subsequently updated in January 2003.

Having categorised all students entering in the particular year and having compiled their basic details, the next step was to establish the reasons why those students in specific categories were not currently registered in their original course.

A standard questionnaire was compiled with the intention of surveying all students who were not currently registered in their original Faculty. After examining several different types of questionnaire, it was decided to use a questionnaire comprised mostly of closed questions or scaled answer questions (Likert Scale). These were combined with a number of open-ended questions, where more detailed information on experiences or further comments were sought. The questionnaires were posted a letter from the Registrar outlining the purpose of the research and how information received was to be utilised. The surveys were individually numbered and the numbers related back to the basic data held on a spreadsheet for each student. In order to encourage those in receipt of the survey to respond, the opportunity to enter a draw to win a travel voucher was enclosed.

The survey contained four different areas. The primary section investigated the reasons the student left a course by outlining many of the possible factors and asking the student to rate the relevance of each while highlighting the critical one. This section also examined how the students felt having left and asked who had assisted them in making their decision to leave.

The second section of the questionnaire dealt with course choice and asked what factors had initially influenced students in choosing their course and UCD as their university. This section also examined their opinions on the career guidance given to them in second level, UCD's literature and Open Day, and asked whether, following their experience, they would conduct things differently if choosing a third-level course again.

The third section regarded expectations, and whether firstly their course, and secondly UCD, matched these expectations and if not, why not?

The fourth and final section was designed to build up and add to the profile of the student, asking questions on their second level school, lecture attendance and part-time work, amongst others.

The BA Modular programme is aimed at adult learners. Recognising the distinctly different profile and nature of the programme, a separate questionnaire was

developed for the BA Modular entrants who had not continued in their course. In order to facilitate students, most of whom have both work and family commitments, it is designed so that students may leave the programme for a number of years and return at a later stage. In this sense it is difficult to term students not currently attending as 'non-completers'. Perhaps 'dormant', a term used in numerous UK reports, would be a better description in this case.

For phase I of the study, the questionnaires were mailed to all students identified as having not completed their courses, first of all the 1999 entry cohort, then the 1999 BA Modular entrants, then the 2000 entry cohort, and finally the 2000 BA Modular entrants. Return of surveys amounted to an average of 28% across each of the main cohorts, with a lower return rate on the BA Modular questionnaires. Each response was coded and the comments categorised. Throughout this report comments quoted are from this survey, unless otherwise specified.

Additional manual research with regard to 'non-completers' was undertaken: from the student information system their time of leaving and examination status were collected; using information available on the CAO system the ranking of the course in their original CAO preferences was added to their record.

For phase II it was noted, following analysis of the 1999 and 2000 responses, that students tended to misunderstand some questions and the questionnaire was revised for the survey of 2001 entry cohort. These questionnaires are therefore analysed separately from 1999 and 2000. It was also decided not to survey the BA Modular students because of the cyclical nature of the programme (i.e. those who entered in 2001 would not have the option of repeating their subjects until 2003). In all other respects the methodology for phase II was the same as before. Throughout this report all figures refer to full-time degree programmes unless otherwise specified.

A study undertaken by the Registrar's Office as part of the Quality Assurance process was also used as a point of comparison for continuing students' views. Any comments drawn from this survey will be referred to as "(Continuing Student)".

The data relating to all entrants were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Continuing Students and Non-Completers were compared with regard to the various categories of information. Chi-square and T-tests were used, as appropriate. A certainty >95% was taken as a measure of statistical significance. A separate data file was created for the survey responses and these were also analysed and correlations between various factors sought.

Data were compiled, following which, a forum was held with representatives from all faculties, student advisors and the relevant administrative offices attending. A summary of the findings was presented and a discussion followed which assisted in the collation of recommendations for future developments which might alleviate the problem of non-completion. It should be noted that it was generally accepted that 100% retention cannot and should never be expected. The recommendations arising from the forum are included in Chapter 7.

# Chapter 2: Previous Studies

Many of the initial studies into student retention were carried out in the USA. Tinto provided the theoretical framework, and concluded that the level of student integration into academic and social aspects of institutions determined whether they were more or less likely to 'drop-out' (Tinto 1975). Several further studies used this theory as their starting point, and it is now estimated that just over half of all students who begin a university course in the USA will actually finish within 6 years and in the same institution in which they initially enrolled (Tinto, 2002).

The factors that have been related to retention of students in the USA are wide and varied, including:
- academic preparation of students,
- student demographics,
- students' aspirations and motivations,
- financial factors,
- the college environment,
- the degree to which a student is involved socially and academically,
- institutional policies and procedures and
- a student's sense of belonging at an institution (Lenning, Beal, and Sauer 1980).

Strategies that were implemented and showed the greatest impact in addressing these problems were the introduction of orientation and mentoring programmes. Also effective were multiple strategy efforts, such as the introduction of women's centres to provide support to non-traditional female students and freshmen seminars to promote the relationship between students and their faculties (Brawer, 1996). A set of retention services and supports that are easily accessible for students also need to be offered (Moxley, Najor-Durack and Dumbrigue, 2001).

Ireland and the UK have two of the highest graduation rates in the OECD[3]. However the rate of non-completion in the UK is most marked in institutions that admit the highest proportion of non-traditional students (Benn, 1995). The expansion of higher education during the 1990s reduced 'wastage' that was due to only a small proportion of the population being able to access higher education. However, it also allowed a broader spread of entry qualifications and standards amongst those admitted, but their success was less assured[4].

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[3] 'Education at a Glance OECD Indicators 2002.' OECD 2002, www.OECD.org

[4] Select Committee on Education and Employment 6th Report, 'Higher Education: Student Retention'. http://www.publications.parliment.uk/pa/cm200001/cmselect/cmeduemp/124/12403.htm

Non-completion in higher education in the UK is determined by a number of factors: poor quality of the student's experience, inability to cope with the demand of the higher education programme, unhappiness with the social environment, wrong choice of programme, financial difficulties and dissatisfaction with aspects of institutional provision are just some of the contributing elements (Yorke, 1999). Numerous studies have assigned the causes of withdrawal to three broad categories: college related, work related and personal/family related (Bale, 1990; Davies, Mullaney and Sparkes, 1998; Martinez and Munday, 1998).

In concurrence with the findings of studies from the USA the same recommendations come to light: in order to promote student retention, colleges need to improve advice and guidance services, pay attention to the early stages of programmes of learning (student induction and initial assessment), establish a closer relationship with students through tutoring, monitor and follow up poor attendance, and they also need to identify those students who are at risk early enough so help can be given (Martinez, 2001). The problem of retention is serious enough for various institutions to have set up specific retention committees and retention projects to address the issue[5].

Healy, Carpenter and Lynch (1999) have investigated the retention rates in the Carlow, Dundalk and Tralee Institutes of Technology for students who registered for the first time in the 1996/97 academic year. A range of issues were determined to be contributing to non-completion in these Institutes. Low Leaving Certificate grades, unclear career aspirations, a lack of information and guidance on course and career options, inappropriate course choices, difficulty with some or all of the subjects taken, and financial and work related problems were all factors associated with early leaving and/or failure. Institutional problems, such as the lack of facilities and support services and poor communication between staff and students, were also contributing factors.

Morgan, Flanagan and Kellaghan (2001) examined the retention rates in Irish undergraduate university courses for students who entered in the 1992/93 academic year. They found that 16.8% of students did not complete the course they had initially enrolled for. Non-completion rates were found to vary across universities from 27.9% in NUI Maynooth to 12.9% in NUI Galway; Computer Studies, Engineering and Science were found to be the subject areas with the highest rate of non-completion.

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[5]The Open University , UK, University of Glasgow, UK., Truro College, UK., College of North West London, UK., Derby Tertiary College, UK., Basildon College, UK., University of Arizona, USA., Rutgers University, USA., Rollins College, USA., University of Michigan, USA., University of New Orleans, USA., James Cook University, Australia,

Baird *et al* (2002) investigated the factors associated with withdrawal from Trinity College Dublin: students cited their choice of course, their compatibility and commitment to the course as having the strongest influence on their decision to withdraw from college. In her study of Second Year University College Dublin students, Bates (2002), reported that students with multiple problems, such as academic problems, practical problems and personal problems are more likely to be unsatisfied with their experience of college life.

By examining the literature available from colleges and education authorities throughout the UK, the USA and Ireland, it is obvious that numerous factors, rather than one particular factor, contribute to non-completion, and it requires a multi-faceted approach to improve retention rates. However, the issue of retention is not just about finishing a course but assisting students in navigating the challenges inherent in the educational setting and wider social context (Moxley, 2001).

# Chapter 3:
# Profile of UCD Entrants

## General Demography – Full Time courses

Each year UCD admits between 3,500-4000 students to full-time undergraduate courses. A summary of their demographic profile follows:

|  | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Number admitted** | 3512 | 3719 | 3701 |
| **% Female** | 57.5% | 57.2% | 54.9% |
| **Average Age at 1 October following entry** | 18.92 | 18.99 | 19.14 |
| **Age range** | 16.67-65.17 | 16.92-65.08 | 16.50-67.58 |
| **Median age** | 18.58 | 18.58 | 18.67 |
| **% Living at home** | 65.0% | 67.8% | 63.0% |
| **% with home address in Dublin** | 45.8% | 47.7% | 47.6% |
| **% Socio-Economic Group 3: Higher Professional** | 27.3% | 29.4% | 29.3% |

*Table 1:    Demographic Background of entrants*

The majority of students were female. While there are more female than male entrants to 3rd level education in Ireland[6] the difference overall is not as marked as it is in the UCD context. Comparing types of institution it is apparent that the pattern in UCD reflects that of the university sector while the reverse is true in Institutes of Technology.
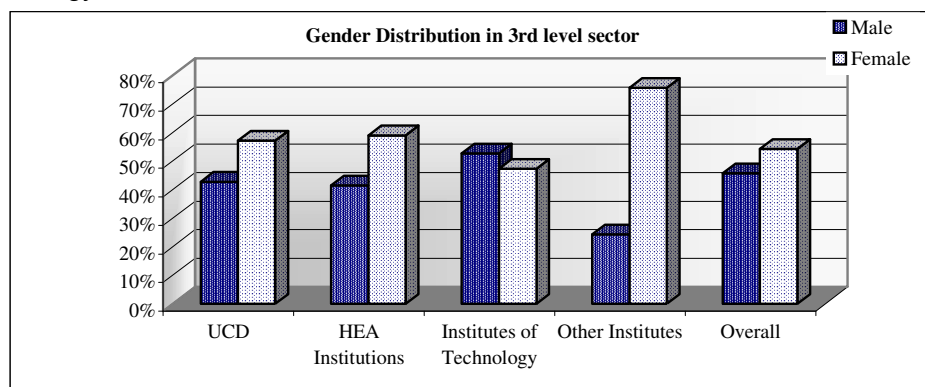


*Figure 1:    Gender distribution in third level sector 2000*

Dublin was the most represented county. Not surprisingly, the distribution of UCD students differed significantly from the overall population of the country: Of those living within the Republic 47.1% of entrants over the three years of the study came from Dublin; this compares with 28.66% of the total population of the country. 76.6%

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[6] HEA statistics available at www.hea.ie, and individual institutes belonging to each category.

of entrants came from Leinster as a whole; Leinster represents only 53% of the total population of the country. Over the three years of the study, the trend was for an increasing percentage to come from Dublin and surrounding counties with a consequent decline in the percentage coming from other areas.

## Academic Background– Full Time courses

Table 2 shows the academic achievements of UCD entrants. There were statistically significant differences over the three years in academic terms. In overall points terms, the percentages at the two extremes of the points scale were larger for the 2001 entrants (Figure 2).

|  | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Number admitted on basis of Leaving Cert** | 3287 | 3452 | 3400 |
| **Average points** | 455.37 | 452.76 | 451.33 |
| **Median points** | 445 | 445 | 445 |
| **Range** | 320-600 | 255-600 | 275-600 |
| **% who had repeated Leaving Cert** | 14% | 12% | N/A[7] |
| **% who had previously attended 3rd level** | 7.2% | 7.2% | 8.1% |
| **% with HB3+ in English** | 48.5% | 48.2% | 54.9% |
| **% with HB3+ in Mathematics** | 32.6% | 30.4% | 32.6% |
| **% First preferences[8]** | 48% | 50% | 51% |

*Table 2:     Academic Background of entrants*
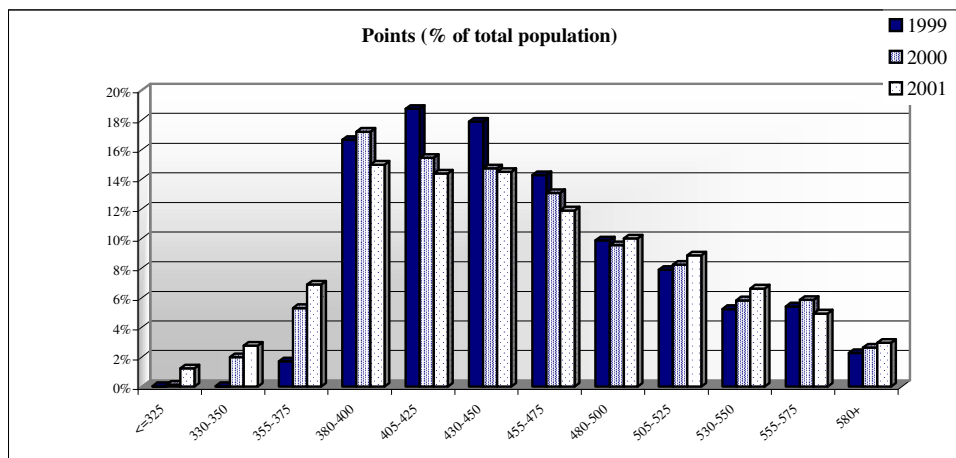


*Figure 2:     Points comparison over three year period*

A similar trend was noted in terms of Mathematics results. For English, the trend was towards an overall improvement in results at time of entry.

Comparing the data with statistics from the Department of Education and Science, UCD entrants have performed significantly better in the Leaving Certificate in

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[7] Figures on repeat Leaving Certificate for 2001 entrants were unavailable due to technical difficulties.

[8] Based on Nett Acceptances.

Mathematics and English than the general population of Leaving Certificate candidates.

**Comparison of Maths results:**
**LC population vs UCD entrants**
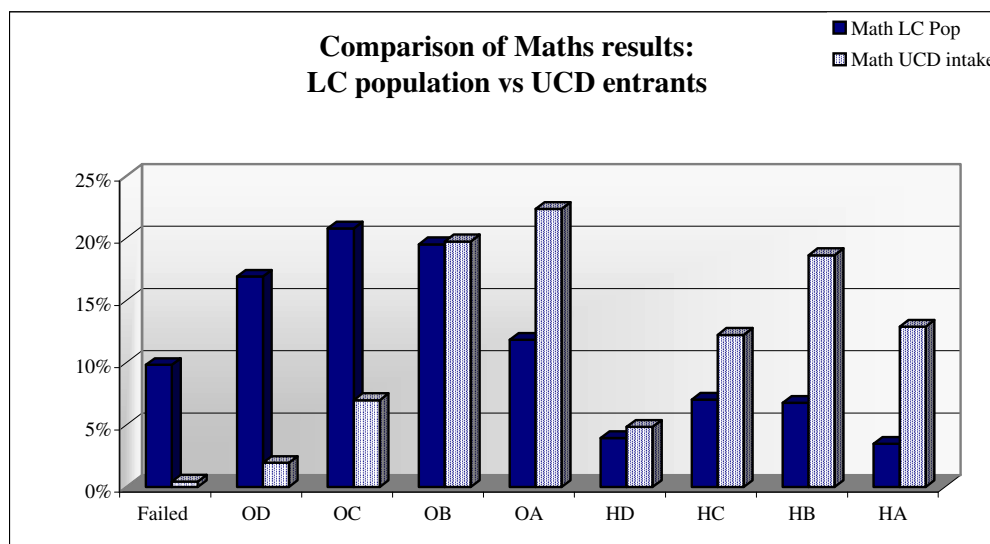
Figure 3:    Maths grades: Leaving Certificate population vs UCD entrants.

**Comparison of English Results:**
**LC population vs UCD Entrants**
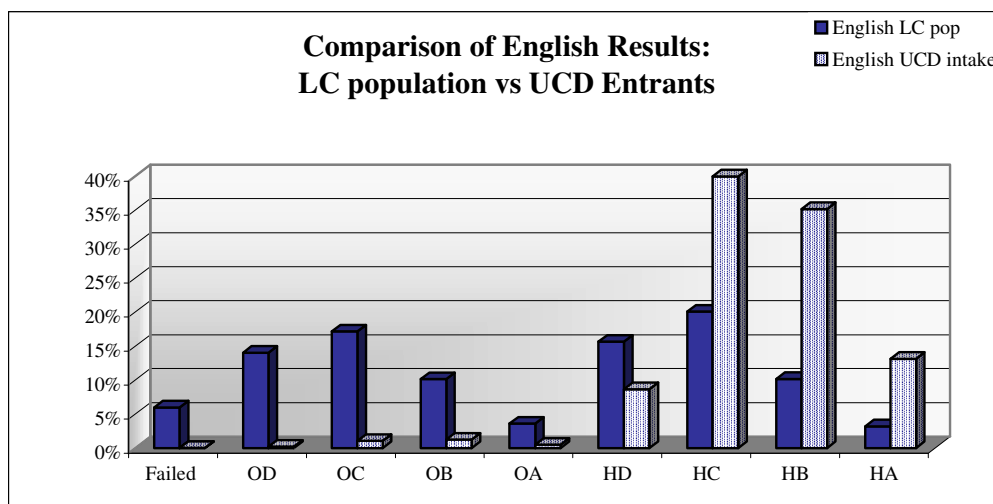
Figure 4:    English grades: Leaving Certificate population vs UCD entrants.

Figures 3 and 4 compare the percentages of students on each grade, and show that UCD entrants out-perform the total Leaving Certificate population in both subjects. UCD entrants also achieved more honours level grades than the general Leaving Certificate population (Honours C and above).

## Entry outside points system

While over 90% of entrants are admitted on the basis of the Leaving Certificate, each year a small number of students are admitted outside the points system. UCD has a long history of promoting access and operates special entry routes for students with

a disability, mature students, and students from disadvantaged areas (New ERA). Students who apply under these categories may gain admission on points in the normal way, in which case they are included in the numbers above (Figure 2). The percentages shown in Figure 5 do not, therefore, represent all students availing of the supports in place for these categories of students.

Transfer students from Institutes of Technology are generally admitted with advanced standing but occasionally some are admitted to first year; such students are included in this study. Students presenting school-leaving qualifications other than the Leaving Certificate are assessed separately in three categories: Overseas, EU, Northern Ireland.
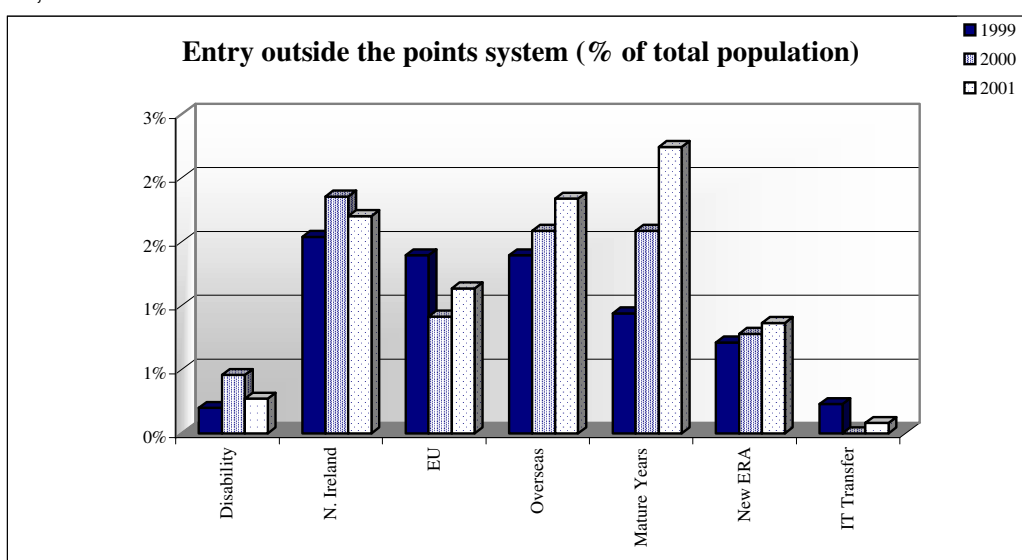


**Figure 5:    Entry outside the points system**

Although the numbers involved are small the trend has been for increases in these areas in recent years. This is likely to continue as the population of school-leavers declines with a consequent diversification of the student body.

