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“Are the study habits of first year undergraduate students influenced by where they live while attending college?”

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ABSTRACT

This study was carried out in the Dublin Institute of Technology with the co-operation of four experienced lecturers of engineering and fifty first year undergraduate engineering students.

The main aim of the research was to establish if living away from the family home influences the study habits of first year undergraduate students.

Many causes of attrition in first year are identified in the research. For this research project the four experienced lecturers were interviewed to capture their views and experiences of the study and learning habits of first year students. The data gathered in conjunction with my own personal experiences, and knowledge gathered from the research literature on the subject, served to guide and inform the selection of the questions which were used in a subsequent student survey.

The analysis of the data gathered provides a detailed insight into the views of the engineering lecturers and the factors which represent barriers to the first year students study and learning. This chapter focuses specifically on the relationship between the students' living arrangements and their study habits.

INTRODUCTION

This mixed method case study was carried out in the Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland and was conducted with the co-operation of four experienced lecturers of engineering and three groups of first year undergraduate engineering students. Many first year engineering students do not return to college for the second year of their programmes. Many reasons for this are identified in the research, including the failure of students to pass assessments and exams as a result of the lack of independent study and learning. The causes of non progression and strategies which might be employed to address the phenomenon have been the subject of vast quantities of research by the international social science research community. Works by Yorke & Longden (2004) have provided invaluable guidance and insight to researchers with an interest in this topic. The fact that there is such great interest in the causes of non completion and the improvement of retention of students signals a high level of commitment to the students by education professionals, the institutes they work in and the organisations which governed them. This is reflected in how Becker (1975) views the development of education on an international scale, he suggests that a “human capital” approach has been adopted by many of the world's governments, this can be summarised as, viewing the success of each economy in terms of the degree to which its labour force is educated.

Professor Vincent Tinto, one of the world foremost researchers of the subject of student retention, while making a presentation titled “Enhancing Student Retention: Lessons learned in the United States” at the National Conference on Student Retention, Dublin (Tinto, 2010) suggested that the United States of America (USA) is currently undergoing a paradigmatic shift in how institutes think about their role in promoting student success. Tinto suggests that Barr & Tagg (1995) capture the essence of this shift by describing it as the movement from an instructional paradigm to a learning paradigm. It involves shifting the focus from how its institutes and educators instruct and teach students to how they can help the

students to learn. The learning paradigm being adopted expands the lens of enquiry about student learning, helping to shape the environment and conditions that promote student progression. In 2006 the Higher Education Academy funded a large scale review of literature around the first year experience in the UK demonstrating that the issues of attrition and retention of first year students is high on the list of its priorities (Harvey et al, 2006) This review suggests that a large number of first year students in the UK expressed a considerable dislike for the experience they encountered of being taught or instructed rather than having their learning facilitated. This is significant as it relates directly to the paradigmatic shift described earlier which is perceived by Tinto to be occurring in the USA.

With a view to exploring the influence the students living arrangements has on their study and learning habits a case study design was selected. For this research, qualitative interviews were carried out with four experienced lecturers to capture their views and experiences of the study and learning habits of first year students. As mentioned earlier the data gathered during these interviews, along with my own personal experiences and knowledge gathered from the research literature on the subject, were utilised to guide and inform the questions selected for a student survey.

The analysis of the data gathered provides a detailed insight into the views of the engineering lecturers and the factors which represent barriers to the first year students study and learning.

The main aim of the research was to establish if living away from the family home influences the study and learning habits of first year engineering students.

Context

As an Assistant Lecturer with the School of Manufacturing and Design Engineering which is part of the College of Engineering and the Built Environment (CoEBE) at the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) since January of 2001, I have been engaged in the delivery of modules on undergraduate Mechanical, and Building Services Engineering programs. Students are required to complete individual assignments as part of the assessment for these modules. In recent years I have become increasingly concerned about the rising numbers of first year students on these programs who did not complete and submit the individual assignments. Despite offers of support and regular reminders of the deadlines for completion of the work, many of these students simply did not present any work. The consequences of not completing these assignments were highlighted to the students, to no avail. Many educational theorists cite academic difficulties and lack of commitment to study as causes of non completion of first year students. As an educator I have a natural curiosity about the reasons why some of these students do not engage in the independent study and learning required for the completion of these assignments.

Research Aim

The main aim of this research was to closely examine the relationship between the students' living arrangements and their study habits with a view to establishing if living away from family home has any influence on the students study habits and how they prepare for individual assessments.

Research Objectives

The objective was to examine and compare data gathered from two sample groups. Students living in the family home while attending college, and students who were not. Examined and compared were,

- The amount of time the students from each group spend studying per week.
- Where and when the students from each group study.
- How the students from each group prepare for assessments and individual assignments.

BACKGROUND

This research focused on the study habits of first year undergraduate engineering students. Hart (2005) suggests that the search and review of the literature for a research study is a critical evaluation, analysis and synthesis the knowledge that exists around the research problem. The literature review, not only seeks to explore in detail of all aspects of the research question, it also seeks to uncover gaps in the knowledge that exists about the research problem. The initial stages of a literature review for this study helped to inform the selection of the research design and data collection methodology used. In order to explore all avenues of the literature around the research problem the following main areas were explored.

