# The first semester of university life; 'will I be able to manage it at all?'

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**Abstract** This paper reports on an Irish study examining first year students' recollections of their concerns, motivations, level of preparedness and perceived skills on entry to university. The study aims to investigate and understand the implications of the attitudes of first year students as they make the transition to university. It also explores students' behaviour during their initial weeks at university. It is important to understand the anxieties of new students, their views on their abilities and their confidence in managing their new role as these factors will have consequences for their experience as first year university students. These findings are explored with a view to enhancing the quality of support for students during this key transition.

**Keywords** First year · University transition · Skills · Workloads · Motivation

## Introduction

The first year of university life is a crucial time for students as a key transition is taking place. As well as becoming familiar with their discipline areas, they are becoming university students and are 'active participants' in this socialisation process (McInnis 2001, 108). They are exposed to both the formal and hidden curricula, the latter term referring to

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the 'informal and implicit demands' made by the university which can often create uncertainty (Bergenhenegouwen 1987, 536). A successful university career requires that students master both (Tinto 1993). International research on student transitions to university highlights the importance of this key period in their academic life, as those who have difficulties with the transition may perform poorly and/or disengage at an early stage from university life (Lowe and Cook 2003; Pitkethly and Prosser 2001).

This paper reports on an Irish study examining first year University College Dublin (UCD) students' recollections of their concerns, motivations, level of preparedness and perceived skills on entry to university. The study aimed to investigate and understand the implications, for universities in Ireland and internationally, of the formative attitudes of first year students. Specifically it explored students' behaviour during their initial weeks at university and possible links between these attitudes and behaviours. As Becker et al. (1995, 2) argue 'we should study students' views of their own experiences because, we think, it is the best way to find out what influences those features of student behaviour we are interested in' (see also Hunter 2006, 9). A related goal was to gather empirical evidence to inform and support the enhancement of the first year experience, a key strategic priority of our university. This focus emerged from a general perception amongst staff and university administrators that there was a problem with the first year experience, a problem defined as a lack of engagement and demonstrated by poor attendance.

This institutional priority is reflective of a broader international focus on the Enhancement of the First Year Experience, evident in research and policy initiatives that have mushroomed across the US, Australia and the UK in recent years. As Krause et al. (2005) have argued, research should play a key role in ensuring the quality and effectiveness of initiatives aimed at improving the first year experience. In Ireland, the scholarship of teaching and learning and more policy oriented institutional research have been underdeveloped and as a result there is a paucity of research in this area (but see Kirby and McElroy 2003; Byrne and Flood 2005 and Blaney and Mulkeen 2008). This paper will contribute to the development of an evidence base to inform both academic policy and future enhancements aimed at improving the Irish and specifically UCD student experience. This is particularly important at a time of expansion in student numbers coupled with declining resources.

## Background and context

The higher education system in Ireland is categorised as 'Anglophone' by Scheutze and Slowey (2002, 311) and is broadly similar to the system found in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. However, unlike students in many other countries, since 1997 Irish students have not been charged tuition fees, although they are charged registration fees (currently €1,654 at UCD) (see Darmody and Smyth 2008 for further discussion). Between 1973 and 2003 the numbers of Irish students in higher education increased fivefold and between 55 and 60% of school-leavers participate in higher education (Clancy 2007, 101, 110). Like other universities in Ireland and internationally, the experience of students and educators at UCD has been altered by the move from an elite to a mass university sector. The makeup of the student body is strongly influenced by socio-economic background and although there has been some increase in the numbers of working class students, middle class groups continue to have far higher participation rates (Clancy 2007). There are also fewer students over 23 than in other OECD countries (Darmody and Smyth 2008, 351).

In the last decade, government education policy in Ireland has favoured the introduction of more flexible frameworks for learning, with an emphasis on life-long learning and widening participation. In response, most Irish higher education institutions have undergone dramatic restructuring both at an administrative and curricular level. UCD has responded by completely redeveloping its undergraduate education programme and introducing both modularisation and semesterisation. Our study was thus undertaken within the context of a rapidly changing national context and a local institutional structure that had adapted in response to these changes.