## Faculty Analysis

Faculties may contain groups of quite separate courses. For example, Medicine includes Medicine, Physiotherapy and Radiography[9]. In other cases, Faculties have denominated entry to courses which are not substantially different to the main stream but guarantee students a place in a 2nd year option. Since there were 35 degree options available to applicants via the CAO in 2001, some of which had less than 10 places, it would be unworkable to compare data at course level. Therefore, for the purposes of this report, faculties will be taken as the unit for comparison. If it is noted

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[9] The Nursing degree programme did not commence until 2002.

that a course within a faculty differs significantly from the pattern for the faculty this will be highlighted.
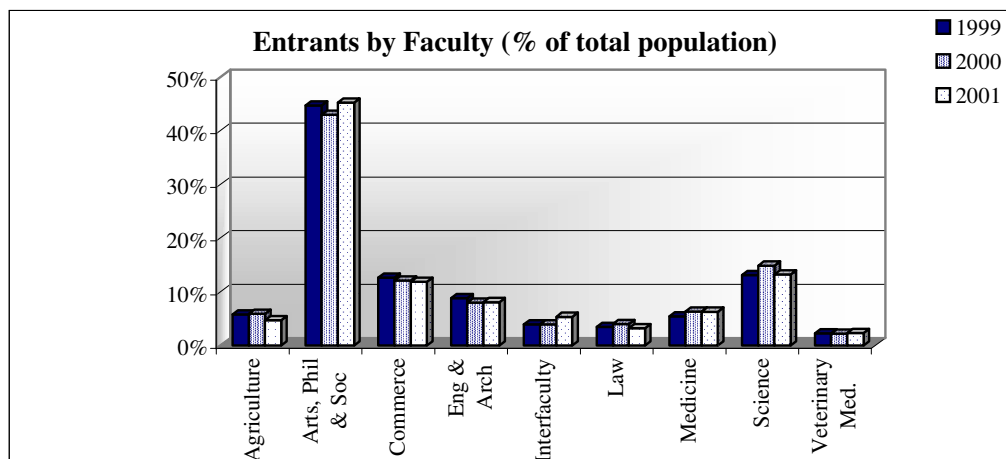


**Figure 6:    Entrants by Faculty**

Arts, Philosophy & Sociology and Celtic Studies[10] and Science are the biggest faculties in terms of student numbers. They both operate omnibus entry for the majority of students. In recent years both faculties have opted to denominate entry to selected subjects via the CAO. In 2000, Arts[11] offered entry to seven separate degree options on a denominated basis for the first time. Agriculture has also moved in this direction over the last number of years and all of its nine degree options were offered on a denominated basis in 2002, but an omnibus option was also retained. The Engineering degrees moved from omnibus to denominated entry in 2001 also.

## *Demographic Background*

A significant gender bias by faculty was noted. There were slight variations by year but female students were consistently in a significant minority in the Faculties of Agriculture, and Engineering & Architecture. In the case of the latter this was a very significant difference from the overall pattern, with over 70% of the entrants being male each year.

An analysis of age by faculty also reveals a significant difference. In particular, students entering Veterinary Medicine and Law tended to be above the average age while the average age for students in Science and Engineering & Architecture was below the overall.

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[10] The three faculties were combined for the purposes of the study as students effectively take the same subjects for the degree programmes offered by these faculties. These faculties will be referred to hereafter as Arts.

[11] See Appendix I (DN051-54 and DN057-59)

The percentage living at home also varied significantly by faculty. Both Medicine and Veterinary Medicine had less than 50% of their students living at home in all three years. The higher numbers of overseas students in these faculties may, in part, account for this. Both these faculties also had a below average percentage of students from Dublin; more students from Cork than from Dublin entered Veterinary Medicine in 2000. Agriculture also had a low percentage of students from Dublin in all years (<20% in each year) although the students were drawn from such a diverse geographical background that Dublin still represented the largest percentage. In 2001, Agriculture had less than 50% of students living at home. Over 50% of students entering the Faculties of Arts in all years were from Dublin – the Music degree and BA Computer Science were the only courses within the Faculty which varied from this significantly.

In 2000 and 2001, Agriculture was the only faculty which did not list 'Higher Professional' as the most represented socio-economic group. 'Farmers' was the most common group for Agriculture in all years. In 1999, the most represented group in Science was Group 6: 'Salaried Employees'. All other faculties had more students from the 'Higher Professional' socio-economic group than any other category.

## *Academic Background*

As is to be expected, the academic profile of the students also varied significantly by faculty. The cut-off points as published are the minimum points at which any applicant was admitted. As the larger faculties have greater numbers of places their minimum entry points will naturally be lower. However, the average points[12] for these faculties are also lower and they tend to attract fewer applicants in the top points ranges.

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[12] Calculated on basis of those presenting Leaving Certificate only.

**Average Points by Faculty**
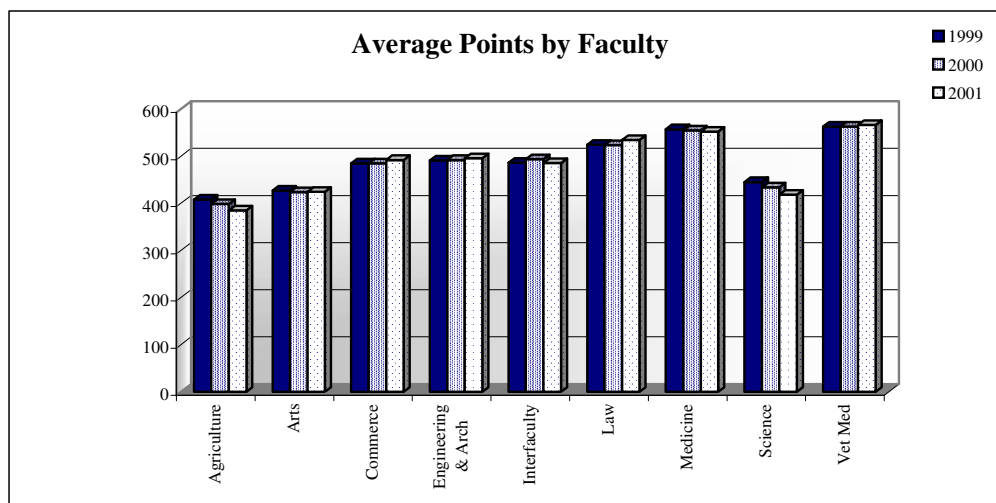


**Figure 7:    Average Points by Faculty**

English and Mathematics results also vary significantly by Faculty – it should be borne in mind, however, that some courses have minimum Mathematics requirements[13]. At present, no course has an English requirement greater than a pass (i.e. minimum D3 at ordinary level in the Leaving Certificate).

**HB3+ English - % within faculty**
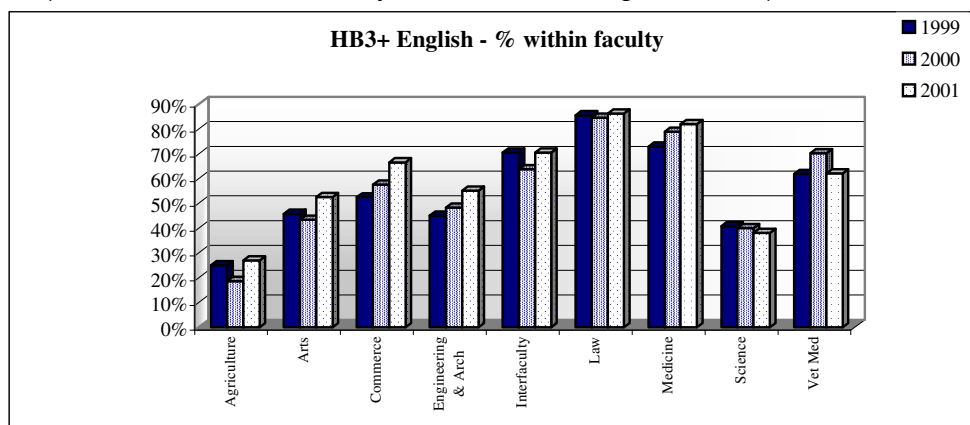


**Figure 8:    Percent of entrants with English results of HB3+[14] by Faculty**

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[13] Prior to 2001 the Mathematics requirement for entry to Engineering (omnibus entry) was HB3. In 2001, when denominated entry was introduced, the requirement was changed to HC3 for all branches except for Electrical and Electronic Engineering.

[14] Calculated on basis of those presenting Leaving Certificate only.

**HB3+ Mathematics - % within faculty**
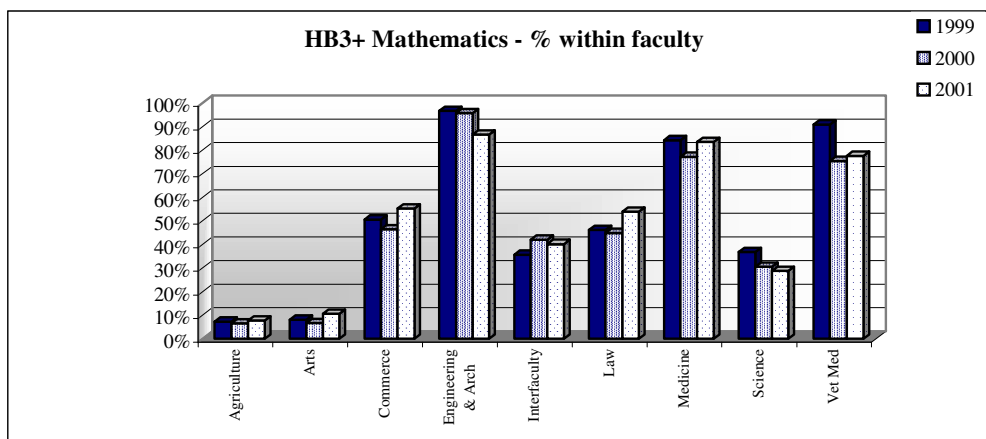
Figure 9: *Percent of entrants with Mathematics results of HB3+[14] by faculty*

All faculties had students who repeated the Leaving Certificate among their entry cohort. The lowest was Engineering & Architecture in 2000 (8.5%). In both years Medicine and Veterinary Medicine had the highest percentage of repeat students. In both years[15], Medicine recorded just over 30% of Leaving Certificate entrants with repeat Leaving Certificate; in Veterinary Medicine the figure was over 40%.

The percentage of first preferences among entrants also varied significantly by faculty[16].

**1st preferences (% of acceptances)**
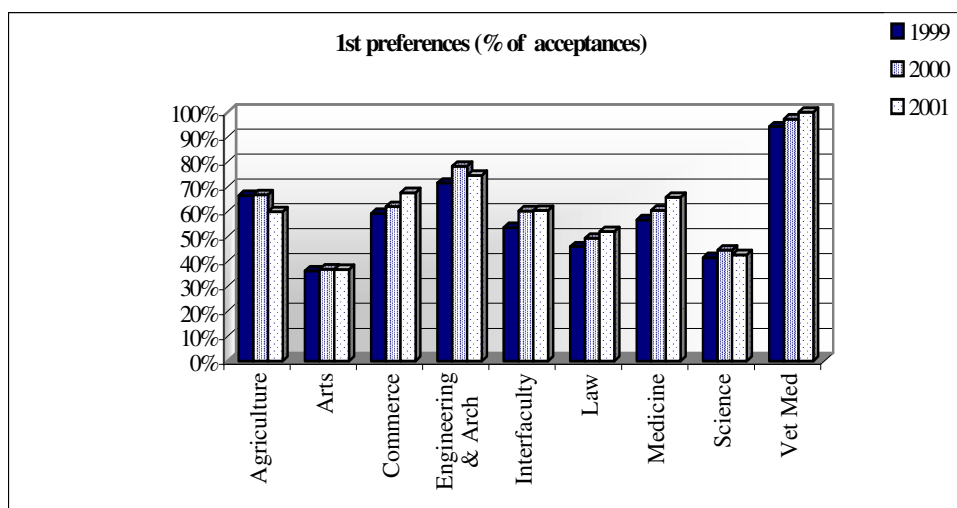
Figure 10:  *Percentage of 1st preferences by faculty*

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[15] Data not available for 2001

[16] Information about preferences is not stored on the UCD Student Information System so this is based on CAO data about nett acceptances.

The lowest percentage of 1<sup>st</sup> preferences was the Faculty of Arts (just under 37% each year). The highest was Veterinary Medicine with 100% in 2001.

In all three years, the numbers who had previously attended third level varied significantly by faculty. At the top of the scale Veterinary Medicine had 24% of its intake with previous third-level attendance across the three years. Medicine and Law recorded just over 10%. At the bottom of the scale were Engineering & Architecture, Interfaculty and Science with less than 5%.

# Chapter 4: Overview of Progression/Non-Completion

## 1999 Entrants

The status of the 1999 entry cohort at the end of the 2000/2001 academic year is shown in Table 3. In summary, of the 3512 full-time students who were admitted in 1999; 93.6% attempted 1st year examinations in 2000; 80.4% were eligible to proceed to 2nd year in the following academic year. This varied by faculty from Arts (72.2%) to Veterinary Medicine (93.6%). An overall non-completion rate of 17.5% was recorded – this includes those who entered 2nd year or repeated 1st year and subsequently withdrew. Only four faculties recorded a non-completion rate greater than 10%: Arts (23.7%); Science (21.5%); Agriculture (18.7%); Engineering & Architecture (12.9%). However all Faculties and all courses within faculties had at least one non-completer.

Of the students who did not continue with their course, 226 left during first year without taking examinations. Most of these officially withdrew before 1st February; students appear to be aware that 1st February is a critical date both in terms of 'free fees' entitlements for the future and 'good standing' regulations. However, 59 students (9.6% of non-completers) did not present for examinations and had not officially withdrawn. These are presumed to have left some time during 1st year. 192 students (31.2% of non-completers) left having failed examinations without repeating the year. A small number of students (34) returned to UCD the following year to register for a First Year programme in a different Faculty and 4 students registered in 2nd year of a different faculty.

## 2000 Entrants

The overall picture of the position of 2000 entrants in 2001/02 is similar (Table 4). Of the 3719 full-time students admitted in 2000, 91.3% presented for their 1st year examinations. Approximately 79% of students were eligible to proceed to 2nd year in 2001/02. Faculty variation showed Science with the lowest percentage of students eligible to progress (70.5%) and Interfaculty highest (95.9%). An overall non-completion rate of 16.9% was recorded – this includes those who withdrew having registered for 2nd year or repeat 1st year.

Although non-completers were recorded in all Faculties, some courses had 100% retention; in general, these were the smaller denominated entry courses with high entry levels in terms of points. The same four faculties recorded non-completion

rates over 10%. However the order had changed to Science (25.4%); Agriculture (22.5%); Arts (21.5%); Engineering and Architecture (10.2%).

With regard to time of leaving there was a marked contrast with 1999. In 2000, the majority of non-completers (323 students) left during first year without taking examinations. The number withdrawing before 1$^{st}$ February increased from 138 (22.4% of non-completers) in 1999/2000 to 218 (34.7% of non-completers) in 2000/2001. 157 students left having failed examinations without repeating the year. Comparing with 1999, more students (54) returned to UCD the following year to register for a First Year programme in a different Faculty; none registered for 2$^{nd}$ year in a different faculty.

## 2001 Entrants

In 2001, 3,701 full-time students were admitted and 91.8% of these presented for their 1$^{st}$ year examinations. 79.7% of students were eligible to proceed to 2$^{nd}$ year in 2002/03 (Table 5). Faculty variation again showed Science with the lowest percentage (67.5%) and Interfaculty highest (94.9%). An overall non-completion rate of 13.3% was recorded – including those who withdrew during 2$^{nd}$ year or repeat 1$^{st}$ year up to February 2003. As with 2001, some courses had 100% retention; again these were similar types of courses. Only three faculties recorded non-completion rates over 10%. They were Science (20.4%); Arts (17.6%); Agriculture (14.4%).

Of the small percentage of the 2001 entry cohort who are not continuing with their course, 304 left during first year without taking examinations; 131 students left having failed examinations without repeating the year[17]; 49 students returned to UCD in 2002 to register for a First Year programme in a different Faculty; 1 student registered for 2$^{nd}$ year in a different faculty.

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[17] It is possible that some of these may still present for examinations but it is unlikely that they would do so in significant numbers.

| 1999 Entrants | | Agriculture | Arts | Commerce | Eng & Arch | Interfaculty | Law | Medicine | Science | Vet Med | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Registered First Years | | 203 | 1569 | 442 | 309 | 138 | 122 | 190 | 461 | 78 | 3512 |
| Eligible to proceed to 2nd year | N | 166 | 1133 | 414 | 278 | 129 | 112 | 169 | 349 | 73 | 2823 |
| of which: | % | 81.8% | 72.2% | 93.7% | 90.0% | 93.5% | 91.8% | 88.9% | 75.7% | 93.6% | 80.4% |
| Continuing | | 163 | 1078 | 409 | 276 | 127 | 110 | 164 | 333 | 73 | 2733 |
| Subsequently withdrew* | | 1 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 12 |
| not registered.* | | 0 | 19 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 9 | 0 | 37 |
| Leave of Absence/deferred year. | | 2 | 28 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 0 | 41 |
| Registered for First Year of same programme. | | | | | | | | | | | |
|   Repeat (Failed or withdrew during First Year) | | 2 | 118 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 3 | 7 | 16 | 3 | 156 |
|   Exam Only | | 12 | 41 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 32 | 0 | 101 |
|   Pass Repeat (e.g. Psychology in Arts) | | 0 | 15 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 15 |
| Eligible to register for First Year of same programme, but not registered.* | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Absent from 1st Year Exams* (Assumed left without official withdrawal) | | 4 | 37 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 13 | 1 | 61 |
| Fail* | | 9 | 101 | 9 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 21 | 0 | 152 |
| Registered for First Year of a different UCD programme. | | | | | | | | | | | |
| In a different Faculty* | | 3 | 9 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 12 | 1 | 34 |
| In the same Faculty | | 0 | 7 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 8 |
| Registered for Second Year of a different programme within UCD. | | | | | | | | | | | |
| In a different Faculty* | | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| In the same Faculty | | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 4 |
| Formally withdrew during First Year, not reg'd for a UCD Prog.* | | 7 | 101 | 9 | 13 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 13 | 0 | 149 |
| Not eligible for further registration* | | 0 | 7 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 9 |
| Total Non-Completers (including withdrew subsequently) (* = Non Completer categories) | N | 38 | 372 | 30 | 40 | 10 | 9 | 16 | 99 | 2 | 616 |
| | % | 18.7% | 23.7% | 6.8% | 12.9% | 7.2% | 7.4% | 8.4% | 21.5% | 2.6% | 17.5% |

**Table 3:** *Status of 1999 entry cohort in Session 2000/2001*

| 2000 Entrants | | Agriculture | Arts | Commerce | Eng & Arch | Interfaculty | Law | Medicine | Science | Vet Med | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Registered First Years | | 218 | 1598 | 450 | 295 | 145 | 147 | 234 | 552 | 80 | 3719 |
| Eligible to proceed to 2nd year | N | 158 | 1156 | 414 | 263 | 139 | 134 | 215 | 389 | 75 | 2943 |
| of which: | % | 72.5% | 72.3% | 92.0% | 89.2% | 95.9% | 91.2% | 91.9% | 70.5% | 93.8% | 79.1% |
| Continuing | | 155 | 1098 | 412 | 260 | 137 | 130 | 212 | 373 | 74 | 2851 |
| Subsequently withdrew* | | 1 | 11 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 15 |
| not registered.* | | 0 | 16 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 7 | 0 | 26 |
| Leave of Absence/deferred year. | | 155 | 1097 | 412 | 260 | 137 | 130 | 212 | 373 | 74 | 2850 |
| Registered for First Year of same programme. | | | | | | | | | | | |
|   Repeat (Failed or withdrew during First Year) | | 9 | 105 | 7 | 10 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 31 | 4 | 170 |
|   Exam Only | | 13 | 51 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 28 | 0 | 105 |
|   Pass Repeat (e.g. Psychology in Arts) | | 0 | 24 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 24 |
| Eligible to register for First Year of same programme, but not registered.* | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Absent from 1st Year Exams* (Assumed left without official withdrawal) | | 5 | 47 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 62 |
| Fail* | | 18 | 53 | 11 | 6 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 34 | 0 | 128 |
| Registered for First Year of a different UCD programme. | | | | | | | | | | | |
| In a different Faculty* | | 1 | 17 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 21 | 0 | 54 |
| In the same Faculty | | 0 | 13 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 14 |
| Registered for Second Year of a different programme within UCD. | | | | | | | | | | | |
| In a different Faculty* | | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| In the same Faculty | | 0 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 11 |
| Formally withdrew during First Year, not reg'd for a UCD Prog.* | | 2 | 22 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 7 | 1 | 40 |
| Not eligible for further registration* | | 0 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 9 |
| Total Non-Completers (including withdrew subsequently) (* = Non Completer categories) | N | 49 | 344 | 29 | 30 | 7 | 12 | 17 | 140 | 1 | 629 |
| | % | 22.5% | 21.5% | 6.4% | 10.2% | 4.8% | 8.2% | 7.3% | 25.4% | 1.3% | 16.9% |

*Table 4:    Status of 2000 entry cohort in Session 2001/2002*

| 2001 Entrants | | Agriculture | Arts | Commerce | Eng & Arch | Interfaculty | Law | Medicine | Science | Vet Med | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Registered First Years | | 174 | 1672 | 437 | 299 | 197 | 117 | 232 | 489 | 84 | 3701 |
| Eligible to proceed to 2nd year | N | 137 | 1214 | 407 | 269 | 187 | 109 | 218 | 330 | 79 | 2950 |
| of which: | % | 78.7% | 72.6% | 93.1% | 90.0% | 94.9% | 93.2% | 94.0% | 67.5% | 94.0% | 79.7% |
| Continuing | | 132 | 1172 | 401 | 258 | 187 | 108 | 214 | 306 | 75 | 2853 |
| Subsequently withdrew* | | 2 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 0 | 15 |
| not registered.* | | 1 | 13 | 1 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 6 | 2 | 31 |
| Leave of Absence/deferred year. | | 1 | 14 | 4 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 11 | 2 | 35 |
| Registered for First Year of same programme. | | | | | | | | | | | |
|   Repeat (Failed or withdrew during First Year) | | 16 | 157 | 15 | 8 | 2 | 1 | 6 | 70 | 4 | 279 |
|   Pass Repeat (e.g. Psychology in Arts) | | 0 | 22 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 22 |
| Eligible to register for First Year of same programme, but not registered.* | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Absent from 1st Year Exams* (Assumed left without official withdrawal) | | 4 | 41 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 0 | 56 |
| Fail* | | 9 | 73 | 2 | 8 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 36 | 1 | 131 |
| Registered for First Year of a different UCD programme. | | | | | | | | | | | |
| In a different Faculty* | | 0 | 18 | 5 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 11 | 0 | 49 |
| In the same Faculty | | 0 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| Registered for Second Year of a different programme within UCD. | | | | | | | | | | | |
| In a different Faculty* | | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| In the same Faculty | | 0 | 10 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 15 |
| Formally withdrew during First Year, not reg'd for a UCD Prog.* | | 8 | 138 | 8 | 6 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 30 | 0 | 201 |
| Not eligible for further registration* | | 0 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 9 |
| Total Non-Completers (including withdrew subsequently) (* = Non Completer categories) | N | 25 | 294 | 17 | 27 | 8 | 7 | 12 | 100 | 3 | 493 |
| | % | 14.4% | 17.6% | 3.9% | 9.0% | 4.1% | 6.0% | 5.2% | 20.4% | 3.6% | 13.3% |