This study was conducted in the College of Engineering and the Built Environment (CoEBE) which now has 9 schools through which it offers 26 undergraduate engineering related programs. The Phenomenon of first year attrition is not unique to the DIT. A study conducted by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) (Mooney et al, 2010) shows that for the academic year 2007/2008 the proportion of first year undergraduate students studying at Irish Institutes of Technology who did not progress to the second year of their programs was 22%. The non progression figure across all third level institutes in Ireland was 15% (Mooney et al, 2010). Many initiatives have been put in place by higher education institutes to provide support and guidance to at risk first year students. Many institutes have put in place students support services manned by dedicated staff that provides advice and guidance to students on a wide range of issues. In order to establish if independent study and learning suited the learning styles of engineer's a review of the literature around the learning styles of engineering students was conducted. Felder (1998) discussing learning styles in engineering students suggests that,

- Active learners learn things by working things out or by working with others
- Reflective learners learn by thinking thing through or working alone
- Sensing learners are orientated towards facts and procedures
- Intuitive learners are orientated towards theories
- Visual learners prefer visual presentations of presented material
- Verbal learners prefer written or spoken explanations
- Sequential learners learn in incremental steps and
- Global learners are system thinkers who like to learn in large leaps.

O'Dwyer (2008) examined these learning styles in a group of 35 students studying electrical engineering at the DIT. Using the Index of Learning Styles (ILS) (Felder & Soloman, 1991 as cited in O'Dwyer 2008) which is a 44 item questionnaire with multiple choice answers (2 per question), the findings indicated that there is no single specific learning style that can be attributed to engineering students. The foremost learning styles which emerged in the group were the active and sensing followed by visual and sequential learning styles.

The causes of attrition in first years.

Tinto's Integration Model Tinto (1993) is based on the theory that the failure of first year students to integrate into either the social or academic communities in college can often cause them to re evaluate the goals and expectations they had set for college life. This often results in them withdrawing from college. It is widely accepted that Tinto's work and the research around it resulted in the acknowledgement by third level institutions worldwide that there is a need to

ensure that a suitable blend of academic and social experience are accessible to not just first year students, but all students. Further studies by Braxton et al (2000) and Braxton & Hirchy (2004) as cited in Yorke & Longden (2004) examined the commitment and integrity of Institutions, this contributed considerably to the recognition of the value and importance of the actions of teachers and administration staff to mission and values of their institute. This study resulted in the greater Institutional commitment to student welfare and to the support of risk first year students.

The first year experience.

Yorke & Longden (2008) tells us that the majority of students who leave first year leave have left by the end of the first semester. It is fair to conclude that the early experiences of these students have a significant influence on whether or not they will stay at college. Transitional issues or factors which contribute to student attrition which can be related directly to the early experiences of these students are, unpreparedness, unawareness of the challenges, lack of commitment and or integration and poor attendance.. The views about whether or not students are negatively affected academically by being in employment are mixed. Curtis & Sham (2002) suggest that students missing lectures due to being in employment results in the lower assessment scores, however the students do benefit the experience of working by developing skills, greater understanding of the world of business and an increase in confidence. Choy (2002) shows that students who worked more than fifteen hours per week, had a lower persistence rates. Working part time on Campus for the entire first year in college resulted in significantly higher retention and higher academic achievement. The impact of the student being in employment is discussed further in the next section.

Monitoring and assessing tools.

The sequential mixed research method design was selected as the most suitable for this research. The Pragmatic worldview provided the theoretical underpinning for the research for which a case study strategy of enquiry was employed. The initial qualitative stage was a series of four exploratory interviews with experienced lecturers. These interviews, the literature and my experiences as an educator served to guide and inform questions which were included in the second stage of the study, a quantitative student survey.

Development stages.

The Interviews were conducted on the following dates, 25TH November 2010, 13th December 2010 and 13th January 2011.

While the findings from the interviews were allowed to have significant influence on the questions a strong focus was maintained on the original research question. The student survey was generated in an online format. There were two reasons for selecting this format. The first was to take advantage of surveying software which aids the collection and analysis of quantitative data. The second was to facilitate completion by students during a session in a computer laboratory.

Findings and conclusions.

The research findings provide an interesting insight into the study habits and attitudes to preparation for individual assignments and assessments from both groups of students, those living at home and those who were not. As illustrated below in Figure 1 the research tells us that, students living away from home spend considerably more time studying alone. The findings concur with both my personal experience and one of the interviewees. When asked if he thought, students' living away from home was a barrier to their learning, he indicated,

“Students tell me they have a lot of time on their hands in the evenings, I'd imagine that they would use this to do a bit of study or to do assignments”.

It could be argued that living away from home takes a considerable degree of maturity and independence. This maturity is reflected in the amount of time spent studying.

	Living at home	Living away from home
Living Arrangements	56%	44%
0 – 2 hours study per week	46%	32%
2 – 4 hours study per week	47%	50%
Over 4 hours study per week	7%	18%

Fig.1

Figure 2 below shows that students living away from home are more likely to spread the work for upcoming assessments and assignments over the time available than students living at home. And also that students living away from home study more on week days and are more inclined to utilise the college library for study.

	Living at home	Living away from home
Spread the work for assignments over the time available	41%	59%
Study on weekdays	39%	61%
Use library in college to study.	45%	55%

Figure. 2

In conclusion, the research conducted here suggest that, for this sample group, living away from the family home while attending college has had a positive influence on their study habits.

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