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Covid-19 Welcome to University: Second Year Students Reflect on the Upcoming Experience of Incoming First Years

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Covid-19 Welcome to University

Second Year students reflect on the upcoming experience of incoming First years

Abstract

A short on-line survey was undertaken by Fr Alan Hilliard, Coordinator of the Pastoral Care and Chaplaincy Service at TU Dublin. Peer Mentors (second year students who volunteer to support first year students) were asked to reflect on their experiences of college life during lockdown. They were also asked their opinion on the challenges facing incoming first years. The findings have very specific insights that can assist us as we prepare to welcome our new first years and indeed all students back to college. The students surveyed are based in the College of Engineering and Built Environment.

The paper is two thousand five hundred words and can be disseminated to students forming the basis of a facilitated discussions as we try to identify the unique challenges over these few months.

'This is an important piece of work with key insights to help us and our students in what we know will be a challenging academic year. Therefore, in my opinion, we should disseminate it as widely as possible'.

Prof. Mike Murphy, Director, Digital & Learning Transformation. TU Dublin.

'The survey makes for interesting reading. It really comes through that the online learning is having a huge impact on the socialisation aspect, and that face-to-face activities such as Peer mentoring and extra-curricular activities are difficult to replace with the virtual. The key messages on motivation and organisation, and the value of supportive staff, socialisation and the interactive environment are really important'.

Dr Brian Gormley, Educational Developer - Student Success, National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

Covid-19 Welcome to University

Second Year students reflect on the upcoming experience of incoming First years

A Survey among Second Years who will be part of TU Dublin's Peer Mentor Program.

Prepared by Fr. Alan Hilliard,

Coordinator of the Pastoral Care and Chaplaincy Services at TU Dublin.

Preamble

A short survey was undertaken among the Peer Mentor candidates in TU Dublin's Bolton St. Campus. The Peer Mentors are second year students from eleven different courses and this initiative prides itself in being embedded in specific courses across the College of Engineering and Built Environment and other colleges across the University. During the academic year the mentors give inputs based on the unique challenges within the course that the first years have registered for. Some mentor programs in other Universities and Colleges present a more generic mentor program focusing on the transition into college life.

Survey

Thirty-six mentors were asked to complete the short on-line survey of which thirty responded giving an 83.3% response rate. Four questions were posed, one of which was the student's name and course code, and all questions were answered with the exception of one respondent who didn't respond to question four. The average time spent on the survey was nine minutes, thirty-six seconds. The initial invite was sent via the student's college email address which was sent on the 28/08/2020 but the majority of replies came on the 02/09/2020 following an individual text message to all the mentors. The remaining questions were as follows:

- ➤ What were your greatest challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic as a student of TU Dublin?
- ➤ What, in your opinion, are the challenges that our incoming First Years face?
- ➤ How do you think we can help the First Years with the Peer Mentor program and as second years? (Creative ideas welcome)

Methodology

As the survey was relatively short, the methodology employed was a qualitative one whereby repetitions of words and phrases were noted and recorded as were nuances around these words and responses. The number of times certain words recurred were enumerated and note was taken of the accompanying phrases to ensure that the context was similar in all cases. For instance, some mentioned missing social interaction from a purely friendship point of view while others mentioned it as an inhibitor to learning.

Motivation and Organisation

The response to the question regarding the greatest challenges were quite consistent, though there were some individual replies that stood out on their own e.g. gaining weight, or one respondent who actually liked the whole transition into lockdown and one who enjoyed the free time to do other things. Another single respondent mentioned that the loss of employment was a challenge to them. Without doubt, the greatest challenge came in under the headings: routine, scheduling, organisation, standards, dedication and motivation. These items were mentioned as being difficult challenges on over twenty occasions which is quite high considering that there were thirty responses. Motivation and organisation appear to be the largest challenges faced over the last few months by the students who responded to this survey. On-line courses seem to make it more difficult to face these challenges which appear to be less stressful in a classroom setting. The difficulty of finding 'motivation' was mentioned on six occasions which accounts for a 20% response in the survey.