*Table 5:    Status of 2001 entry cohort in Session 2002/2003*

# Comparison with previous study

The non-completion rates for the three years of the study can be compared with the 1992 figure of 14.43% published in a HEA report (Morgan, 2001). This report quotes a non-completion rate for UCD in 1985 of 19.7%, indicating a significant improvement in retention rates between 1985 and 1992. However it also shows worsening of the situation since 1992.
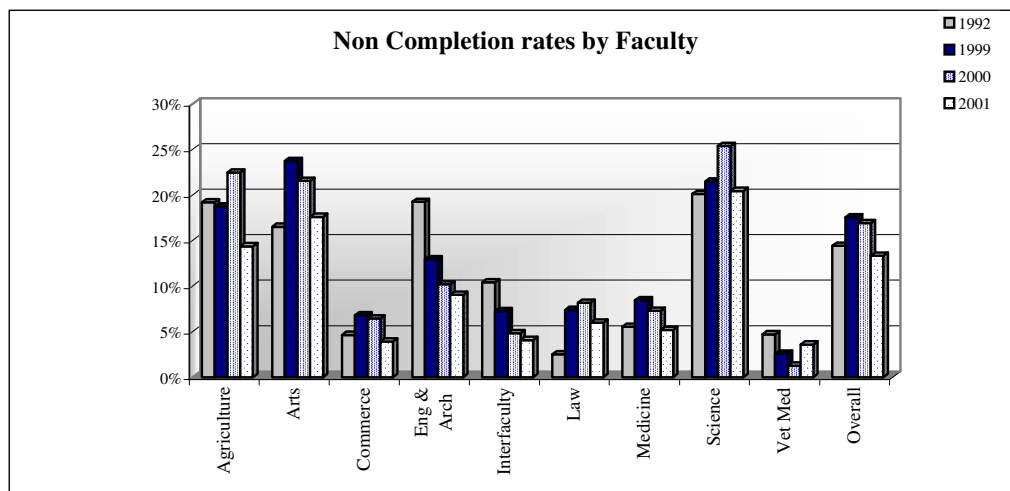


*Figure 11:  Non Completion Rates by Faculty*

Those who entered in 2001 and, to a lesser extent, 2000 have passed fewer of the hurdles at which students withdraw. However, the first five categories, chronologically, of time of withdrawal are complete for 2001 and these can be compared.
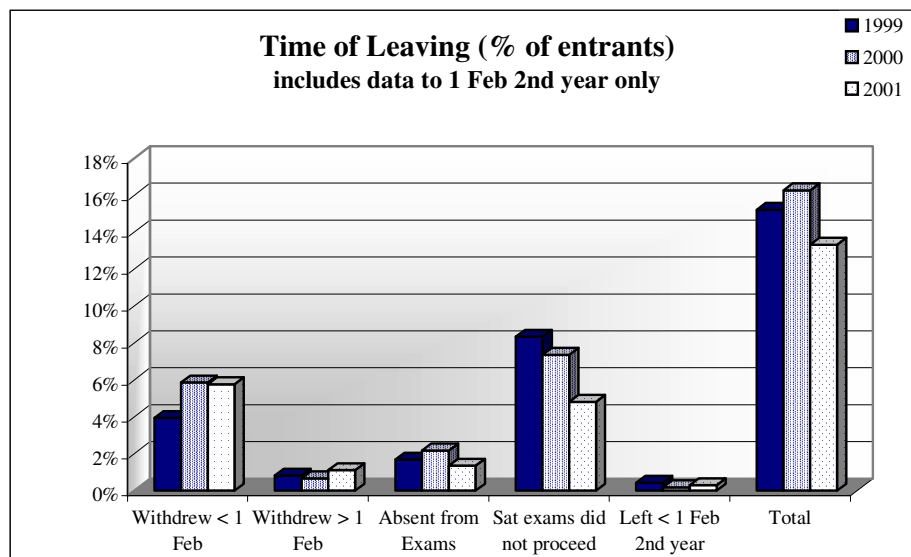


*Figure 12:  Percent who left during or immediately following first year*

There is a significant difference between the three years in terms of percentages who left within each time period. It appears that the trend is for students to make the decision to leave earlier with more doing so before 1<sup>st</sup> February in 2000 and 2001. It would also seem reasonable to conclude that the overall trend for 2001 is for the non-completion rate to be slightly lower than previous years.

When time of leaving is analysed further a distinct pattern for withdrawals during 1<sup>st</sup> year is noted (including 2002 figures):
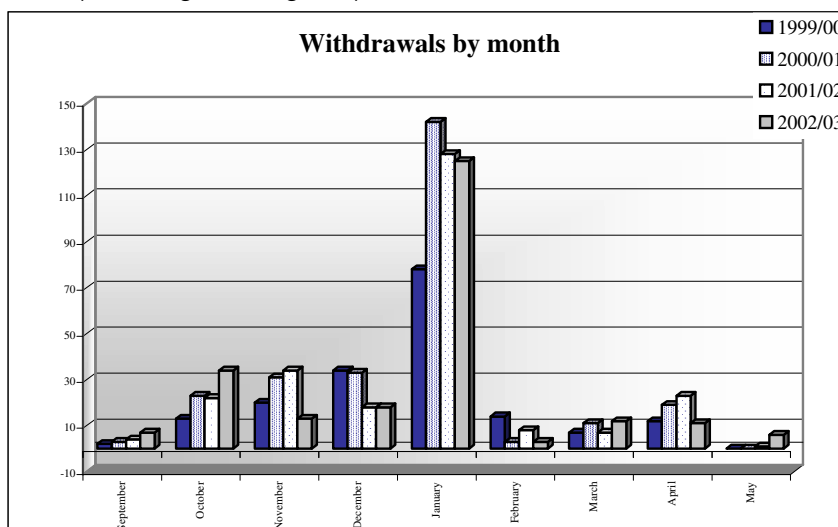


*Figure 13:  Withdrawals during 1<sup>st</sup> year by month*

It is clear from this that January is the peak time for students officially withdrawing during 1<sup>st</sup> year. Some of these students may subsequently have returned to UCD.

# Chapter 5: Comparative Analysis – Continuing Students/Non-Completers

## General Demography

### *Sex*

In all three years the non-completion rate was higher for female students than for male. This was to the level of statistical significance in 1999 and 2001 only.

| | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Male non-completion rate** | 16.1% | 16.5% | 10.4% |
| **Female non-completion rate** | 18.6% | 17.2% | 15.7% |
| **Overall non-completion rate** | 17.5% | 16.9% | 13.3% |

*Table 6:    Male/Female non-completion rates*

In 1999 and 2001 there was some variation to this pattern by Faculty. However in 2001 the only faculty for which the male non-completion rate was higher than the female was Interfaculty. This outcome is similar to that found in the Institutes of Technology (Healy, 1999). Although, in contrast to UCD, males outnumbered females in the total population in the Institutes of Technology, females were over-represented among those who Failed/Left.

### *Permanent Residence*

| Non-Completion rates | Dublin City & County | Commuting distance[18] from Dublin | Rest of Leinster | Munster | Connaught | Ulster (Including N. Ireland) | EU | Non EU | Overall N/C Rate |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1999** | 15.8% | 17.3% | **21.6%** | 18.5% | **19.1%** | 16.9% | **41.0%** | 9.4% | 17.5% |
| **2000** | 14.9% | **22.7%** | 15.7% | 16.4% | **21.4%** | **18.4%** | **23.5%** | 7.4% | 16.9% |
| **2001** | **13.6%** | 12.4% | **14.1%** | 11.1% | 13.0% | **17.0%** | 8.0% | 10.8% | 13.3% |

*Table 7:    Non-Completion rate by permanent residence*

Table 7 shows the differences in non-completion rates between 'areas of permanent residence'. The differences were statistically significant in 1999 and 2000 only. With the exception of 2001, students from the Dublin area had non-completion rates below the overall. EU students consistently had non-completion rates greater than the overall – in some instances twice as high.

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[18] Taken as counties Kildare, Louth, Meath and Wicklow

The variation in pattern between the years is illustrated in Figure 14:
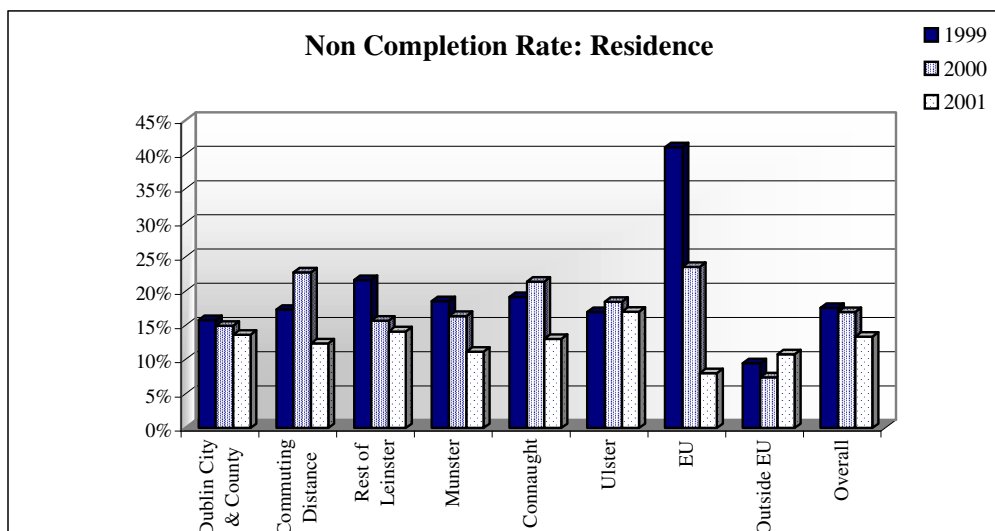


**Figure 14: Non Completion rate by Area of Permanent Residence**

It appears that students whose 'home' is in Dublin or outside the EU (Non-EU) are most likely to be continuing students.

## Accommodation while at college

Unsurprisingly, given the percentage of students from Dublin and adjacent counties, the majority still live at home during their first year in college. In 1999 65.0% were residing at home; the figure for 2000 was 67.7%.

| Non-Completion Rates | Home | Flat | Campus | Lodgings | Relatives | Hostel | Unknown | Overall |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1999** | 13.9% | **18.0%** | 17.4% | **34.8%** | **33.9%** | **40.0%** | **82.5%** | 17.5% |
| **2000** | 15.4% | 16.6% | **24.7%** | **26.3%** | **25.9%** | **33.3%** | **18.4%** | 16.9% |
| **2001** | **14.1%** | 13.6% | 11.8% | 10.2% | 5.6% | 2.6% | **100.0%** | 13.3% |

**Table 8: Non-completion rate by term accommodation type**

There were statistically significant differences when comparing continuing students and non-completers by accommodation type. In 1999 and 2000, students living at home have lower non-completion rates than the overall. The rate for those living at home in 2001 tallies with the peculiarity in the rate for those from the Dublin area. The only group with consistently higher non-completion rates are those for whom accommodation type is 'unknown'.

## Age

No statistically significant difference between continuing students and non-completers in terms of age was found in any year.

### Parents' Employment Status and Income Range

As already mentioned, in both years the most represented socio-economic group was Group 3: Higher Professional. This group was significantly less represented in the non-completer cohort.

| Socio-Economic Group | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1.   Farmers | 15.0% | 15.2% | 12.8% |
| 2.   Other Agricultural | 15.2% | **18.4%** | 5.6% |
| 3.   Higher Professional | 15.0% | 13.3% | 10.1% |
| 4.   Lower Professional | **22.0%** | 11.8% | **18.6%** |
| 5.   Employers/Managers | 16.3% | 18.1% | 11.2% |
| 6.   Salaried Employees | **19.0%** | **17.7%** | **14.1%** |
| 7.   Intermed/non-manual | 13.6% | 6.3% | 6.9% |
| 8.   Other Non-manual | **23.1%** | **27.6%** | **20.0%** |
| 9.   Skilled Manual | **22.9%** | **26.2%** | **20.9%** |
| 10. Semi-Skilled Manual | **17.9%** | **26.1%** | **21.1%** |
| 11. Unskilled Manual | **29.4%** | **29.0%** | **13.6%** |
| 12. Unknown | **21.9%** | **20.6%** | **19.0%** |
| **Overall** | 17.5% | 16.9% | 13.3% |

*Table 9:     Non-completion Rates by Socio-Economic Group*

Although the pattern varied slightly between the years, it is apparent that in all years two groups had non-completion rates below the overall rate for the year (table 9): Farmers and Higher Professional. The non-completion rate for Salaried Employees, Non-Manual, Skilled, Semi Skilled and Unskilled Manual and 'Unknown' was greater than the overall non-completion rate in all years.

'Unknown' categories are indicative of students who did not complete registration fully. The observation that 'Unknown' had high non-completion rates for both Accommodation Type and Socio-Economic Group led us to enquire whether the non-completion rate for these students was above the overall non-completion rate for each year. It was found that the non-completion rate for students who failed to provide one or the other of these items on their registration form was above the overall non-completion rates in all years. A very small number of students (21) did not complete either piece of information; the non-completion rate for this group was 52.38%.

# Educational Attainment/Academic background

## *Leaving Certificate points and grades*

The average Leaving Certificate points score obtained by students entering UCD was over 450 in all three years – 450 points equates to six B3s at honours level. The average and median points for non-completers were consistently lower than the overall.

|  |  | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | Combined |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Mean** | **Continuing** | 460.10 | 459.18 | 456.16 | 458.43 |
|  | **Non-Completer** | 432.72 | 421.26 | 419.60 | 424.86 |
|  | **Overall** | 455.37 | 452.76 | 451.33 | 453.13 |
| **Median** | **Continuing** | 450.00 | 450.00 | 450.00 | 450.00 |
|  | **Non-Completer** | 420.00 | 412.50 | 410.00 | 415.00 |
|  | **Overall** | 445.00 | 445.00 | 445.00 | 445.00 |

*Table 10:   Mean & Median points: Continuing Students vs Non-Completers*

Figure 15 shows the percentages of continuing students and non-completers at each points level. It can be seen that a higher percentage of non-completers than continuing students come from the lower point ranges.
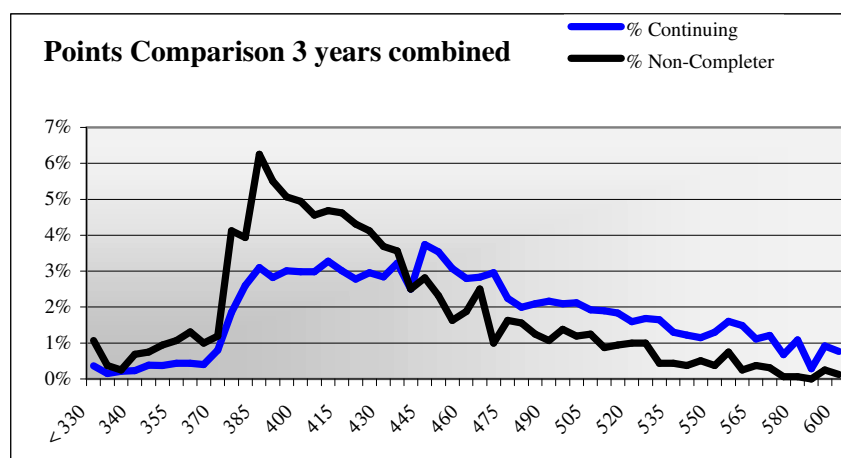


*Figure 15:  Percentages at each points level : completers vs non-completers*

The trend for higher non-completion rates at the lower points levels applied in each year.
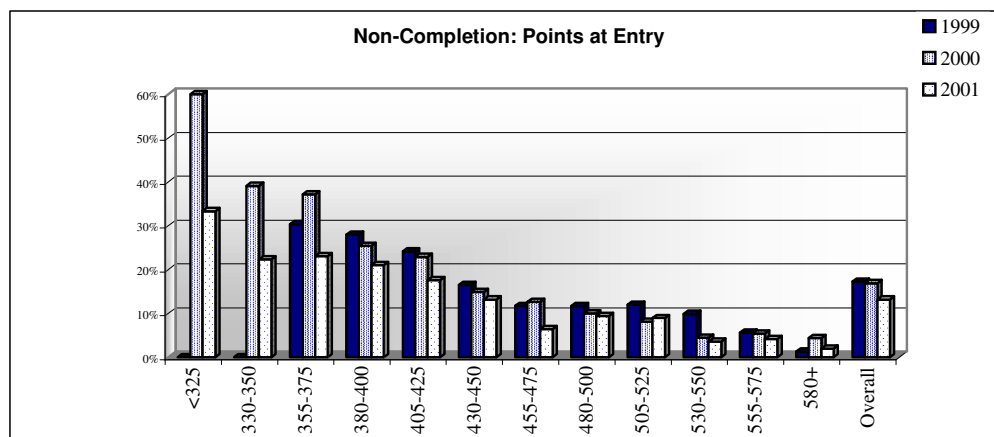
**Figure 16: Non-completion rates by points**

The average Leaving Certificate points obtained by students in each faculty was investigated. Overall it was observed that continuing students have higher average points than non-completers with a few exceptions in each year (in bold on Table 11). In the faculties where exceptions occur the numbers of non-completers are very small.

| **1999** | | Agriculture | Arts, Phil & Sociology | Commerce | Engineering & Arch | Inter-Faculty | Law | Medicine | Science | Veterinary Med | Overall |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Continuing students** | Mean | 411.4 | 429.0 | 485.9 | 491.4 | 485.6 | 524.4 | 559.6 | 449.1 | 562.9 | 460.1 |
| | Median | 405.0 | 425.0 | 470.0 | 495.0 | 480.0 | 515.0 | 560.0 | 442.5 | 560.0 | 450.0 |
| **Non-completers** | Mean | 394.7 | 422.2 | 467.7 | 483.0 | **500.7** | 517.8 | 532.1 | 428.9 | **565.0** | 432.7 |
| | Median | 387.5 | 415.0 | 460.0 | 485.0 | **495.0** | 515.0 | 532.0 | 420.0 | **565.0** | 420.0 |
| **Overall** | Mean | 480.3 | 427.4 | 484.8 | 490.3 | 486.4 | 523.9 | 557.3 | 445.0 | 562.9 | 455.4 |
| | Median | 405.0 | 420.0 | 470.0 | 490.0 | 480.0 | 515.0 | 560.0 | 435.0 | 560.0 | 445.0 |
| **No. Non-Completers[19]** | | 36 | 349 | 26 | 38 | 7 | 9 | 12 | 90 | 1 | 568 |
| **2000** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Continuing students** | Mean | 403.9 | 427.0 | 486.3 | 493.6 | 494.7 | 522.3 | 555.8 | 439.7 | 563.0 | 459.2 |
| | Median | 400.0 | 420.0 | 475.0 | 495.0 | 485.0 | 520.0 | 560.0 | 435.0 | 560.0 | 450.0 |
| **Non-completers** | Mean | 380.4 | 411.6 | 457.0 | 473.8 | 476.7 | **534.2** | 536.7 | 416.4 | - | 421.3 |
| | Median | 370.0 | 405.0 | 450.0 | 462.5 | 477.5 | **522.5** | 540.0 | 405.0 | - | 412.5 |
| **Overall** | Mean | 398.5 | 423.7 | 484.7 | 491.6 | 493.9 | 523.4 | 554.2 | 433.7 | 563.0 | 452.7 |
| | Median | 390.0 | 415.0 | 470.0 | 495.0 | 485.0 | 520.0 | 555.0 | 430.0 | 560.0 | 445.0 |
| **No. Non-Completers[19]** | | 49 | 314 | 23 | 28 | 6 | 12 | 15 | 137 | 0 | 584 |
| **2001** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Continuing students** | Mean | 388.1 | 425.4 | 491.5 | 497.6 | 485.3 | 533.9 | 552.8 | 425.1 | 565.7 | 456.2 |
| | Median | 380 | 420 | 485 | 495 | 490 | 530 | 555 | 415 | 560 | 450 |
| **Non-completers** | Mean | 367.6 | 416.8 | **497.7** | 478.1 | **491.3** | 530.0 | 535.5 | 393.0 | - | 419.6 |
| | Median | 360.0 | 410.0 | **500.0** | 480.0 | **485.0** | 520.0 | 545.0 | 390.0 | - | 410 |
| **Overall** | Mean | 385.3 | 423.9 | 491.7 | 496.0 | 485.5 | 533.8 | 551.9 | 418.5 | 565.7 | 451.3 |
| | Median | 375.0 | 415.0 | 485.0 | 495.0 | 490.0 | 530.0 | 555.0 | 410.0 | 560.0 | 445.0 |
| **No. Non-Completers[19]** | | 23 | 273 | 13 | 24 | 8 | 3 | 10 | 95 | 0 | 449 |

**Table 11: Faculty Mean & Median Entry points; continuing students/non-completers**

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[19] Of those who presented Leaving Certificate only

As the largest faculties, the points relative to non-completion were analysed separately for the Faculties of Arts and Science.
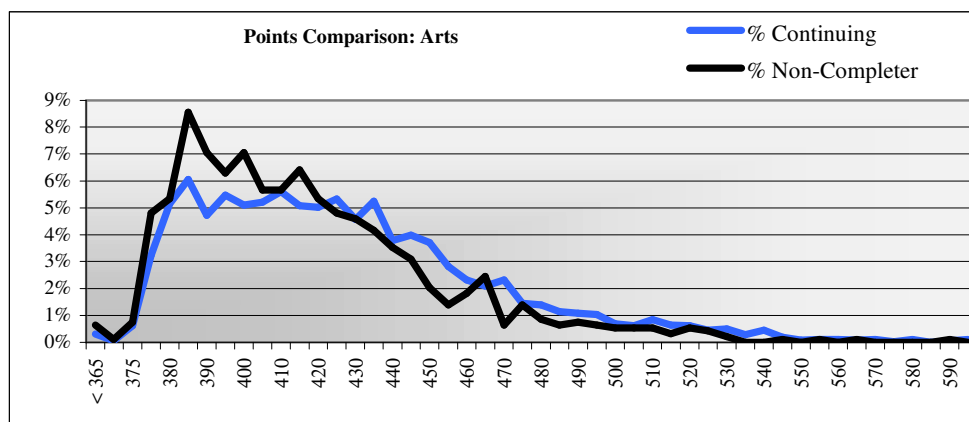


*Figure 17: Points Analysis: Arts*

Although the graph is less dramatic than that for overall entrants, a significant relationship was found between points and non-completion within the Faculties of Arts, Philosophy & Sociology.
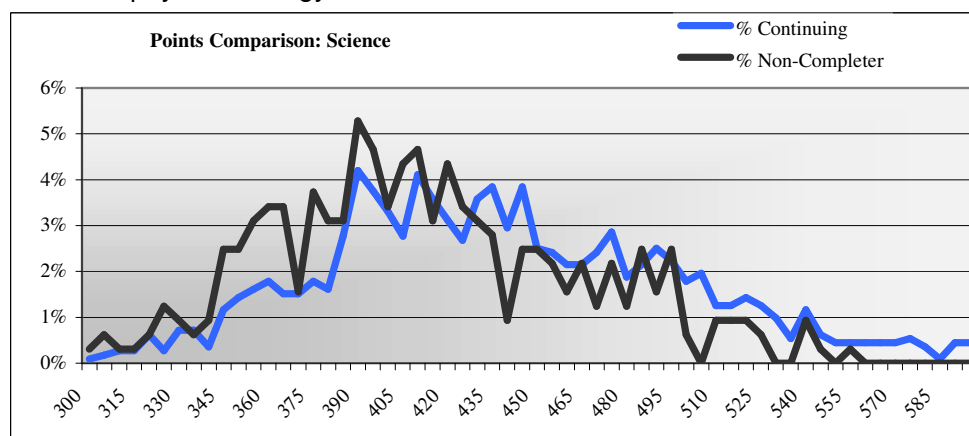


*Figure 18: Points Analysis: Science*

Again there was a significant relationship between points and non-completion within the Faculty of Science.

## English and Mathematics Results

Leaving Certificate English and Mathematics grades for the continuing students and non-completers were compared and are illustrated in Figures 19 and 20. A relatively small percentage of the intake had presented Ordinary Level English in the Leaving Certificate. However, the non-completion rate was lower than the overall for these students. At Honours Level the non-completion rate was below the average at the HA and HB level only.

**Non-Completion rates: English grades**

■ 1999
▨ 2000
☐ 2001
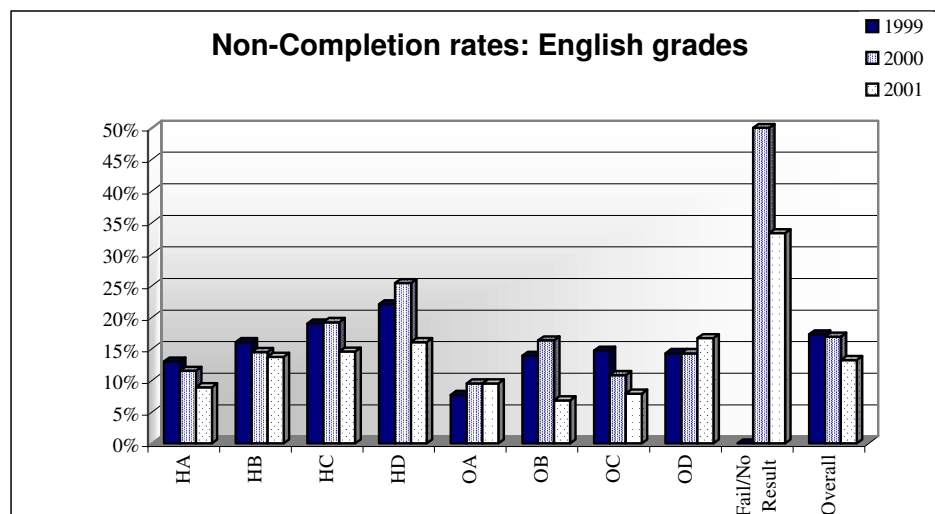
*Figure 19: Non Completion Rates by English Results*

The pattern for Mathematics results was quite different. More than half the intake had presented Mathematics at Ordinary Level. The non-completion rate was greater than the overall for all ordinary level grades and for Grade D at Honours Level.

**Non-Completion rates: Maths grades**

■ 1999
▨ 2000
☐ 2001
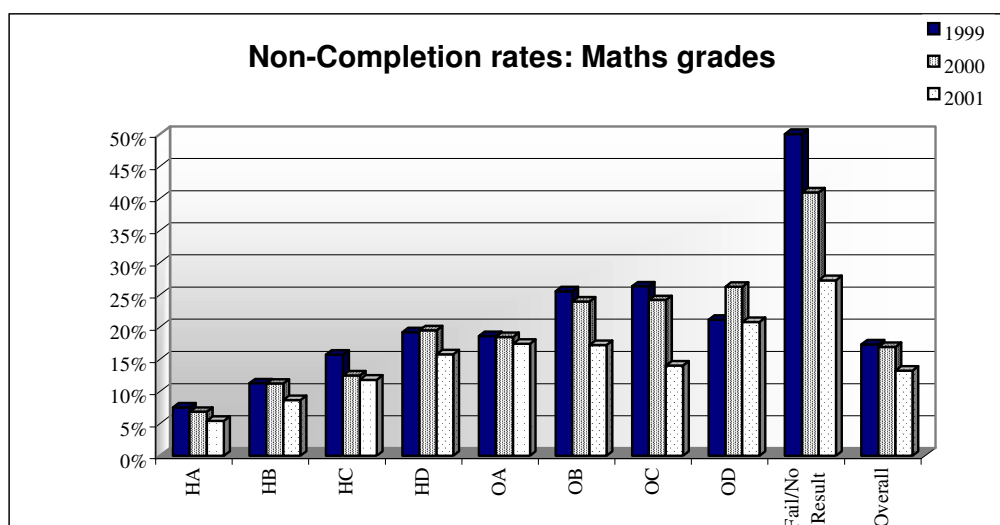
*Figure 20: Non Completion Rates by Mathematics Results*

## *Relative importance of academic criteria for Leaving Certificate Entrants*

Clearly many of the factors analysed interplay with one another. In order to determine the relative significance of Leaving Certificate points, Mathematics and English results across a maximum sample, a linear regression model was built for all those who entered on the basis of points. All of these factors had statistical significance when taken across the three-year population. It was established that the

points score was the most significant of these factors, followed by Mathematics results. English results were the least significant.

The 'Study of First Year Students in Three Institutes of Technology'[20] drew the same conclusion:

> *"Low grades in Leaving Certificate Mathematics are more strongly associated with non-completion in first year than low grades in English."*

Since the points score at entry is the most significant factor overall, non-completion rates by faculty for those with 450 points (approximately average points) or greater, were compared across the three years.

**Non-completion rate: points score 450+**
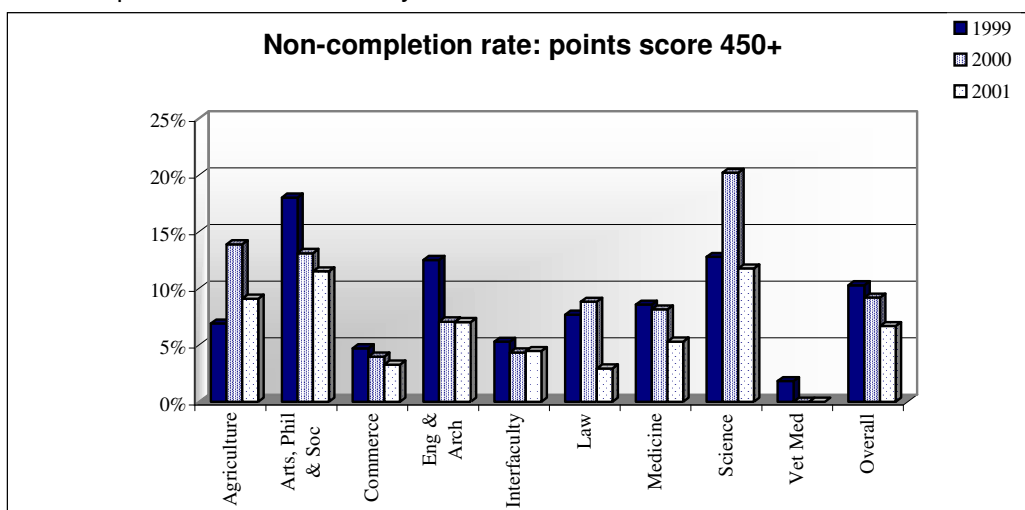
*Figure 21: Faculty Non-Completion rates; points ≥ 450*

The overall non-completion rate for students in the above average points range (450+), was 10.3% in 1999; 9.26% in 2000; 7.0% in 2001. Although the non-completion rates for Arts and Science were lower within these points ranges, the rates for these faculties remained higher than the overall. For example, in 1999 Arts and Commerce both had 361 entrants with points scores of 450 or better. In Arts, 65 of these left; in Commerce, just 17 left. A statistically significant relationship still exists between faculty and non-completion even at this points level.

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[20] Healy, Carpenter and Lynch 1999

To further illustrate the relationship between points and non-completion, the non-completion rate above and below the Leaving Certificate points median of each Faculty were compared. As 50% of the intake are either side of the Faculty median, the expected result, if points were not a factor, would be equal non-completion rates above and below the median. Figure 22 uses 2001 as an example of this.

**Non-completion rates above and below  Faculty median 2001**
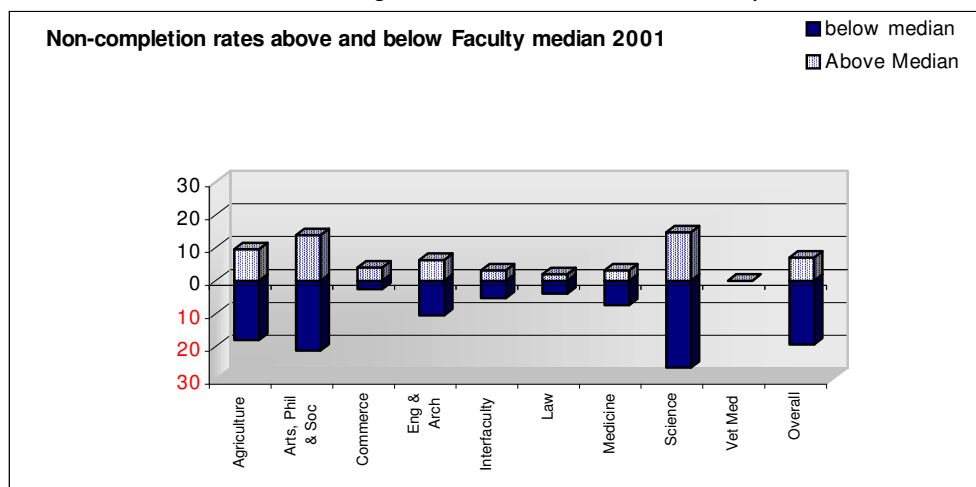


*Figure 22:  Non-completion rates above and below points median by Faculty 2001*

In all Faculties, except Commerce, the rate of non-completion is greater below the points median than above. The Faculties of Arts and Science have non-completion rates both above and below the points median that are greater than the overall non-completion rate for the year.

# Other criteria at time of admission

## Repeat Leaving Certificate

In 1999, 13.5% of the continuing students repeated their Leaving Certificate, compared to 17.2% of the non-completers. Only 0.6% of the continuing students have repeated their Leaving Certificate more than once, which compares with 0.2% of non-completers.

Of the entrants in 2000, 12.5% of the continuing students had repeated their Leaving Certificate. This compares to 11.9% of non-completers, 0.6% of continuing students and 0.4% of non-completers who have repeated their Leaving Certificate two or more times. No significant correlation between Leaving Certificate repeats and non-completion was found in either year. The figures are unavailable for 2001.

## Previous Third Level Attendance

No statistically significant relationship was detected between previous third level attendance and non-completion in any year.

### *Course Preferences at time of application*

As previously stated, course preference at time of CAO application is not held on the student record system, so it is not possible to compare continuing students to non-completers in the same way as other categories of information. However, the course preference ranking of final acceptances (nett acceptances) was compared to those of non-completers. Although non-completion rates were higher among those who accepted a lower preference choice, the difference was not statistically significant.
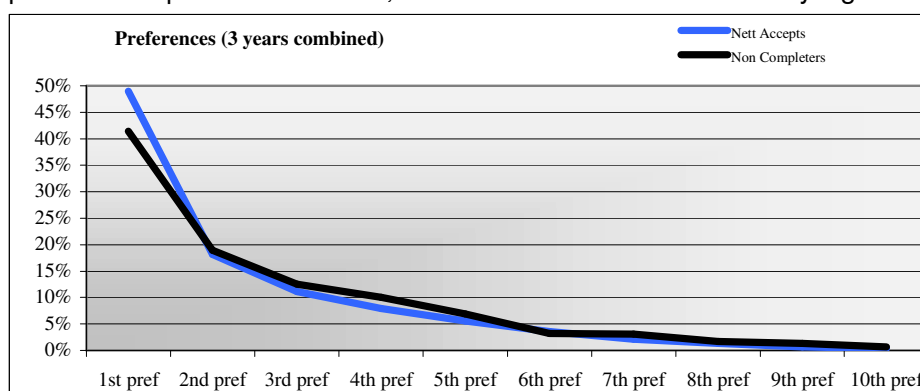


**Figure 23: Preferences of nett acceptances compared with non-completers**

Overall, 49% of the total intake accepted their first preference choice. Only 41.4% of non-completers were in their first preference.

### *Comparative Analysis – non academic criteria*

A linear regression model was built for all entrants (via points and special category) to compare the relative significance of the various factors identified (excluding academic). When all years were combined, 'Accommodation Type' was found to be the strongest predictor, followed by 'Socio-Economic group' and 'Faculty'.

## Subject choices

First year students are required to choose subject options within Arts and Science. First Year Arts students select three of the thirty subjects on offer. However their range of choice is restricted by time-tabling limitations. The overall non-completion rates for omnibus Arts Entry (DN012) in 1999, 2000 and 2001 were 22.9%, 18.7% and 18.7% respectively.

Obviously subjects with very small numbers of students attending will have high non-completion rates, even if only one student decides to leave. For example, in 1999 Hebrew had a non-completion rate of 100.0% but Latin had a non-completion rate of 60.0% and Welsh had a non-completion rate of 37.5%, even though only 3 students left each subject. Therefore it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the relationship between individual subjects and likelihood of non-completion.

Thirteen subjects had above average non-completion rates in each of the three years. This included some of the larger subjects such as English, Psychology and Sociology.

Sociology is often chosen as a second subject by students whose aim is to study single subject Honours Psychology. Both subjects have non-completion rates between 20.0% and 30.0% in each year. The high non-completion rate for both these subjects may be partly due to students failing to get into Second Year Psychology at the end of First Year Arts (omnibus entry). This is further demonstrated by comments received from survey respondents where this reason is given for the decision to leave UCD.

The 2000/2001 academic year was the first year of denominated or direct entry into certain subject areas within the Faculty of Arts. It was noted that a number of students transferred out of the denominated branch they had entered. Figure 24 outlines the level of non-completion in each of the direct entry courses, and shows that in some cases non-completion rates are well above the overall faculty non-completion rate.
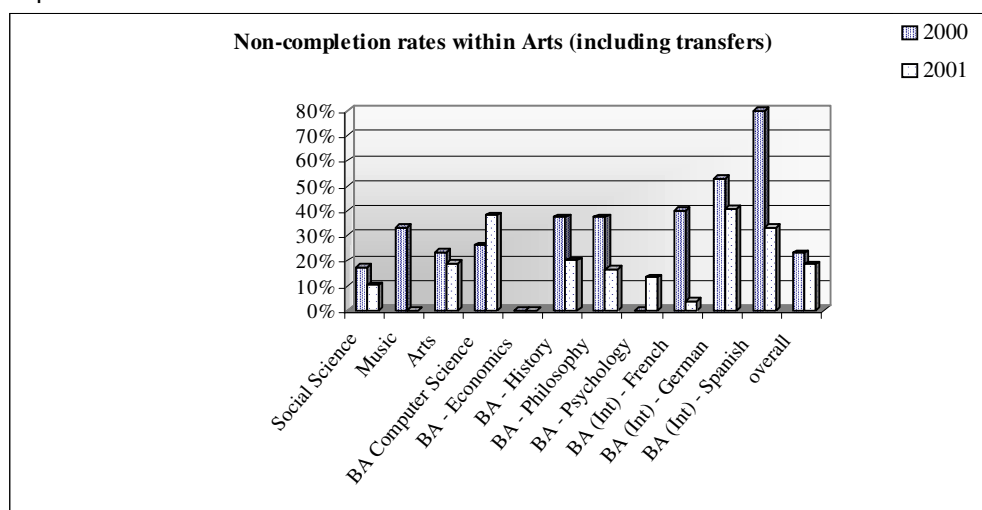


**Figure 24: Non-completion rates by programme: Arts**
**(including transfers within the Faculty).**

Similarly in the Faculty of Science, students entering First Science omnibus (DN008) take four subjects selected from 15 different combinations, known as groups. Each group contains Mathematics. When comparing the non-completion rates by groups there was a statistically significant relationship between the groups and non-completion in 1999 only.

## Conclusions

Therefore it is safe to conclude that the full-time student is more likely to be a non-completer if he/she entered with below average points and weaker grades, especially in Mathematics.

The non-completer is most likely to be living away from home.

Those from socio-economic groups '1 Farmers', '2 Other Agricultural workers' '3 Higher Professional' and '7 Intermediate and Non-Manual' are more likely to be continuing.

It was also noted that with regard to some categories of information, students who did not provide data at the time of registration were more likely not to be continuing students.

Non-completers are most likely to be registered in the Faculties of Agriculture, Arts and Science; however the Faculties of Engineering & Architecture and Medicine have non-completion rates above the overall rate for the year in relation to their points levels.

# Chapter 6: Survey response: Full Time Students

## Introduction

All undergraduate students who entered in sessions 1999/2000, 2000/2001 and 2001/2002 who were no longer continuing in the faculty they entered were surveyed. For the full-time programmes, responses were received as follows:

| | No. Surveyed | Response | Response Rate |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1999** | 567 | 158 | 27.9% |
| **2000** | 509 | 144 | 28.2% |
| **2001** | 520[21] | 117 | 22.5% |
| **Total** | 1596 | 419 | 26.3% |

*Table 12:    Survey responses*

Although the percentage of females who responded was slightly greater than the percentage in the population of non-completers, this was not to the level of statistical significance.
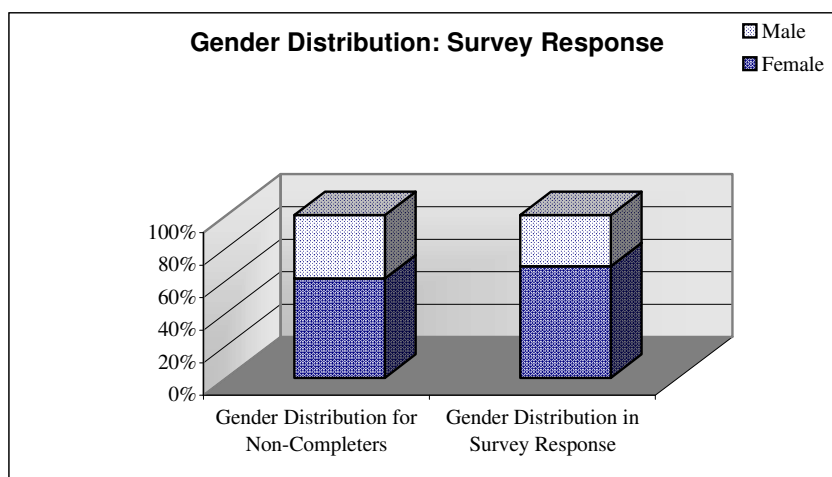


*Figure 25:  Gender Distribution: non-completers and survey response*

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[21] Some of these altered their registration status as a result of the survey

The age profile of the survey response was not significantly different from that of the non-completer population, although those in the 18 age bracket were slightly over-represented.

| Age Brackets | ⊆17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21-25 | 26-30 | 30+ | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Non-completers** | 249 | 928 | 400 | 84 | 46 | 15 | 16 | 1738 |
| | 14.3% | 53.4% | 23.0% | 4.8% | 2.6% | 0.9% | 0.9% | 100.0% |
| **Survey response** | 56 | 242 | 99 | 9 | 7 | 5 | 1 | 419 |
| | 13.4% | 57.8% | 23.6% | 2.1% | 1.7% | 1.2% | 0.2% | 100.0% |

*Table 13:    Age distribution of non-completers and of survey responses for the intake*

The survey response was also checked against faculty. There was no statistically significant difference in the representation by faculty in the survey response and in the non-completer population.
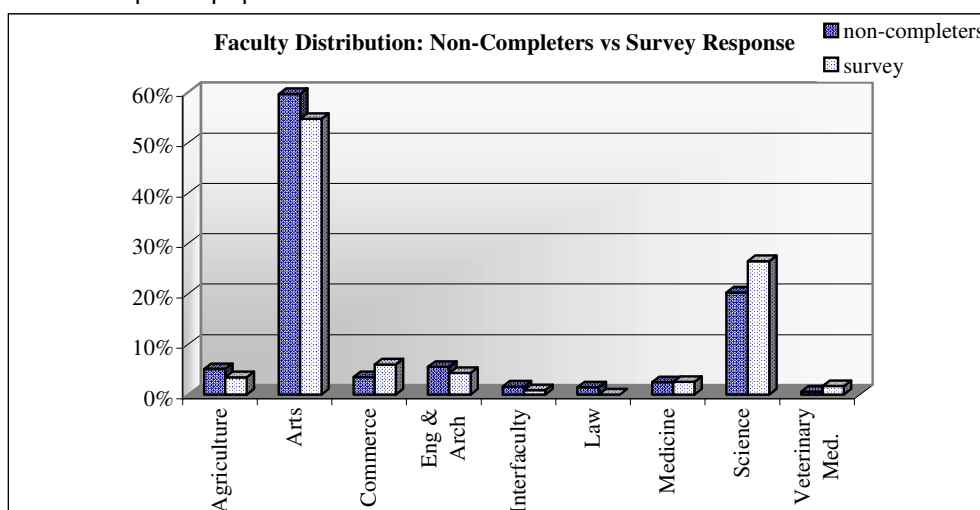


*Figure 26:  Faculty Distribution: Non-completers relative to survey response*

In addition, the population of non-completers was compared to the survey response in terms of socio-economic group. Again no significant difference was found. It is therefore concluded that the responses were a valid and representative sample in these respects.