Supportive Staff

Within all these responses there was a concern that some students felt they were not achieving their normal standards in their work due to these factors. In other words, they were underachieving. This was particularly relevant to students who were submitting practical projects that required materials. However, a number who mentioned this stated that appropriate consideration was given by the lecturers in each case. Where initial uncertainty was felt by three of the respondents, they all say that this was alleviated by academic staff. Furthermore, 20% of students found the suddenness of the change when lockdown was imposed was a shock to their systems.

Though people may find it challenging to get to college at the best of times over 27% of respondents found studying at home more difficult than studying in college. An example of this type of response by one student is

> *Normally, I prefer to do university work on campus, be it staying later on some days or having it done early as I don't focus well at home.*

Missing interaction was mentioned specifically by one-third of respondents. The interaction mentioned for the large part was with other students but interactions with staff is missed too. One could combine these answers with the difficulty's students were finding in digesting information without the usually opportunity to ask questions, develop ideas and to discuss topics with fellow students and lecturers. Two examples of a response to this scenario is

> *Overall, it was trying to compensate for the lack of social interaction.*

> *Showing my work digitally instead of face to face was hard as it was more difficult to convey ideas.*

One other issue raised among challenges to the respondents was lack of stable or strong broadband which was mentioned by four of the respondents (13.3%). One response which captures the sentiments of the majority of the respondents is the following challenge:

> *Keeping track of important events, tasks and deadlines while not being in the university setting.*

Socialisation

The second question asked the second year Peer Mentors to reflect on what they thought were the challenges that first year students will face. They were asked to answer under two headings. The first was 'in general' and the second was 'challenges on your specific course'. There was a degree of overlap in the answer to both parts so for the purposes of a more complete response both sections will be considered as one. There are some course related issues which will be passed on to the various course coordinators.

Without doubt, the greatest challenge faced by the incoming first years, in the opinion of the second years, is the absence of socialisation and the building and development of friendships. The loss of the interactive nature of college life is of great concern to them. This study reinforces that the nature of college life, it appears, lies in the opportunities for friendship and engagement that are built up over time. This is never planned or orchestrated, it just happens due the nature of classroom interactions, projects, practical classes, social events, etc. The high level of interaction was mentioned twenty-seven times over the course of this question. The word 'social' was mentioned fourteen times which is just short of 50% of respondents.

> *They won't be able to have the same level of social interaction that we enjoyed during our first year which could have quite detrimental effects for them, as well they won't have the same level of engagement with their professors that they would have had had they been in the college.*

Interactive Environment

Other factors mentioned were lack of contact with lecturers, cooperative learning environment, talking/discussing matters with lecturers and other students. These responses identify for us the hidden dynamic of the educational setting. The transmission of knowledge and the process of learning goes hand in hand with a positive, interactive and social environment. The level of cooperation that happens between students, especially in practical classes, was identified as an outcome of the course work they engage in. This is a characteristic of the education provided in

Bolton St. but may not have been given much attention by students in the past, however, now that it is removed, the value of what has been on offer is seen, named, and appreciated. It is within this context that students mature, engage and lose the constraints that were placed on them in previous educational settings.

While reading through the responses there was an incredible insight shared by 20% of the respondents who feared that the lack of a social, interactive environment with fellow students and staff in a college setting may leave first years acting like secondary school students in a third level setting. Here are two responses highlighting this:

> *Learning how to manage your assignments and be responsible with your time management. It's easy to forget that you're not in secondary school anymore and the lecturers will not be giving you constant reminders to do your work.*

> *Feeling the exciting difference between secondary school and college life.*

Practical Matters

However, there are some very practical matters that are of concern for our second years as they reflect on the plight of incoming first years. Some subjects require getting used to equipment, subjects that require studio time, teasing out difficult issues in subjects like maths, mechanics, measuring and costing and Adobe/GIS will be all the more difficult if classes are taught on line. Other students worry because their home computer does not have college capability and they rely heavily on the computers in college. The experience of last year's first year students of lecturer/student interaction was obviously quite positive and was an important part of their learning and development as it is mentioned specifically by 23% of the respondents.