# Reasons for Leaving Course

## Why students choose to leave

In the first section of the questionnaire (see Appendix), students were asked why they chose to leave their course, the reasons behind their decision and how they felt having finally left. Students were asked to answer mostly five-point (Likert) scaled questions combined with a number of open-ended questions where more detailed information was gathered. The survey responses received from non-completers from the three years have been combined for this chapter.

Students were asked to rate factors which may have contributed towards their decision to leave. The rating scale was from 1 (not relevant) to 5 (highly relevant); 21 different factors were suggested. The top ranking responses are shown below.
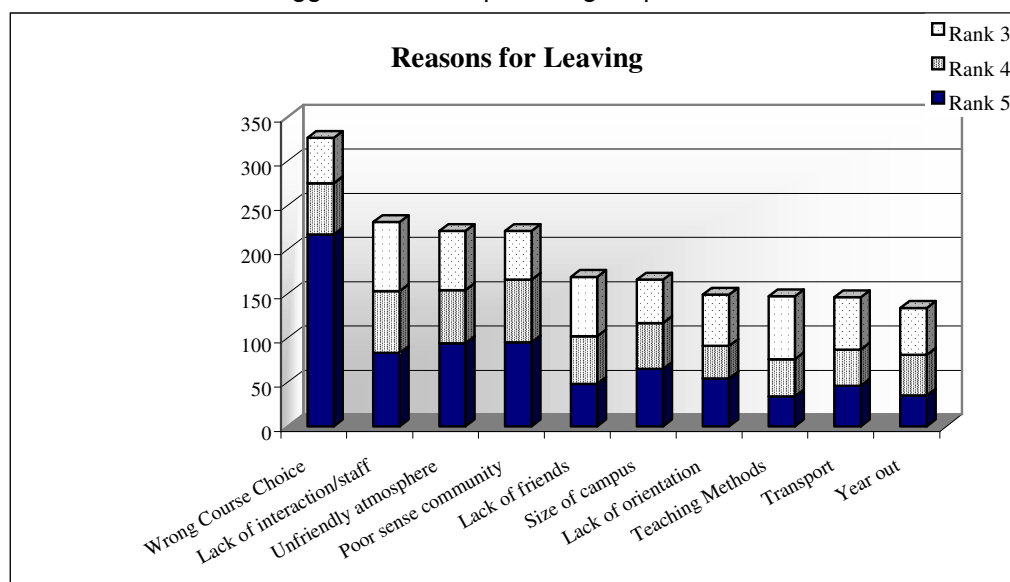


*Figure 27:  Top ranking reasons for leaving*

The individual factors and the frequency with which they were rated are listed in Table 14. Wrong Choice of Course was found to be the key factor. This was followed by Lack of interaction with staff; Unfriendly atmosphere; Poor sense of Community and Lack of Friends.

Wrong Course Choice was also the main reason in the study of Universities in the North East of England[22]. Interestingly the second and third factors in that study were 'having exams/assessment' and 'financial concerns'. In our survey 'Failed Exams' ranked 15 and 'Financial Difficulties' ranked 13.

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[22] Dodgson and Bolam

| Factor | 5 (highly relevant) | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 (not relevant) | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Wrong Course Choice** | 51.79% | 13.84% | 12.17% | 5.49% | 13.13% | 404 |
| **To repeat LC for 1st preference** | 0.95% | 0.72% | 1.19% | 1.43% | 87.83% | 386 |
| **Course too difficult** | 3.58% | 6.68% | 14.56% | 19.57% | 49.40% | 393 |
| **Course not challenging** | 2.63% | 5.25% | 8.35% | 10.26% | 66.83% | 391 |
| **Failed exams** | 7.40% | 4.30% | 6.68% | 4.06% | 69.69% | 386 |
| **Problem adjusting to Teaching Methods** | 8.11% | 10.02% | 16.95% | 10.74% | 49.16% | 398 |
| **Accommodation difficulties** | 6.21% | 4.77% | 7.64% | 4.77% | 70.88% | 395 |
| **Financial difficulties** | 6.21% | 6.68% | 7.40% | 9.31% | 64.92% | 396 |
| **Location of UCD/Transport problems** | 10.98% | 9.79% | 14.08% | 9.31% | 50.60% | 397 |
| **Job opportunity** | 1.91% | 3.34% | 1.43% | 3.34% | 83.77% | 393 |
| **Personal or Family Problems** | 12.17% | 5.73% | 5.97% | 4.30% | 66.59% | 397 |
| **Needed a Year out** | 8.35% | 10.98% | 12.65% | 7.40% | 55.37% | 397 |
| **Did not know anyone/Difficulty making friends** | 11.46% | 12.89% | 15.99% | 11.22% | 44.39% | 402 |
| **Size of campus** | 15.51% | 12.41% | 11.69% | 12.65% | 44.63% | 406 |
| **Lack of orientation** | 12.89% | 8.83% | 13.84% | 12.41% | 46.54% | 396 |
| **Poor standard of facilities** | 3.58% | 2.15% | 9.55% | 14.56% | 64.20% | 394 |
| **Lack of Access to Social Activities** | 3.58% | 5.49% | 7.88% | 11.93% | 64.20% | 390 |
| **Lack of interaction with Faculty/Staff** | 19.81% | 16.71% | 18.62% | 10.26% | 30.55% | 402 |
| **Unfriendly Environment/Atmosphere** | 22.43% | 14.32% | 15.99% | 10.50% | 33.65% | 406 |
| **Poor Sense of Community** | 22.67% | 16.95% | 13.13% | 9.31% | 33.65% | 401 |
| **Other** | 12.89% | 3.34% | 0.48% | 0.48% | 0.72% | 75 |

***Table 14:   Factors contributing to decision to leave
ranked from 1 (not relevant) to 5 (highly relevant)***

The 'other' category included many items which could be regarded as belonging in one of the main categories. Some which had not been covered in the list were

*'Limited Second Year Places'*

*'Too much time between lectures.'*

In 2001, the increase in fees was listed and also

*'Unjust high 'external' repeat fees'*

Students were also asked, as a separate question, to indicate which factor was the most significant. Only two factors were not mentioned: 'job opportunity' and 'lack of access to social activities'. 'Wrong course choice' was listed as the most significant factor by 43% of respondents. The next most frequently occurring reason was 'personal/family reasons' with 7.8%. Other reasons listed here included homesickness, receiving another offer and not being allowed to transfer.

## Wrong Course Choice

The most common reason cited for leaving college prior to completion of the first year, was the wrong choice of course, with almost 52% of survey respondents citing it as the major reason they left college.

> "At the time of completing the CAO form, I was 16 years old. In retrospect, I believe I was not capable of making a decision that would affect the rest of my life."

For some students their experience in UCD opened them up to other options not previously considered:

> "Got involved in Dramsoc doing set design and realised at the end of the year it was the only thing I liked about UCD – getting to create things – so I followed that instead of repeating."

The majority of the survey respondents (70.8%) had their choice of course ranked 1 (43.2%), 2 (18.1%) or 3 (9.5%) on their CAO form. There was no statistically significant relationship between where the course ranked on the CAO form and ranking of 'Wrong Course Choice' as a reason for leaving.

> "I felt that within the first month I had made the wrong choice of course. I found that neither the subjects, lectures or career prospects for someone doing Social Science, interested me at all."

There was no correlation between 'Wrong Course Choice' and time of leaving or between 'Wrong Course Choice' and Faculty.

## Unfriendliness/Poor sense of Community

A poor sense of community, the unfriendly atmosphere and the lack of interaction with the faculties and the staff, were the next most common reasons cited as contributing towards non-completion. The size and the scale of the campus, family problems and a lack or orientation were also frequently mentioned.

> "As a 1$^{st}$ Year student I felt totally isolated. Although facilities do exist to support students you have to be assertive enough to seek them out, which many 1$^{st}$ Year students are not."

> "Due to large classes, it was very difficult to make friends, the people I met on first day remain friends now, but others would introduce themselves and it may be 2/3 weeks before you would see them again. No interaction in class, very impersonal."

> "UCD is just too big. I found it impossible to make friends with people whom I didn't know already."

Of the factors relating to this area, only 'Poor Sense of Community' correlated with Faculty. Figure 28 compares the percentages giving each ranking to this factor within faculties. This shows that students studying in Interfaculty programmes or in the Faculties of Arts are more likely to rank this factor high, whereas it is not very significant in Medicine or Law.

**Ranking of 'Poor Sence of Community' by Faculty (% of respondents)**
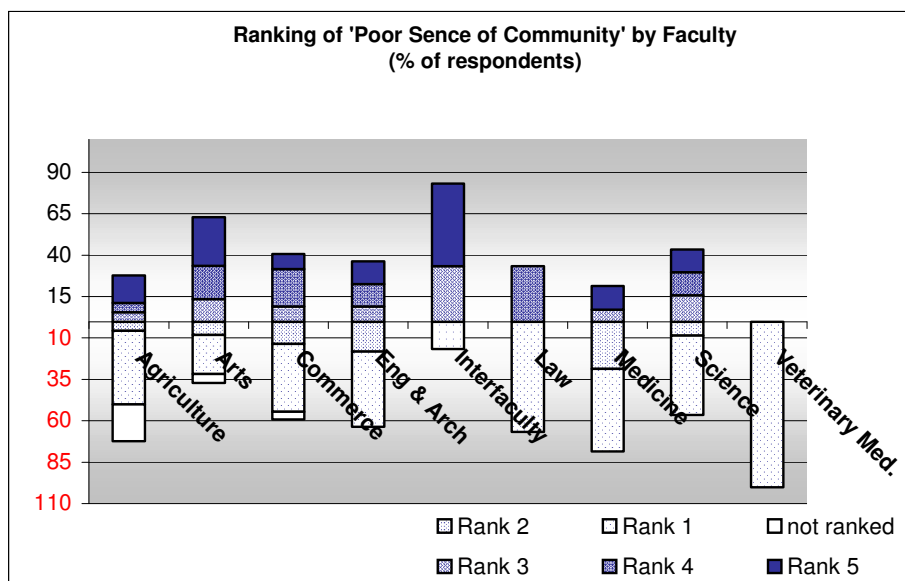


*Figure 28: Percentage rankings of 'Poor Sense of Community' within Faculties*

## Other factors

Less commonly cited reasons include difficulty in making friends, the location of UCD and transport problems, accommodation difficulties and financial difficulties.

> *"It took too long to get there every day. I was spending 3 hours a day on a bus for sometimes only one lecture."*

> *"I feel that if I had had campus accommodation I would have settled in sooner, being in with others in a similar position to me, so making more friends. It would have been easier to then make use of University facilities and to get more involved with clubs and societies."*

> *"I couldn't afford to stay in Dublin on a grant of £50 a week. I had to live in Kildare with an Aunt and had to travel a lot."*

Not surprisingly accommodation difficulties as a factor correlated with home location as can be seen from Figure 29.

**Ranking of 'Accommodation Difficulties' by Home Location
(% of respondents)**
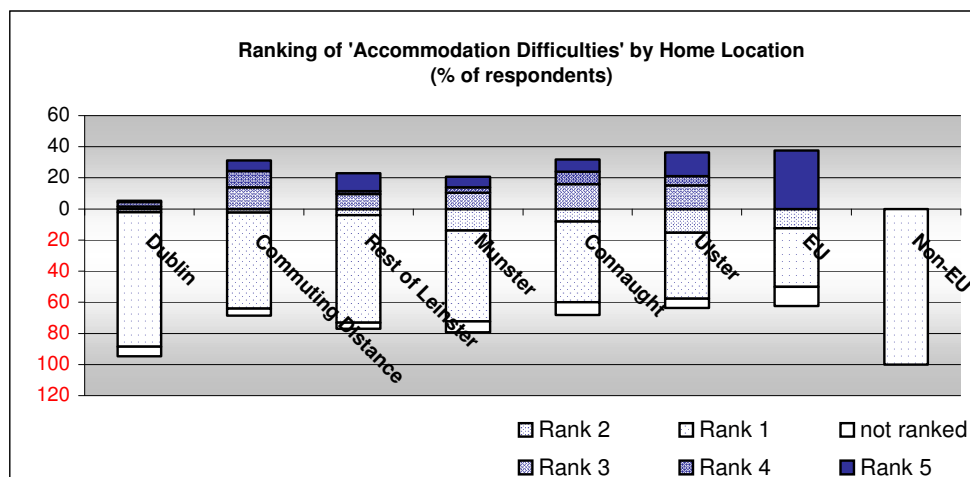
*Figure 29:  Accommodation difficulties by home location.*

The relatively low ranking of 'Financial difficulties' as a factor was somewhat unexpected. There was a significant relationship between this and socio-economic group.

**Ranking of Financial Difficulties' by Socio Economic Group
(% of respondents)**
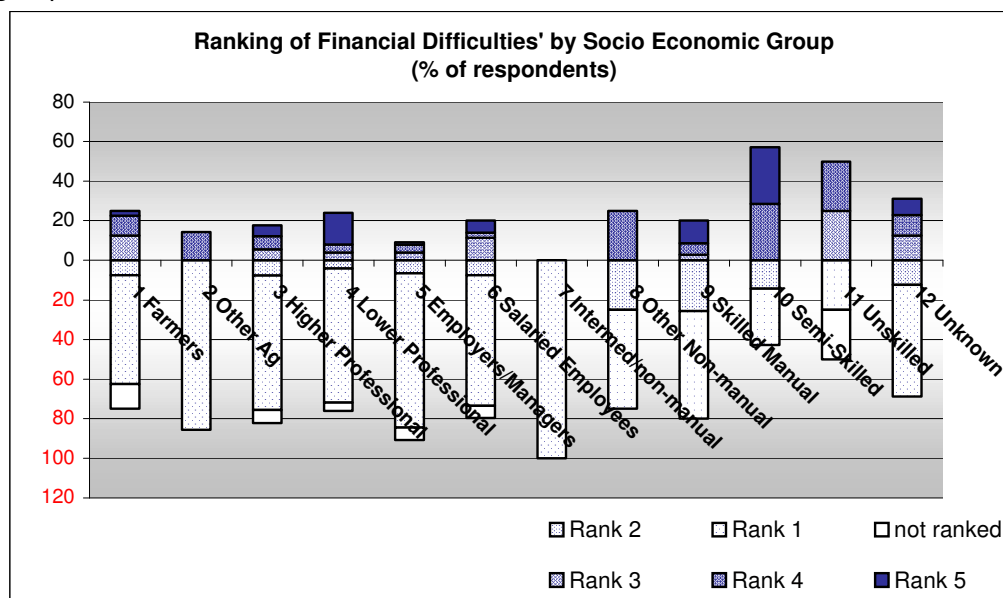
*Figure 30:  Relationship between 'Financial Difficulties' and Socio-Economic Group*

However, there was no correlation between 'Financial Difficulties' as a reason for leaving and number of hours worked. When questioned about part-time work, 54.7% of the survey respondents had some type of part-time employment and this seems to be consistent with the percentage of students throughout the college who work part-time (Bates, 2002).

According to the Euro Student report[23] the employment rate for Irish students is 58%. The average time in employment of working students in Ireland is 11 hours or less per week according to the report – this is the highest in the EU, jointly with Austria, Finland, Italy and the Netherlands. Of the respondents who were working, 13.8% worked at or below this number of hours. The average number of hours worked by respondents was 16.39 per week.

Overall 55% of respondents were working. A small number of these were working more than 24 hours a week (Table 15); 1 student was working 50 hours a week. Essentially, some students were holding down a full-time job and trying to study for a full-time degree at the same time, therefore lecture attendance suffers due to work commitments.

| Working Hours per Week | No. of Students | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Not working | 187 | 44.6% |
| 8 hours or less | 33 | 7.9% |
| 9-16 hours | 98 | 23.4% |
| 17-24 | 74 | 17.75 |
| 25-32 | 21 | 5.0% |
| > 32 hours per week | 6 | 1.4% |

*Table 15:    Working hours per week*

Although there was no significant relationship between working hours and Faculty, the faculties of Law and Arts had the highest percentage of students working (66.6% and 63.8% respectively). Even within laboratory based courses surprisingly high percentages were working relatively long hours. For example, in Science 52% of respondents were working; 21 of them were working over 17 hours per week.

## What could UCD have done?

Students were asked whether there was anything UCD could have done to support them at the time when they were having doubts about their course. The majority of those who responded to this question said 'no' (55.2%). Some of these qualified their response by saying that had received advice and help but still decided to leave.

> *"No, I talked with my Dean and Tutors, there was nothing they could do to make me change my mind."*

Others cited their decision to leave as a personal choice.

> *"It was a personal decision and UCD staff were there if I needed them. One Tutor in particular went out of his way to make sure I thought I was making the right decision."*

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[23] *'Euro Student, Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe 2000'*, (2002). Synopsis of Indicators and National Profiles for Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy and The Netherlands.

However the remaining 44.8% of respondents to this question felt that the university could have provided more support and help while they were making their decision to leave. The most common problem seemed to be that students were unaware where to seek help, and some students didn't even know help was available.

> *"I was unaware of my career advisor or of any support, this is not to say it did not exist but rather I did not know anything about it."*

> *"It was hard to find someone to talk to. When told who to contact, he/she was not available."*

> *"My course is small, 80 students, yet my smallest lecture had 300 (Information Studies). The college did not provide enough occasions for me to interact with students in my course."*

Students felt that a better tutoring and mentoring system would have helped them. More one to one meetings with tutors and a mentoring system with students from 2nd, 3rd and 4th Years are suggested as possible solutions.

> *"Should have one on one meetings with a counsellor or teacher during the first term to see how people were settling in. Teachers should have been more helpful to students especially during practicals and made an attempt to even pretend to get to know them."*

> *"I never had any advice from anyone or interaction with people who could have guided me. At my present university I have a personal tutor who I meet once a month, I find this very helpful."*

> *"From my knowledge of other universities, their tutoring system seems to be one on one, tutors are available and contactable at all times regardless of the matter. I feel UCD does not supply such a service. I think had it been available, things might have been different."*

> *"I think every 1st year student should be mentored by a 2nd or 3rd year student for the entire year, as is the case in other universities. In that way you'd have someone to help you settle in, introduce you to other students, show you the ropes so to speak."*

Students also cited bad experiences with staff members and the lack of interaction between staff and students. More and better communication between students and staff members might encourage students to stay:

> *"The staff appeared so indifferent to and dismissive of first years, I doubt they cared."*

> *"I approached some of my subject lecturers and informed them I was having difficulties, they were very unhelpful and told me that there was nothing I could do."*

*"I was in a class of only 13 yet when I didn't return, the faculty made no effort to contact me."*

Many students experienced problems with their courses and felt that more specific information on course content and extra tuition may have helped. Also, having the option of transferring to different courses may have changed some student's minds about leaving and have given them the option of continuing in UCD.

*"The support was inadequate to help me make my decision, but perhaps there could have been an individual grind service more readily available to help with aspects of the course I struggled with."*

*"Changing to another course in UCD may have helped me."*

*"Let me change to do Arts instead of having to leave the country to return home. Special circumstances should have been made for overseas students having difficulties."*

Finally, students felt that it was difficult to adjust and become accustomed to college life, the atmosphere was impersonal and the college far too big. They suggested better orientation/induction on an ongoing basis might have helped them. The need for more accommodation on campus was also a major issue.

*"It's too big unfriendly and I always felt like a number and nothing else."*

*"I think an introduction day would have helped where students and staff would become more familiar with each other."*

*"I think a lot more help need to be offered to first year students in the first few months at college. Especially as regards knowing their way around campus and getting used to the coursework."*

*"There should have been an orientation week for 1<sup>st</sup> years only."*

*"I should have been given a place on campus which I deserved having arrived at UCD knowing no one, but made the effort to represent the college in football and rowing – I spent most of my time on campus."*

## *Reaction to Leaving*

Not surprisingly, in view of the numbers who ranked course choice as their main reason for leaving, 68.3% of survey respondents had not considered deferring their college course till the next academic year.

Students were asked how they felt having left their respective courses. They had the choice of ticking more than one option, and a total of 411 responses were recorded over the three cohorts. 60.4% of respondents said they felt relieved. Only 7.2% felt nothing in particular.

## *Advice on Leaving*

Students were asked who they spoke to before they made their final decision to leave college. The majority of students approach their parents and older siblings (91.4%) or their friends (89.0%) for advice. Administrative staff, Lecturers, Tutors, Counsellors and Students Advisors were the next most likely people to be approached, when considering leaving. The Students' Union Officer and the Chaplain were the least likely to be consulted.

It is interesting to note that the two most consulted groups of people are not only external to UCD but also have no background in counselling. This was also highlighted in the study of second year UCD students (Bates, 2002). This study found that 51.7% of students cited 'parents' as the most frequent source of help with personal problems. For academic problems, 29.6% of students would approach a parent. A Tutor/Demonstrator followed by a Lecturer/Professor were the most sought sources of advice for academic problems.
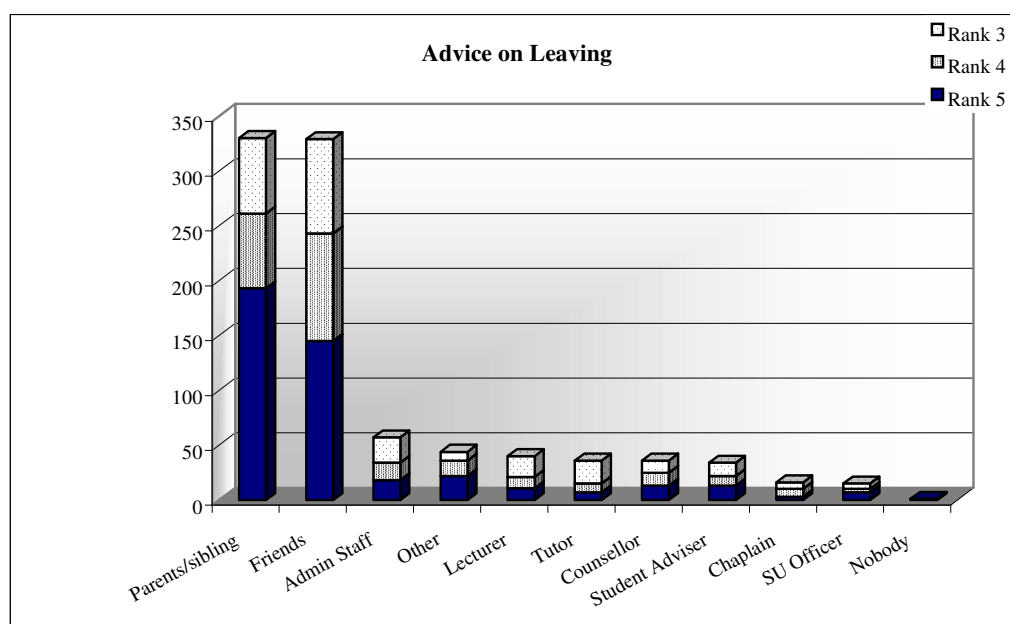


**Figure 31: Ranking of sources of advice prior to leaving college**

When assessing the helpfulness of the source of advice they sought, students ranked the helpfulness they received from family and friends higher than any advice or help they received from the sources within the college.

Some students who sought advice before leaving, left anyway but seemed to have a more positive feeling towards UCD:

> *"I went to the student advisor before I made my choice to leave. She was very helpful and supportive. I wanted to go there was nothing more the faculty could have done to make me want to stay."*

> *"I saw a Dean who was extremely kind and helpful but unfortunately the problem was too difficult to correct."*

> *"After deciding to leave, I did ring the Admin Office to find out what procedure I had to take and the guy who I spoke with was extremely helpful and concerned. This was much appreciated."*

## Career since leaving and Current Aspirations

When asked what they had been doing since leaving UCD, more than two-thirds (68%) had re-entered third level. Only 21% of the respondents were not involved in some form of study. (Figure 32).
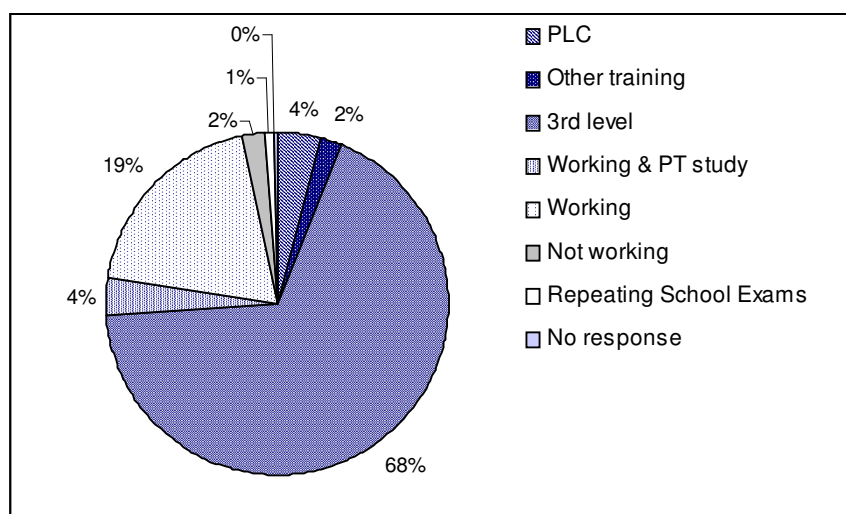


*Figure 32:  Occupation of students since leaving UCD*

Students who had not re-entered education were asked whether they would consider studying full or part-time in the future. Of the 89 respondents 85.4% said they would consider resuming their studies. It is estimated from this that less than 4% of the students who left UCD have no intention of undertaking further study.

Respondents were asked whether they would consider returning to UCD in the future. This question, while intended for those not currently in education, was answered by many students who had already returned to education. Of the 303 respondents, just under half (45.9%) said they would consider returning to UCD for future study.

# Factors Affecting Choice of Course and University

## *Decision Making Process*

### Course Choice

The second section of the questionnaire investigated why students selected their courses and why they choose to attend UCD in particular. Students were given 8 factors which influenced their course choice and asked to rank them in order of relevance from not relevant (1) to highly relevant (5). Most students picked a certain course because they liked the subject at school and ranked this factor highly relevant; undertaking a course which qualified a student for a particular field of work was also rated as highly relevant (Table 16). The reputation of a course is somewhat relevant to students when they are choosing their courses.

| Factor/Rank | 5 (highly relevant) | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 (not relevant) | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Liked subject @ School | 33.4% | 22.2% | 11.5% | 6.2% | 18.6% | 385 |
| Good Reputation of Course | 10.0% | 22.0% | 15.8% | 14.6% | 27.0% | 374 |
| Qualification | 18.9% | 11.5% | 15.5% | 11.7% | 32.7% | 378 |
| Previous points | 9.3% | 12.9% | 18.1% | 9.8% | 38.9% | 373 |
| Guidance Counsellor | 8.4% | 12.2% | 17.2% | 11.0% | 42.2% | 381 |
| 2nd Level Teacher | 6.0% | 14.3% | 14.8% | 12.2% | 41.8% | 373 |
| Parents/Older Siblings | 6.4% | 15.3% | 11.9% | 13.6% | 43.7% | 381 |
| Friends | 3.3% | 11.0% | 13.8% | 14.8% | 46.3% | 374 |
| Other | 15.8% | 4.5% | 0.2% | 0.0% | 1.0% | 90 |

*Table 16:    Factors which influenced course choice*

'Other' was also mentioned as an option. Most of these comments were of the nature of

> *'Only course I was offered.'*

However factors such as the previous points level and the influences of Guidance Counsellors, families, teachers and friends are all ranked as less influential than the other factors.

There was a significant correlation between ranking of 'wrong course choice' as a reason for leaving and 'Liked the subject at school' as reason for choosing the course. Almost half (49.3%) of those who ranked 'Liked the Subject at School' as a key reason for their course choice ranked 'wrong course choice' at level 5.
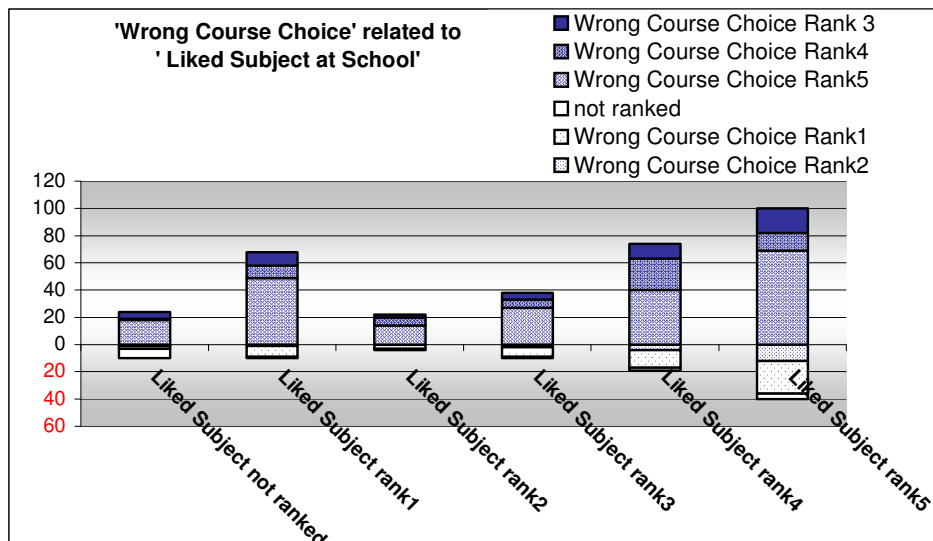
***Figure 33: Rating of 'Wrong Course Choice' versus 'Liked Subject at School'***

There was also a statistically significant negative relationship between 'Wrong Course Choice' and 'Course qualified me for the work I wanted to do' with 49% of those who indicated that the qualification of the course had no relevance to their original choice ranking 'Wrong Course Choice' 5
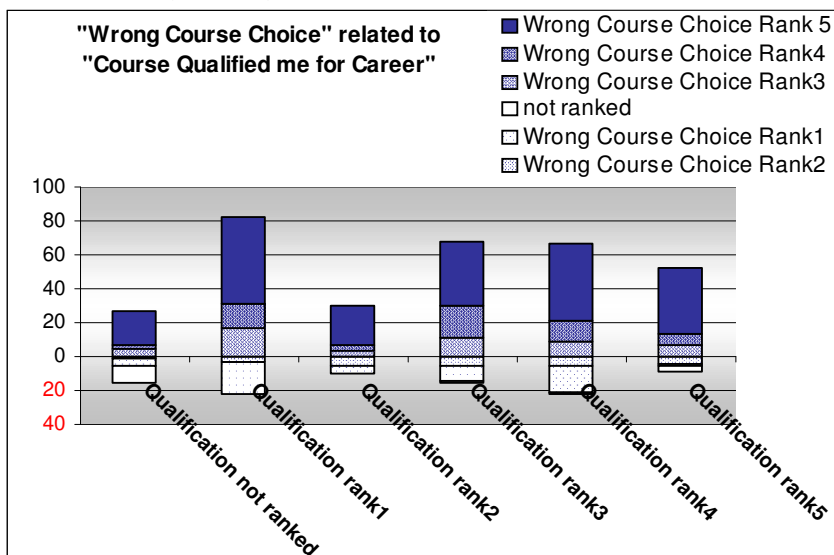


***Figure 34: Rating of 'Wrong Course Choice' versus 'Course qualified me for work I wanted to do'***

## Choice of University

To determine the factors contributing to a student's choice of UCD as their place of study, again a number of factors were listed and students were asked to rate them from not relevant (1) to highly relevant (5). The good general academic reputation, good facilities and the good social/sports life in UCD are rated as highly relevant regarding the choice as UCD as a place to study over other institutions.

These factors were followed by the influence of friends and families. 'Other' in this case, as with course choice, related to a UCD course being the only offer received. Table 17 shows the percentage ranking of all factors:

| Factor/Rank | 5 (highly relevant) | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 (not relevant) | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Academic Reputation | 31.0% | 28.6% | 15.8% | 5.0% | 10.0% | 379 |
| Good Facilities | 21.0% | 26.5% | 18.4% | 9.1% | 16.5% | 383 |
| Good Social/Sports Life | 7.4% | 21.2% | 19.8% | 9.5% | 24.8% | 347 |
| Friends | 9.5% | 12.9% | 16.7% | 11.5% | 39.9% | 379 |
| Parents/Older Siblings | 8.4% | 11.7% | 15.0% | 9.8% | 43.4% | 370 |
| Only Option | 15.0% | 6.9% | 9.3% | 9.1% | 49.4% | 376 |
| Close to Home | 8.4% | 9.3% | 10.7% | 6.7% | 55.6% | 380 |
| Guidance Counsellor | 3.8% | 10.3% | 11.9% | 10.5% | 50.8% | 366 |
| 2nd Level Teacher | 3.1% | 6.9% | 11.2% | 8.8% | 56.8% | 364 |
| Not close to home | 4.5% | 5.7% | 6.9% | 6.2% | 62.3% | 359 |
| Other | 8.1% | 1.7% | 0.5% | 0.0% | 0.2% | 44 |

*Table 17:   Factors which influenced choice of UCD*

## Other influences and Factors in the decision making process

Career guidance, Faculty Information Booklets and UCD Open Days are all sources of information available for prospective students, when they are considering their choice of University. Questions around these areas were asked to determine the level of preparedness for third level.

Students' perception of the career guidance available to them at 2nd Level was rated from low (1) to high (5). 36.1% of students rated the standard as low, with only 8.2% rating the standard as high. There was no statistically significant relationship between students' ranking of their career guidance with ranking of 'Wrong Course Choice' as a reason for leaving.

Of the survey respondents, 94.5% had read UCD literature as part of the decision making process. Most rated the literature average or above average for user-friendliness, clarity and quality of information. Despite this, students had some suggestions for improvements:

> "Course information should be made more basic, words such as physiology, kinesiology, embryology mean little to secondary school pupils."

> "Clearer information on what courses lead to is important. The content is clear, but frequently not the aim of the course."

> "More realistic view could be given to the potential UCD student. Course booklets which are made available to Leaving Cert students could be

*made clearer, particularly as regards exam workloads, negative marking,
and the length of clinical placements during holiday time."*

When asked about Open Days, 73.7% of survey respondents said they had attended a UCD Open Day before they started their course here, 20.5% of students said it had a significant influence on their decision to attend UCD and 30.5% said it had a slight influence on their decision. Only 4.5% of respondents said the Open Day was the main influence on them attending UCD and 15.0% said it had no influence at all. 2.9% of respondents said the Open Day actually had a negative influence on their decision to come to UCD. There was no correlation between Open Day attendance and ranking of 'Wrong Course Choice' as a reason for leaving.

All 2nd year students in UCD were surveyed by the Central Administrative Offices in Session 2001/02 as part of the Quality Assurance process. Responses were received from 590 students (16.83%). Comparing this response to that of the non-completion survey it was observed that a slightly greater percentage of the non-completers had attended Open Days.

The ranking of Open Days varied significantly between the two groups with a greater concentration of non-completers ranking it as 'slight influence'.

The Second Year students made some useful suggestions with regard to Open Days:

*"Sample lectures should be given on Open Days. The idea of having the
option to decide choices in arts by attending lectures to see if you will be
interested in the subject you choose or not is very important. A lot of
people choose subjects more wisely when they have been to a few
different ones." (Continuing Student)*

*"UCD should have current students at Open Days to discuss college
lifestyle with prospective students." (Continuing Student)*

Finally, the non-completers were asked if, following their experiences, there was anything they would do differently if choosing a 3rd Level course again. The vast majority of students said they would research possible courses much more and speak to current or past students and lecturers to obtain more information.

*"Obtain more career guidance. Research the teaching methods and the
entrance requirements for each year of the course and how this impacts
subject choice."*

*"I would try to be more informed about course content. I would like to
know about class sizes – which were huge in UCD – and about obligation*

*to attend lectures. I found there was no structure in place to ascertain which student attended lectures and those who didn't."*

*"More research, more information at school on the actual work undertaken."*

*"Talk to people who are currently attending UCD and doing my particular course if possible."*

*"Wouldn't go somewhere just for snob value. Also the size of the college was a major factor in choosing my next college."*

*"I would follow my heart and not my head. I would go for something that I was passionate and deeply interested in rather than something, which I was doing just because there would be a good job at the end of it."*

*"If I wasn't sure what I wanted to do I'd probably take a year out to do a diploma course just to try and decide what I wanted to do with my life. Plus I feel that students coming straight from secondary school are not ready for the change from being told what to do to actually having to do things for themselves. I feel that my year at UCD taught me what to do and what not to do in college life."*

## Course Interest and Commitment

The survey of non-completers included questions to determine whether the students had engaged with the course at any level.

### Welcome and Orientation

In response to whether they had attended 'Welcome and Orientation' events when starting UCD, 78.5% said they had. This compares favourably with the second year sample, only 66% of which had attended these events. There was a significant variation in attendance rates by year with the 2001 entrants being least likely to have attended.

Both non-completers and continuing students were critical of UCD's efforts in this respect:

*"There should be more orientation days to enable pupils to get to know each other. Communication also needs to be improved. I was unaware of any support services available. There could be a mentoring programme for new students so they could rely on older students to provide information and help them to settle in."*

*"Freshers week should include a guided tour and better orientation."*

*"Try to organise smaller groups for first couple of weeks so people can get to know each other. Big crowds can be off-putting." (Continuing Student)*

It is clear that, even though the majority of students had attended welcome and orientation events, these are not regarded as an effective introduction to UCD. Perhaps the size of these events is too large and too intimidating to be constructive and students find it difficult to get to know each other in such large groups. Also a lack of practical events (e.g. tours of the campus) was highlighted.

> *"Perhaps a 'tour guide' or orientation of UCD would be helpful, as the size of the campus is quite daunting and is, more than likely, a huge change for students" (Continuing Student)*

Only 5.3% of respondents to the non-completer survey were late entrants who would have missed orientation.

## Attendance at Lectures

When asked what percentage of lectures they had attended Figure 35 shows that the majority of the survey respondents (54.3%) attended more than 75% of their lectures. However, 6% attended less than 25% of their lectures.
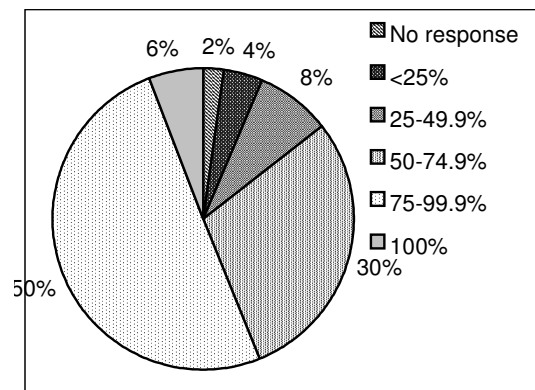


*Figure 35:  Percentage lecture attendance by non-completer survey respondents*

Students were also asked to rate 6 factors from not relevant (1) to highly relevant (5), as the reasons for their non-attendance at lectures. Most students rated not finding the subject interesting as the most significant factor in their non-attendance. Transport difficulties and no obligation to attend were also rated highly, whereas late socialising, personal problems and part-time work were not rated as a significant contributory factor towards non-attendance (Table 18).

| Factor/Rank | 5 (highly relevant) | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 (not relevant) | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Not interested in subjects | 27.9% | 15.5% | 15.3% | 7.4% | 22.0% | 369 |
| Transport Difficulties | 14.1% | 16.2% | 13.8% | 8.6% | 33.9% | 363 |
| No obligation to attend | 13.1% | 12.9% | 16.7% | 11.9% | 31.7% | 362 |
| Late Socialising | 10.3% | 9.1% | 14.3% | 11.9% | 38.7% | 353 |
| Personal Problems | 11.0% | 7.4% | 8.4% | 9.1% | 48.2% | 352 |
| Other | 11.7% | 4.3% | 1.2% | 0.2% | 0.5% | 75 |
| Part-time work | 3.3% | 6.0% | 3.8% | 6.7% | 63.7% | 350 |

*Table 18:    Reasons for not attending lectures*

Other in this case included:

> *"Too overcrowded."*

> *"Playing pool in the bar."*

> *"No. of hours free between lectures."*

With regard to not having an obligation to attend, both non-completers and continuing students appeared to be perplexed that no one noticed when they stopped attending:

> *"Introduce some sort of monitoring of attendance – it is far too easy to stop attending and go completely unnoticed."*

> *"I have been in less than twenty per cent of the time (family emergency as opposed to laziness). Nobody in any office knows. If I fail the year, I have cost the taxpayer money. I wouldn't mind more projects to keep me working and motivation up." (Continuing Student)*

> *"I think to ensure students go to their lectures is a main effect on their liking of the course as they have the ability to make friends there and they will also be on top of their notes and study. To enforce this I think that lecture attendance should go towards your final grade."*

## Expectations and Participation

### Integration into UCD Community

An indicator of level of involvement in UCD is whether students joined clubs and societies. 68.9% of the survey respondents said they had become involved in clubs and societies. Interestingly, there was no correlation between involvement in clubs and societies and 'difficulty making friends', 'Poor Sense of Community', 'Unfriendly atmosphere' or 'lack of access to Social Activities' as reasons for leaving. Almost 70% of those who ranked 'difficulty making friends' as very significant (5) had got involved in at least one club or society. Some students related lack of involvement to accommodation difficulties:

> *"I feel that if I had had campus accommodation I would have settled in sooner, being in with others in a similar position to me, so making more friends. It would have been easier to then make use of University facilities and to get more involved with clubs and societies. Having campus accommodation would have given me a better start to college, both socially and giving some independence."*

Only 67% of the 2$^{nd}$ year survey felt that they were 'part of the UCD community'. Involvement with clubs and societies was perceived as a key factor in making UCD more welcoming.