> *The lack of in person experience due to Covid. Some things just need to be explained or shown in person to get a really good understanding.*

> *Making new friends within your course because it's so much easier when you have people to discuss assignments/ worries with.*

The students raise the point that, while socialisation and making friends is good fun it is also at the heart of the learning experience. Other items that were mentioned in this section were mental health, the lack of class trips, time management, money, creating notes from class and knowing what is important to record. These were mentioned once and sometimes twice while, yet again, motivation and organisation was mentioned four times in this section.

Tips

The final question asked what assistance the second years can give to first years via the Peer Mentor program. Without doubt, there were two areas that the second years felt they could be of immense benefit to the first-year experience. The first was 'tips' and the second was creating networks of communication.

The areas covered in tips was quite extensive but the Peer Mentors acknowledge that they have an expertise with regard to coping with, and enjoying first year. This is precisely why this program is in place – because from a student perspective they are the experts in first year. The tips they can offer are on matters like how to take notes, how to find your way around college, where to find help and support when needed, how to cope with living away from home, how to stay motivated, trusting your classmates and your lecturers, finding your way around the college and around Dublin, how to be confident around on-line lectures and class participation, staying healthy, how to save your work on-line, involvement with college societies and clubs, how to budget, preparing good, healthy and thrifty meals, how to keep on top of the inevitable work load and, finally, developing a healthy schedule. A number of the respondents suggested putting many of these tips on PowerPoint slides that can be shared with the first years over a period of time.

> *For example, we could encourage waking up early, eating well and what to eat, how much exercise and different sports help getting into a routine and feeling better physically and mentally. Also, how it's important giving yourself a break in between work and study even if it's just out in the garden.*

Previous experience has shown that there are GDPR issues involved in setting up informal on line supports and one always has to be mindful that many first years are under 18 years of age.

Networking

The second theme in this section that arose was the benefits of networking for incoming first years. The need for informal networking and support was raised in 26% of the responses. Suggestions ranged around WhatsApp groups, or other group chats where people would have an opportunity to get to know others in their class. Though there was an expressed interest in 'checking-in' on first years, there is a strong desire to meet the first year's face to face so that they can get to know the mentors thus building up a better bond with them.

> *We can keep giving them tips and advice as & when required, be approachable and regularly go to their classes and talk to them.*

One reply acknowledges the need to support the students but also emphasised the third-level nature of the environment so while the second years are there to help, the first years should be allowed 'to navigate the unique challenges they are faced with themselves'.

Conclusion

The overall theme in this survey is the loss of community and human interaction. There are suggestions advising how this can be counteracted, but we are learning once again that education, especially at third level, is a highly interactive environment for undergraduate students. However, there is a strong commitment on the part of the second years to be a support to the first years at this time of transition. They firmly believe that they have the ability to offer practical advice, and assist the students as they try to develop a sense of belonging to the University in their first-year experience. The observation by many that incoming first years may remain locked into a second-level mode of learning is one that is to be noted and, hopefully, ways can be found to encourage students to mature into third level students. This leaves all involved in the educational process, academics as well as those in student services, to devise and develop strategies by which incoming students engage with all elements of college life. In conclusion, it is worthy to note that many of the mentors remember the benefits of last year's Peer Mentor program when they were first years as evidenced in these quotes.

I believe that the peer mentor program can be helpful with not only encouraging the students but also by giving them advice, obviously as second years we will have more experience than they would as they enter the course and they may appreciate having a student's opinion on the course and its elements. I know last year when the second years were brought into our class and we had a chat after the introductions, it was great to hear their experiences and to ask questions that you wouldn't really ask a lecturer.

We can help the first years by giving them our personal advice, and telling them our own personal stories, maybe even mistakes we have made that they should not need to make.