> *"Encourage students to be more active in clubs and societies (especially those catering for sport)." (Continuing Student)*

> *"Hand out information on student clubs and societies – they are what make up the UCD community." (Continuing Student)*

### Concurrence of Course Expectations with Reality

In the third section of the survey, non-completers were asked if the course they chose had lived up to their expectations and the majority (71.1%) of respondents replied 'no' the course hadn't lived up to their expectations. Some comments regarding a student's choice of course and the reality of attending the course are as follows:

> *"I didn't really know what I was expecting but I felt it was very impersonal and unstructured."*

> *"Course content seemed to be far removed from final job qualification and work, expected too much too soon."*

> *"Courses moved too quickly, too much material, never enough depth, didn't discuss exams with us or our progress."*

> *"I never felt like I was learning anything, and so I didn't feel like there was any point in going to college."*

Not surprisingly there was a significant correlation between those who said the course did not live up to their expectations and their ranking of 'Wrong Course Choice'.

## Concurrence of University Expectations with Reality

A small majority (53.4%) of non-completers surveyed felt that the college itself lived up to their expectations. The view of the college as a whole seems to be more positive than students' impressions of their individual courses. Some respondents made positive comments about their experience of UCD:

**Positive:**

> *"I enjoyed life at college, the facilities and general daily life were good."*

> *"It was better than I expected, I really enjoyed the year and was sorry I had to leave."*

> *"Great social life clubs and sports."*

> *"Fantastic social life."*

Unfortunately the majority of comments were more negative:

**Negative:**

> *"It was hard for others not from Dublin to fit in."*

> *"I found a lack of student staff communication and a lack of sense of community in my course."*

> *"It was too big and impersonal for me as I am shy. I felt very lonely. I thought university was going to be fun but unfortunately it wasn't."*

> *"Very unfriendly, too big."*

> *"Unfriendly atmosphere, the size of the campus proved very daunting. Class sizes were so big it was very difficult to make friends."*

## Other comments

In order to collect as much qualitative data as possible respondents were given plenty of scope for additional comments and suggestions for improvements. Most availed of this opportunity, some even writing on additional pages. Many of these fell into recurring themes:

**Class size**

> *"Just smaller classes and more tutorials. Also a core tutorial where you can get together with a tutor and talk about your academic problems and other concerns relating to UCD."*

### Communication with Academics

*"There could be more lecturer/student feedback on courses. Lack of communication between students and lecturers."*

*"Lecturers need to become more involved personally with students and whether they have any questions about coursework. I found the tutorials unhelpful as they just tested what you know, rather then explaining anything in greater detail or answering students questions about coursework."*

### Options within courses

*"In second year, very early on we were told to make important choices regarding options. I felt that some of these options were very appealing and many were not. Surely it would make more sense to accommodate everyone interested in the popular option by increasing its frequency. Instead, I was left with third or fourth choices very often."*

### General Atmosphere

*"I don't think there is a whole lot that can be changed. The main problems I had related to the size of the college and the atmosphere – neither of which can really be changed."*

*"Brighten up the place – it looks like a morgue half the time – just concrete wall after concrete wall! I found it quite depressing going to college."*

*"I have always found that the colours of a study environment are very important. During my time in UCD, I always found the grey colour scheme in the library exceptionally depressing and consequently found it difficult to study effectively there."*

Finally some students seem to really appreciate the opportunity to give feedback:

*"Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity. I have been waiting since 1999 to say these things!"*

# Conclusions

## *Reasons for Leaving*

Students are most likely to leave UCD because they feel they have made a wrong course choice. However, unfriendliness and poor sense of community are also significant factors. Prior to leaving they are most likely to seek advice from sources external to UCD, i.e. family and friends. It is estimated that less than 4% have left the educational system completely.

## *Decision Making Process*

Despite the fact that the students who leave have researched their course choices by reading UCD literature and attending Open Days, they are not happy with the choices they make. Both those students who have left and those who are continuing feel that the information they receive could give more detailed, or a different type of, information. UCD must, therefore, review its input into the applicants' decision-making process.

The majority of the students who left had attended welcome and 'orientation to campus' events. However they did not feel that these were adequate.

Many students had a low attendance at lectures due to lack of interest in subjects but transport difficulties, frequently related to time-tabling issues, and lack of obligation to attend were also significant factors.

## *Participation and Integration*

The majority of respondents who leave UCD had made efforts to integrate into the University by joining clubs and societies. Notwithstanding this, their expectations were not met. Respondents felt that their course did not meet their expectations but UCD itself did.

The main issues which respondents wished to address further at the end of the survey were class size, lack of interaction with academics, time-tabling, transport and snobbery.

Many students had constructive suggestions for improvements which will be discussed further in the recommendations of this report.

# Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations

## Conclusions

It is clear from the statistical analysis of full-time students who did not complete, that there are certain 'at risk' students who are more likely than the average student to be non-completers. Specifically these are

➢ Students who enter with weak academic qualifications, both in terms of points and grades in Mathematics and English;

➢ Students in the larger, less vocational Faculties of Arts, Philosophy & Sociology, Science and Agriculture;

➢ Students from outside Dublin and, in particular, those within commuting distance of Dublin and those from other EU countries.

Many students are taking the decision to leave quite early with most leaving before 1st February of 1st year. The peak month for withdrawals is January.

Most students state that the strongest factor influencing their decision to leave was 'Wrong Course Choice'. This is also evidenced by the fact that the majority re-apply through the CAO.

However, significant numbers also rank 'size and unfriendliness' and related areas as important factors in their decision to leave. Part-time work was not rated as a significant contributing factor towards non-completion by the respondents to the survey. However it is clear that some students are spending worrying amounts of time working.

It is important to note that a very small percentage of students are leaving third-level education entirely. Based on tracking CAO applications and the survey responses it is estimated that only 21% are no longer involved in any form of education. The majority of survey respondents in this category said they would consider further education in the future.[*]

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[*]NB we acknowledge that there may be sample bias as students who are satisfied with their current occupation would be more likely to respond.

## Recent Developments/Developments in Progress

While it is accepted in UCD that there will never be 100% student retention, nor should it be expected, UCD has been committed to improving student retention for some time. A number of initiatives have already been put in place across all the areas which impact on Student Retention, some of which are too recent to have had an impact on the students surveyed in this study.

These include:

➢ A Literature Review Working Group has been established which aims to develop clearer literature which will provide the potential applicant with the information he/she wants. It also aims to prevent the proliferation of leaflets and booklets produced by individual faculties and departments. The provision of clear and adequate information regarding entry requirements, course content and career prospects will hopefully give students sufficient insight to choose their courses more carefully.

➢ Arising from a quality review of student welfare, this area has been restructured. Since January 2002, there are now faculty based student advisers. Additional staff have been assigned to the Disability Support Service.

➢ The Student Advisors are piloting an induction programme for small groups of students. This involves a series of events throughout their university career but with a particular concentration on the first academic year. A folder of information builds up over the course of the sessions. Feedback to date is very positive.

➢ In the Quality Assurance survey of continuing students, students requested that a 'Frequently Asked Questions' booklet about where to go for information would be useful. Although this information was already published in the Student Handbook it was not in a user-friendly format and was clearly not being read by students. This publication was upgraded in 2002 to an FAQ style and a diary was incorporated. This has been well received by students (and staff).

➢ Some faculties have restructured their programmes in recent years. Veterinary Medicine introduced Problem Based Learning in 1999 and the Faculty of Commerce has introduced Small Group Teaching from 2002. It is already evident in the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine that these measures help the development of a learning community.

➢ In conjunction with this project a booklet entitled 'Supporting Students with Difficulties – Guidelines for Academic Staff' has been produced by the First Year

Committee. This advises staff on the welfare services and how to deal with distressed students.

➢ Arising from the internal circulation of an early draft of this report, the Registrar has now put a proposal to Academic Council with regard to facilitating transfer between courses at the start of the academic year, in exceptional circumstances. This proposal has been accepted and will operate from September 2003.

# Recommendations

However, it is also clear that there are further developments and improvements which can be undertaken. In particular, UCD has responsibilities with regard to:

➢ assisting students make the correct course choice,

➢ easing the transition between second and third level,

➢ providing academic and pastoral support for students, and finally,

➢ if a student decides to leave, ensuring that this is supported and the student leaves feeling positive about UCD.

Recommendations are included under each of the above areas. These recommendations were collated from four main sources:

1. The forum discussion following the presentation of the findings to faculty representatives and the student support services personnel who are meeting and dealing with new students during their first term in UCD. Those involved included academic and administrative staff, Student Advisers, co-ordinators from the Disability Support Service and New Era Programme, and the Chaplains.

2. The very constructive suggestions made by those who participated in the non-completion survey.

3. Suggestions for improvements which arose via the Central Administrative Offices Quality Assurance survey (some of these have already been implemented).

4. Consideration of ideas which have worked for other institutions.

## *Pre-Admission*

As previously stated, the major reason students gave for leaving UCD prior to completing their first year was because they felt they had chosen the wrong course. Therefore, how can UCD help students to choose the correct course?

### Literature

The question of whether UCD is delivering adequate and explicit information in the prospectus, faculty booklets and website needs to be addressed. Looking at the

findings of the survey, students have rated parents and siblings above guidance counsellors and teachers as an influencing factor on their choice of course, so parents seem to be reading information booklets and guiding their children. Therefore, the presentation of information needs to be clear, factual, focused, 'user-friendly' and aimed at 2nd Level students, parents and Guidance Counsellors. It may be necessary to produce a separate pack of information targeted specifically at Guidance Counsellors.

Faculty booklets are not considered to be very user-friendly and the information presented needs to be much easier to understand. The information contained is more detailed than the average school-leaver requires at time of application. However, they should be available to Guidance Counsellors when more detailed information is required.

The prospectus should be updated. It needs to contain more detailed information than it does at present, particularly with regard to options and individual subjects and details about timetables. Certain information can be misleading; the prospectus shows Denominated Psychology has 35 places, but potential students are unaware that they may be attending lectures with up to 500 other students. A 'spotlight' on current students could also be included ("A day in the life of…" type information).

> *"The requirements for continuing in the course from year to year should be made clear in prospectus. Also the limitations on subject choice for 2nd and 3rd year due to grades and small number of places should be highlighted initially."*

> *"There needs to be more information about exactly what the course in question is like on a daily basis. The entire schedule, week by week, should be explained and described." (Continuing Student)*

It must be recognised that the prospectus needs to be updated annually. In addition to being available on the web it should be made available on CD-ROM. This could be in an interactive format which would allow students, for example, to enter their best subjects at school and would then link them to courses which may be of interest, thus opening them up to areas they had not previously considered. The UCD video, available to second-level students and guidance counsellors, also needs to be updated.

A focus group involving 1st Year university students and a second focus group involving 6th Year Second Level students would give more insight into how students perceive UCD's literature.

> *"No 'booklet' can fully describe the kind of work that's done in a course."*

> *"The course was extremely different to the way it was explained in the prospectus. Also there was not enough detail in the brochures so it made it difficult to know what to expect."*

> *"The subjects seemed to be different than as described by leaflets."*

It has been recommended that university publications should obtain the *Crystal* from the *Plain English Campaign*[24] – UCD should aspire to be the first Irish university to attain this.

## Open Days

Possible approaches were discussed at the forum:

➢ Unify the University open days and the individual faculty open days and market them as a whole? That way the event can be more 2nd Level student focused. Aiming towards all the faculties delivering the same message with possibly a standardised presentation format for all faculties and departments.

➢ Discard the university open day in favour of the individual faculty open days;

➢ Continue with a university-wide open day aimed at 5th years and individual faculty days aimed at 6th year pupils.

Many students find the timing of Open Days unsatisfactory and seemed to think they were aimed at 6th year students:

> *"Open days should be before the CAO date in February. Lots of schools have mock exams at this time of year." (2nd Year Student)*

> *"Open days should occur earlier in the year as are disruptive to students. September/October would be more beneficial." (2nd Year Student)*

Indeed, it is because of this that faculties have begun to hold their own Open Days.

Students also felt that meeting with other students would be beneficial:

> *"If a program was set up where potential students of UCD could get the advice of current students of UCD on various courses, it could reduce errors in choice of course."*

The scheduling and style of Open Days needs to be urgently reviewed. They need to be more focused and to provide more detailed information. UCD must make more use of the students who are currently here to assist with recruitment, either as representatives on stands or by including student profiles in literature. More

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[24] Proceedings from Staying Power – A colloquium on Increasing Retention Rates in Higher Education, National Centre for Guidance in Education

volunteers from the current staff and student population, including academics, advisors, post graduates and undergraduates need to be available during these open days to talk to school leavers about their own experiences. UCD needs to ensure that accurate and up-to-date information is given out by all volunteers and, therefore, need to produce a training guide or CD to inform staff about questions which may not relate directly to their area.

> *"The content and subject options of my course differed from what I had been led to believe at Open Day."*

The possibility of the introduction of a Mature Years Open Day also needs to be addressed.

### Schools Liaison

As with Open Days, an issue with Schools Liaison is how to focus recruitment strategies. Is it more effective to deliver a university wide message via school liaison activities, or to deliver an individual faculty message?

The recommendation arising from the forum was that a standard presentation about UCD should be used at all schools liaison events. Faculties/departments could add to the template for their specific areas. Those representing UCD at events must be willing to give information about all courses. Students should be used with staff – especially if the students were from the local area.

Many of the students surveyed had no contact with schools liaison events and felt that this was because UCD was not interested in their area:

> *"I chose to come here completely on my own (and against advice of careers teacher). There are a lot of schools in Northern Ireland being ignored by Irish universities – we are worth it too!" (Continuing Student)*
> [In fact, schools in Northern Ireland are visited regularly by UCD]

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**Recommendations:**
- Review literature; make it more user-friendly; include profiles of students and graduates; include practical information
- Explore new technologies such as interactive websites and CD-ROMs, and explore the provision of a facility for students to 'text' literature requests.
- Review Open Days; make them more focussed; use students as well as staff;
- Schools Liaison should be more pro-active; presentations should be standardised; students should be used where possible.

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## *Induction*

Induction to UCD for first year undergraduate students consists of a faculty advisory meeting, registration and a welcoming event held in O'Reilly Hall. There is no official orientation/induction for postgraduate or visiting students. Many of the freshers do not attend the available events as they are out of the country at the time.

Both the continuing students surveyed through the QA process and the non-completers felt there was a great lack in the area of induction. Suggestions for improvement included:

> *"I think there should be a week before college starts that is only for 1st year students. Not an academic week but more geared towards orientation and the students getting to know each other and the college grounds. Due to the size of UCD, I think this would be very helpful to new students."*

> *"More signs of general guidance are required on first day due to the large size of the campus. First year courses should be more explanatory during the first week."*

> *"Organise a 'shadow' student for one day. Encourage more people to join societies, perhaps a welcoming e-mail from SU and registrar to all first years. A tutor or mentor to help students with difficulties; not one for 1,000 but one for approx. 30-50 students."*

> *"Accommodation to be sorted before college starts. 3-6 month introduction course for all students, on campus, to ensure they are UCD material, this would also give students a chance to find suitable accommodation and, if necessary, part-time work."*

It seems students want more practical advice during their initial weeks in UCD, want a longer adjustment period and want a certain level of mentoring. Many of these suggestions have almost no monetary cost (e.g. welcoming e-mail) and could prove very effective in helping students feel part of UCD. Ongoing students recognised the need for continued support during the first term:

> *"Have meeting for 1st years after 1, 2 & 3 months to iron out problems."*
> *(2nd Year Student)*

These issues with regard to induction need to be addressed. In tandem with improving the standard of induction events the aim of encouraging attendance at induction and orientation events by all students should be remembered.

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### **Recommendations:**
- Improve induction and orientation events using focus groups of students and a survey of best practice in other institutions to provide direction

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- Provide more practical information (e.g. where to find things)
- Understand that orientation cannot be isolated in the week prior to the start of term but must run through the 1st term or even the whole of 1st year.

## Support during studies

### Pastoral support

The new student advisors are to be welcomed. However measures must be taken to ensure that students are aware of this service and know how to access it.

> *"Didn't know where to seek advice if I ran into difficulties."*

Also, the number of advisors currently in place is simply not enough to deal with the size of the student body. Therefore it is necessary for UCD to rely on other resources to supplement the service provided by the student advisors. Possibilities suggested by students include a 'buddy' system with students in 2nd or 3rd year:

> *"As I'm sure its not feasible to reduce the size of the student population, I think if possible it would be a good idea to introduce a "buddy system" for 1st years with 2nd, 3rd year students etc. It could also encourage better relationships between tutors/lecturers and students."*

Both continuing students and non-completers felt that mentors would help:

> *"I would not have made such a hasty decision to transfer if I had a mentor or someone like that to talk to. I think it is a very good idea to have someone help you with the courses etc. It will most likely help the new students in guiding them and not to feel so alone and fearful of the higher educational system."*

> *"Mentor schemes should be set up early in the year to give students more information on their course etc." (Continuing Student)*

In particular, if students were obliged to meet with a mentor, perhaps twice per term there would be an opportunity for early detection of difficulties. The mentors should be trained to a certain level in dealing with problems but could refer students with more serious difficulties to the student advisors or chaplains as appropriate[*].

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[*]A mentoring programme in being piloted in the Faculty of Science.

## Social Life

An unfriendly environment and atmosphere and a poor sense of community throughout the campus were cited as significant contributing factors towards students withdrawing from UCD. Some efforts have been made within faculties to promote a more friendly atmosphere – for example Science put seating and hot drinks machines in an open area in the building. As one student commented

> *"The benches around the SU shop and the shop in the Science Building are very comforting and the coffee machines are a big help." (Continuing Student)*

The physical surroundings were a recurring theme in comments with many remarking on the overall 'greyness' of the environment.

Whereas UCD cannot dictate to an individual the extent to which he/she gets involved in social activities, it can play a role in encouraging students to participate and ensuring sufficient diversity of activities to facilitate all students.

> *"More non-pub/club based events for Freshers as not everyone is 18 on arrival at UCD."*

Some students also pointed out ways in which social life and academic life could interact:

> *"I think the best way to learn is through small groups, this also helps people to socialise without having to make much of an effort."*

## Interaction between Social and Academic Life

If a student has no time to get involved with clubs and societies due to other commitments, how do they get to know other students? More and more students are finding it necessary to work during their studies, which restricts the time available to them for socialising.

Also, as has been seen, many students feel alienated as soon as they arrive in UCD and will be disinclined to join societies. Possible solutions to break down the barriers include:

➢ Group learning: the assignment of group tasks and projects allows students to get to know each other in smaller groups. (This does not require much staff involvement and does not need many resources);

➢ Study groups: also encourages the interaction between students and staff in smaller groups.

In the words of Vincent Tinto[25]:

> *"For these students, indeed for most students, the classroom may be the one, perhaps only place where they meet faculty and student peers and engage in learning. For that reason, the settings we build to promote learning must include, indeed begin with, the classrooms of the campus."*

Therefore, UCD needs to consider moving away from traditional teaching methods, with less emphasis on lecture time and more emphasis on group learning.

> *"I didn't realise just how impersonal it would be. Even the lecture theatres are too big. Big classes should be divided into smaller ones."*

> *"The sense of how enormous UCD is the most over-awing element. The feeling of isolation and loneliness needs to be overcome. Breaking up into smaller groups for assignments etc might be of some help." (Continuing Student)*

Whereas small group teaching may not be feasible in all faculties, tutorials that already take place in many faculties could be limited in numbers to be more effective (10-12 max) and be held frequently.

> *"Some form of help – perhaps extra tutorials or just to have smaller tutorial sizes. There were nearly 70 in my tutorial – you get no attention."*

Both continuing students and those who left, had suggestions:

> *"Tea/coffee mornings every month for tutorial groups and extend time for tutorials." (Continuing Student)*

> *"My course was very isolated, I think the tutorials in Arts sometimes should be spent playing "getting to know each other games." I made no friends because all we did was sit down and take notes. I was very lucky to know friends from school otherwise I think I would have left sooner."*

By introducing a more active teaching methodology it should be possible to enhance all aspects of the learning environment.

> *"Students are much more likely to retain knowledge the more active they have been in acquiring that knowledge themselves. Students who have been lectured will retain 5% of the information they have been given, by reading the material themselves they will retain 10%, if there is an audio-visual input they will retain 20%, through demonstration 30%, by discussing the information they will retain 50%. If a student practices by doing, uses the information to teach others, or uses the information immediately they will retain between 75% and 90%. This proves the point*

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[25] Keynote address to the 'Southwest Regional Learning Communities Conference'

*that practical work and involving the students in their own learning is very beneficial".* [26]

## Academic Life

Teaching style can greatly influence a student's reaction to the material and involvement, not only in the subject, but also in UCD as a learning community. To quote Vincent Tinto[27] again:

*"Unfortunately, the educational experiences of most students are not involving, the time they spend on task disturbingly low. Learning is still very much a spectator sport in which faculty talk dominates and where few students actively participate. Most students, especially those in the first year, experience learning as isolated learners whose learning is disconnected from that of others, where the curriculum is experienced as a set of detached, individual courses, one separated from another in both content and peer group, one set of understandings unrelated in any intentional fashion to the content learned in other courses. Though specific programs of study are designed for each major, courses have little academic or social coherence. It is little wonder that students seem so uninvolved in learning. Their learning experiences are not very involving."*

The non-completers who responded to the survey perceived these difficulties:

*"No participation during lectures, no interaction. Difficult to take in 50 minutes of information with absolutely no interaction."*

*"It just seemed different. I knew UCD would be huge but I did think the lecturers would appreciate that fact and involve students as much as possible."*

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[26] http://www.ecwexford.ie

[27] Keynote address to the 'Southwest Regional Learning Communities Conference'

In an American study, 'Ideas to Encourage Student Retention' published following a faculty seminar at Jefferson Community College, Kentucky, numerous ideas were presented for faculty use in dealing with student retention[28]. These included practical and common sense advice such as:

[Under the category: General Classroom Management, item no. 19]

> *"Throughout the course, but particularly during the crucial first class sessions:*
>
> > *(a) stress a positive "you can handle it" attitude*
> >
> > *(b) emphasize your willingness to give individual help*
> >
> > *(c) point out the relevancy of your subject matter to the concerns and goals of your students*
> >
> > *(d) capitalize on opportunities to praise the abilities and contributions of students whose status in the course is in doubt; well-timed encouragement could mean the difference between retention and attrition*
> >
> > *(e) utilize a variety of instructional methods, drawing on appropriate audio-visual aids as much as possible*
> >
> > *(f) urge students to talk to you about problems, such as changes in work schedule, before dropping your course. Alternate arrangements can often be made."*

Better teaching practice need not necessarily be expensive. One continuing student suggested:

> *"…lecturers should wait outside lectures for first years to chat to them in the first week." (2nd Year Student)*

Suggestions arising from the forum on retention held in UCD included setting problems for students to work on in groups. For example, Civil Engineering students are required to work in small teams to design and build a bridge using everyday items such as paper clips. This is both a learning and team building experience. A small prize is offered for the best design, which adds extra interest to the project.

It must also be noted that second-level students are used to getting regular feedback. Some students perform best when receiving praise and criticism regularly. The sudden lack of any indication of performance when they arrive in third level is a major shock.

> *"I felt no sense of accomplishment when I was working hard, so I quickly lost interest in the course."*

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[28] http://www.hcc.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/studretn.htm

> *"I didn't feel there was anyone to go to when I was having doubts. Also there was nobody to reassure me I was doing well and to stay (no feedback)."*

Students also felt that if staff noticed their weaknesses earlier their situation could have been improved:

> *"I worked very hard to do well in my course and did in two of my subjects and the practical part of Chemistry which I loved. I wish my weak points had been noticed more and I had been pushed more to work on them instead of the parts I loved such as the practicals. The practical tutors were brilliant!"*

Best practice dictates that UCD should instigate a system to provide regular feedback, particularly for first year students. As Vincent Tinto[29] has reported:

> *"Colleges and universities should take seriously the task of assessing student learning and providing feedback to students about their learning. Let me be clear. Though testing can be seen as a type of assessment, I am not referring to testing but to assessments such as portfolios, reflective diaries, one-minute papers, and the like, that engage students and faculty alike in shared conversations about what is being learned. Equally important it does so in ways that enable faculty and students to alter their behaviours so as to enhance learning."*

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### Recommendations:
- Introduce a 'mentoring' or 'buddy' system

- Promote an environment in which students will wish to socialise and ensure that alcohol consumption is not the focus of events

- Create learning communities:
  - ➤ Reduce class sizes where possible (e.g. using small group teaching)
  - ➤ Ensure that tutorial groups are kept to small numbers
  - ➤ Create a social atmosphere in tutorials

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[29] Keynote address to the 'Southwest Regional Learning Communities Conference'

## *Spotting the 'at risk' students*
### Attendance at Lectures

Many students who leave UCD simply drift away and never formally retire from their course. Others retire several months after they have stopped attending lectures. During the period where students have stopped attending but have not formally decided to leave there is a window of opportunity to encourage them to remain. In response to the question 'Was there anything UCD could have done to support you prior to, or at, the time you were having doubts about your course?' one student replied:

> "Yes, could have talked to me. I didn't actually hand in my letter to say I was going until February when I left in November. Not one letter was sent about my leaving or not attending tutorials. I felt no one cared I was gone."

It is not only important that students not attending are identified as early as possible but there may also be benefits if students know this will happen. Many students felt that they did not attend because there would be no sanctions imposed on them:

> "I can only speak for myself, but I feel that if attending lectures was compulsory and if a tighter rein was kept at least of 1st year students, less would leave. In Arts it's very easy to feel that one can get away without doing a lot – a very common perception. Possibly if I had a goal to reach I would have worked harder – but I was quite naive and didn't take things as seriously as I should have."

> "I think to ensure students go to their lectures is a main effect on their liking of the course as they have the ability to make friends there and they will also be on top of their notes and study. To enforce this I think that lecture attendance should go towards your final grade. I also think that small group meetings of students within each course should be set up regularly and frequently."

> "To maybe keep a closer eye on those not attending lectures regularly and approach those students in a view to helping them with what problems or doubts they might have."

Clearly in larger classes it would not be feasible to have roll-calls at the start of each lecture. Perhaps this role is best suited to tutorials – a tutor should certainly notice if someone missed two tutorials in a row and alert the appropriate student advisor.

New technologies will also facilitate tracking student attendance. All 1st Year Commerce students have laptops and access the blackboard virtual learning environment. This system allows announcements and up to date information relating to course developments to get directly and quickly to students. It also allows

communication between fellow students and lecturers via email discussion boards and chat and feedback from lecturers is obtained more readily in comparison to more traditional methods. The system facilitates an electronic roll call; students need to log-on so attendance can be monitored. Blackboard is being used in this way in the University of Newcastle upon Tyne.[30] Possibilities such as reporting of students whose cards have not been used in the library could also be investigated.

Follow-up for students who are not attending could come from a tutor or student advisor. Recognising the underlying philosophy of the university, that students are adults, follow-up should be of the nature of a friendly enquiry rather than an admonishment.

## Other 'at risk' students

Students who are not attending are only one category of 'at risk' students. As previously discussed, the students who are weaker academically are also high-risk students. As the population of school-leavers declines it is likely that more students in lower points ranges will be entering UCD. Therefore, there is a need to put measures in place to support these students at the start of their university career.

> *"More support to students having difficulties keeping up with the pace of lectures. More advice should be given towards dealing with assignments."*

> *"I didn't find myself able to approach anyone to ask for assistance in my studies."*

The problem is exacerbated by the common misperception that low points/entry requirements imply an easy course:

> *"Ag is a very intense course. The points do not reflect the standard so lots of people found it very tough. That's obviously not UCD's fault but it leads peoples to believe it's easy."*

Study skills courses would be useful to all students; even an entrant with maximum points will not immediately understand the difference between a school essay and a university essay.

> *"An essay writing work shop. I could not grasp the concept behind a 'college' essay."*

In addition to this, if students were assigned to mentors as suggested above, the mentor would become aware that the student is falling behind and could arrange additional help before the situation got out of hand.

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[30] Dodgson and Bolam

In some cases the help required related to a specific subject not previously studied.

*"Biology, computer science and maths were fine but I feel I was misled with physics. I think Leaving Cert. physics should be a requirement or there should be extra tutorials."*

*"Some course should be given to students who have never done Physics before."*

The difficulty is that if courses are restructured to start subjects from an *ab initio* level, the more able students and those who have previously studied the subjects at school may lose interest and disengage from the subject:

*"Was a lot more basic than I expected. I also expected first year to be more theoretical not practical."*

*"I had studied higher-level chemistry, biology and maths for the Leaving Cert. The core subjects… … are chemistry, biology, maths and physics (or at least they were in 1999). I found this a bit boring/lack of a challenge, as I had most of the material already covered in the Leaving Cert."*

The University of New Orleans introduced a course entitled 'University Success 1001'[31]. They found that, comparing retention rates for those who participated versus those who did not, this course tended to increase retention by 10%. Furthermore, it also improved academic performance for both groups with high and low ACT [American College Test] scores, but more so for groups with low scores.

Other 'at risk' groups include students from outside Dublin. Part of the difficulty with these students is probably the inadequacy of maintenance grants. Anecdotal evidence shows that UCD has students commuting from as far away as Sligo because this is cheaper than renting accommodation in Dublin. Efforts should be made to accommodate as many first years as possible in campus accommodation:[*]

*"…I also think that if possible all 1ˢᵗ year students should be offered the choice of living on campus (those who reside outside Dublin)."*

*"Accommodation was a major impediment as I lived in digs quite far away. Campus accommodation should be provided for every student who comes from Donegal/Cork."*

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[31] University of New Orleans, Academic Affairs *The Impact of University 1001 course on Student Retention and Academic Performance Fall 1997-Fall 2000*

[*]However students in campus accommodation do have higher than average non-completion rates.

Where this is not possible, assistance should be given to help students find accommodation nearby:

> *"I spent the first two months in Dublin attending college and competing for the college in football and rowing without accommodation. Bumming on couches in freezing kips is not good for you. I was in lousy health and feeling low. There should be active help for students looking for accommodation instead of endless advice."*

Students have a very short space of time between receiving an offer and starting at UCD in which to find accommodation. This is made even more difficult if students apply for campus accommodation and are unsuccessful – they are then behind other students in looking for accommodation. One student, when asked if he/she would do anything differently if starting over replied:

> *"Find out about accommodation well in advance. (Although Catch – 22 situation arises as you cannot secure accommodation before you know if you have been accepted onto the course – by which stage it is too late)."*

This difficulty does not arise for ongoing students since they can book accommodation from one year to the next. This is a further argument in favour of increasing the percentage of campus accommodation reserved for first years. Another way in which UCD could assist is by block booking local private rental accommodation for the overflow from campus accommodation. UCD could investigate the financial implications and feasibility of this possibility.

It has also been noted that certain faculties have significantly lower retention rates. While this interacts with the fact that some students in these areas are entering with lower academic qualifications, issues with regard to subject choice also seem to be a factor:

> *"Don't let students sign up for their choice of subjects in the first week – give them a couple of weeks to make up their minds."*

Many students indicated that they had left because they chose subjects they did not like within their degree:

> *"The subjects I choose did not correspond to the expectations I had. They did not seem to match up with the work I wanted to do."*

The size of the lectures and subject choice also had an impact. Understandably, students found it easier to make friends where the whole class was together for most of the day.

> *"Very difficult to make good friends because the classes are so big. You could see someone one day and not see them again for a few weeks."*

The larger faculties need to be the focus of any moves to improve retention. While it would be impossible to solve all the difficulties, additional guidance with regard to subject choice at the start of term would certainly help.

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**Recommendations:**
- Track attendance at lectures/tutorials/laboratory classes and follow-up on those not-attending.
- Provide additional support for students entering with weaker qualifications.
- Increase the amount of on-campus accommodation available to first years.
- Focus on the larger faculties.

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## Practicalities

Respondents identified timetables as an issue. Students would prefer to have more compact timetables.

> *"Try to have college less spread out e.g. starting at 9.00 having a lecture, then having one at 12.00 and having a practical at about 2.00/3.00 – 5.00/6.00."*

> *"Not have lectures at 9am on Mondays or after 4pm on Fridays." (2nd Year Student)*

Transport problems were allied to this:

> *"Living in Tallaght it was extremely hard to make the majority of the 9am lectures. I had four 9am starts. A special bus was provided the 50X but wouldn't make it in on time. Finally getting home was worse. Travelling approx. 4 hours and then be expected to study was very difficult."*

Timetables could be reviewed with regard to the practicalities of commuting in 21st century Dublin. Also UCD could liaise with the transport services to negotiate improved transport links (a proposal has been made with regard to linking to Luas).

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**Recommendations:**
- Improve flexibility with regard to changing course – preferable to keep student in UCD rather than force them to stay in a course and then loose them from the college;
- Attempt to improve transport links;
- Review timetables;
- Improve opening hours for student support services;
- Provide a means by which students can forward suggestions on an ongoing basis.

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## *The Decision to Leave*

When students have decided to leave, how does UCD ensure that they have given due consideration to all factors, that they are happy with their decision and that they leave with positive feelings about their experience in UCD?

### Exit Interviews

Currently there are no formal exit interviews for students withdrawing from UCD. It is suggested that the introduction of formal exit interviews would give immediate feedback and the possibility of changing the student's outlook and views of UCD, hopefully getting something positive from a negative situation. These could be interviews with a common format but with scope for individual faculty questions.

> *"When I went to leave I was never asked had I thought my decision through or would I like to see a counsellor for guidance. I was discharged in a matter of minutes, no questions asked."*

It is important that students be 'signed-off' by an advisor before they officially retire. The immediacy of the feedback would provide more valuable information than can be acquired by a retrospective survey:

> *"Ask people who have just left these same questions – I would have answered differently two years ago."*

Evidence from the survey indicates that the survey itself helped people feel better about UCD and it is safe to assume that an appropriate exit interview would have the same effect:

> *"Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity. I have been waiting since 1999 to say these things! It's the first time UCD has impressed me in a long time."*

It could be argued that exit interviews will assist only students who officially retire but if a system of monitoring attendance were in place the percentage who leave by simply drifting away would be significantly reduced. Obviously the availability of such interviews would need to be publicised with posters/flyers.

### Career Guidance /follow up

One of the points that arose at the retention forum was the fact that there is no career guidance facility available once a student has left college. The student could return to their school guidance counsellor but they may be embarrassed to do so or the guidance counsellor, through lack of time, may not be in position to offer help. The Careers and Appointments Office offers what help it can and, indeed, received favourable mention from some survey respondents.

However, this is currently beyond the remit of the office, which is geared towards graduate employment and postgraduate courses. Therefore, where should students go for advice? Ideally UCD should provide a career advice service. This would leave the students with a much better impression of the university, help them make the right choice second time around and hopefully ensure they do not feel completely let down by UCD. Perhaps an inter-University service could be provided, particularly among the Dublin universities.

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### Recommendations:
- Instigate a system of exit interviews;
- Provide Guidance for students leaving UCD.

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Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is essential that UCD raises awareness of retention issues across the university and that all staff see the role they have to play in improving retention.

Moxley, Najor-Durack and Dumbrigue (2001) have defined institutional commitment in their book 'Keeping Students in Higher Education', the four properties are:

> *"The institution must make the priority it places on retention explicit formally through policy statements, publications and within programmes of staff induction appraisal reward and development.*

> *Members of the academic community must consider and appreciate the broad scope of colleagues' responsibilities and contributions to retention and identify where their jobs fall within the scope of retention efforts.*

> *Colleagues should look in detail at their roles in terms of retention and decide what each community and every member of staff can offer students who face retention issues.*

> *The institutional commitment to retention will indicate what is available to students and how support and resources might be made available to retention initiatives."*

# Glossary

### CAO
Most applicants for UCD must apply via Central Applications Office. Applicants may list up to ten degree and ten diploma/certificate choices in order of preference. Leaving Certificate results are scored on the 6 best subjects and points are awarded (maximum 600). Applicants are then ranked and places offered accordingly. The basic principle of the system is that applicants are offered the highest preference to which they are entitled. Both lists are assessed separately. For more information see www.cao.ie. Some applicants, such as Overseas Applicants, apply directly to UCD.

### CHIU
Conference of Heads of Irish Universities, CHIU represents the Heads of the seven Irish universities. It aims to promote the development of university education and research by formulating and pursuing sectoral policies and programmes.

### Continuing Student
For the purposes of this report a continuing student is one who is still registered in the Faculty which he/she originally entered. It does not in anyway reflect on their performance in examinations.

### EU (non-Irish) students
Applications are assessed outside the points system, but students must meet the matriculation requirements and attain examination qualifications that match the entry standards of Irish students.

### Faculty
The faculty is the basic academic unit within University College Dublin – for full detail of the courses within each faculty, please see Appendix I.

### IT transfer
Applicants who have obtained, or will obtain, a National Diploma/Certificate with a distinction, credit or merit from an Institute of Technology in Ireland are eligible to apply for admission to an appropriate course in UCD. In general, such students are admitted to the second year or third year of the course. However, in some cases first year admission is possible. Only those admitted to First year are included in the data presented in this report.

### Mature Student
Applicants who are 23 years of age or over at 1<sup>st</sup> January prior to the  proposed entry date are deemed 'Mature Applicants' and are entitled to special consideration in terms of additional education/work experience. In 2002, 191 full-time students were offered places on this basis. Mature applicants are also entitled to consideration on the basis of their school-leaving qualifications in competition with other applicants (128 offers in 2002).

### New ERA (Equal Rights to Access)

A scheme under which students from disadvantaged areas are encouraged to attend third-level. Students may be admitted on a direct application basis outside the points system. In addition, students admitted on points may be part of the scheme in terms of financial assistance and support.

### Non-Completer

For the purposes of this report a 'non-completer' is a student who is no longer registered in the Faculty which he/she originally entered.

### Northern Ireland Students

Applicants from Northern Ireland, presenting A-levels, are not assessed on a points system, but must achieve a minimum grade level.

### OECD

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

### Open Days

UCD Open Days are held during March to coincide with the break between terms in UCD, as the number of visitors could not be accommodated while students are on campus. Around 20,000 2nd Level students visit the campus over 2 days; the majority are 4th and 5th Year students with some 6th Year students. The objective of the UCD Open Days is to provide future students with information on the career options open to them and the opportunity to see campus facilities and the on-campus student residences. Individual Faculty open days also take place throughout the year, usually during the first term; they are more lecture based and aimed towards 6th Year students.

### Overseas students/Non-EU students

Applications are individually assessed, but students must meet the matriculation requirements and attain examination qualifications that match the entry standards of Irish students. For some courses a separate quota for overseas students exists and students may be admitted with lesser qualifications.

### Students with a Disability

Applicants with disabilities are considered on the same academic grounds as other applicants. However, their disability is taken into account. An alternate entry system, known as the access programme, exists for those students who can provide evidence that their educational achievements have been directly affected as a result of their disability.

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# Appendix I: Faculties

The Faculty is the academic unit within UCD. Most faculties are sub-divided into a number of departments. The table below shows the faculties with the programmes offered within each which were studied as part of this report:

| Faculty | Programmes | CAO Code |
|---|---|---|
| Agriculture | Agricultural Science (BAgrSc) | DN010 |
| | Food Science (BAgrSc) [denominated entry from 2000] | DN040 |
| | Landscape Horticulture (BAgrSc) [denominated entry from 2000] | DN041 |
| | Forestry (BAgrSc) [denominated entry from 2001] | DN042 |
| | Agribusiness and Rural Development (BAgrSc) [denominated entry from 2002] | DN043 |
| | Agricultural and Environmental Science (BAgrSc) [denominated entry from 2002] | DN044 |
| | Animal & Crop Production (BAgrSc) [denominated entry from 2002] | DN045 |
| | Animal Science (BAgrSc) [denominated entry from 2002] | DN046 |
| | Engineering Technology (BAgrSc) [denominated entry from 2002] | DN047 |
| | Horticultural Science (BAgrSc) [denominated entry from 2002] | DN048 |
| Arts<br><br>Celtic Studies<br><br>Philosophy & Sociology<br><br>(For the purposes of this study these faculties were combined since the courses offered are all offered jointly by departments within these faculties. The faculties have since been re-structured into 'Arts' and 'Human Sciences') | Social Science (BSocSc) | DN007 |
| | Music (BMus) | DN011 |
| | Arts (BA) | DN012 |
| | BA Modular (Evening) Degree Course (BA) | DN022 |
| | Computer Science (BA) [New course from 1999] | DN050 |
| | Economics (BA) [denominated entry from 2000] | DN051 |
| | History (BA) [denominated entry from 2000] | DN052 |
| | Philosophy (BA) [denominated entry from 2000] | DN053 |
| | Psychology (BA) [denominated entry from 2000] | DN054 |
| | Arts (International – French) (BA) [denominated entry from 2000] | DN057 |
| | Arts (International – German) (BA) [denominated entry from 2000] | DN058 |
| | Arts (International – Spanish) (BA) [denominated entry from 2000] | DN059 |
| Commerce | Commerce (International) – Modern Irish (BComm) | DN014 |
| | Commerce (BComm) | DN015 |
| | Commerce (International) – German (BComm) | DN016 |
| | Commerce (International) – French (BComm) | DN017 |
| | Commerce (International) – Spanish (BComm) | DN018 |
| | Commerce (International) – Italian (BComm) | DN019 |
| | Actuarial and Financial Studies (BAFS) | DN020 |
| | Commerce (International) – Swedish (BComm) [Intakes in 1998 and 1999 only] | DN025 |
| | Economics and Finance (BSc) | DN026 |
| Engineering and Architecture | Architecture (BArch) | DN001 |
| | Engineering (BE) [Omnibus entry until 2000] | DN003 |

| Faculty | Programmes | CAO Code |
|---|---|---|
| | Agricultural and Food Engineering (BE) [denominated entry from 2001] | DN070 |
| | Chemical Engineering (BE) [denominated entry from 2001] | DN071 |
| | Civil Engineering (BE) [denominated entry from 2001] | DN072 |
| | Electronic Engineering or Electrical Engineering (BE) [denominated entry from 2001] | DN073 |
| | Mechanical Engineering (BE) [denominated entry from 2001] | DN074 |
| | Civil Engineering or Mechanical Engineering (BE) [denominated entry from 2001] | DN075 |
| Interfaculty | Business and Legal Studies (BBLS) | DN021 |
| | Sports Management (BSc) [first intake 2001] | DN024 |
| Law | Civil Law (BCL) | DN009 |
| | Civil Law (Law with French Law) (BCL) [first intake 1999] | DN029 |
| Medicine | Medicine (MB, BCh, BAO) | DN002 |
| | Radiography (BSc (Radiog)) | DN004 |
| | Physiotherapy (BSc (Physio)) | DN006 |
| Science | Science (BSc) | DN008 |
| | Computer Science (BSc) [first intake 1998] | DN030 |
| | Theoretical Physics (BSc) [first intake 1998] | DN031 |
| | Mathematical Science (BSc) [first intake 2000] | DN032 |
| Veterinary Medicine | Veterinary Medicine (MVB) | DN005 |
| | Veterinary Medicine (Graduate Applicants) (MVB) [first intake 2001] | DN105 |

# Appendix II:
# Sample Questionnaire