University College Dublin (UCD) is the largest university in the Republic of Ireland. In 2007 there were 22, 082 students attending the university, approximately three-quarters of students of whom were undergraduates. UCD is a publicly funded, research-intensive university and was ranked 108 in the world in the 2008 *Times Higher Education* world university rankings (http://www.topuniversities.com/worlduniversityrankings). The university is made up of five Colleges (Arts and Celtic Studies; Business and Law; Engineering, Mathematical and Physical Sciences; Human Sciences; Life Sciences) that have a function similar to that of Faculties in other institutions. It is an urban commuter campus, with approximately 14% of the student population living in campus accommodation. In 2007 the majority of incoming undergraduate students at UCD came to university straight from secondary school, and more than 50% were living at home. Approximately 50% of these incoming students are beginning their university careers by succeeding in getting a place on their first choice course. The 2007 retention rate for UCD was 83.7% (Blaney and Mulkeen 2008, 19). Incoming first year students have a 1 or 2 day orientation programme before the start of the academic year. At the time of the study a peer mentoring scheme was in place in only one of the Colleges in UCD, Life Sciences.

## Literature review

The international literature on the first year experience highlights three key issues of concern across a range of contexts: transition and motivation, student expectation and time management.

Transition and motivation

International research on student transitions to university highlights the importance of a successful transition period; those who have difficulties with the transition may perform poorly and/or disengage from university life (Lowe and Cook 2003; Pitkethly and Prosser 2001). In response, many universities worldwide have initiated major initiatives to support this transition and to encourage student engagement. The starting point for many of these initiatives is that institutions have a responsibility to support incoming students (Barefoot et al. 2005, 381). Successful initiatives are many and varied; Barefoot et al. (2005, xvi) identify twenty initiatives contributing to excellence in first year programmes in US institutions, including peer mentoring schemes (for discussion see Jacobi 1991), first year seminars, orientation and common reading.

In a recent overview of the available research in this area, Bovill et al. (2008, 42) report that student retention and performance are key concerns across a range of contexts and that 'both appear to be linked with motivational factors such as interest, expectations of HE and support for learning' (Bovill et al. 2008, 42). A related issue is student engagement (Bryson and Hand 2007). While this is a complex phenomenon, Reason et al. (2005 cited in Bovill

et al. 2008, 42) have found that students' perceptions of their academic competences were related to their engagement with the university. The literature suggests a link between the attitudes of first year students and their likely behaviour during their first year at university, and it is this relationship that our research will further investigate.

Behaviour of any kind is closely linked to motivation and this is equally true of the transition to university. The initial motivation for participation at higher education has an impact on how students subsequently fare at university (Archer 1994). Motivations are generally thought of as stimulated by the self (intrinsic motivation) or by external influences (extrinsic motivation) (Fazey and Fazey 2001). Each of these types of motivation has its own logic and may be associated with different degrees of engagement, types of learning behaviours and likelihood of success. Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) link non-completion to extrinsic motivations. The available research on the reasons incoming Irish students have for going to university highlights the importance of both factors. In their pre-enrolment survey of students at the University of Ulster, Lowe and Cook (2003) found that academic and career reasons (extrinsic), were rated more importantly as a motivation for coming to university than personal reasons. Only 22% of their respondents rated parental influence as an important motivator, while 31% of their respondents rated enjoyment as important. Byrne and Flood (2005, 119) in a study of accounting students at Dublin City University found vocational motives to be important for 90% of respondents. However 67% of their respondents also stated that the opportunity offered for an active social life was very important or important. These students had a view of university education as involving personal as well as academic development and 70% of students surveyed rated 'Going to university seemed like the natural thing to do' as either very important or important (see also Lowe and Cook 2003, 58).

Student expectations and concerns

While students may be highly motivated to participate in higher education, their enthusiasm may be quickly dampened by the reality of the first few weeks at university. Goldfinch and Hughes (2007, 260) argue that 'students tend to enter university with high confidence in their key skills', although this confidence may be misplaced for some. In the Byrne and Flood study (2005, 120) a similar pattern is reported. These high levels of reported confidence may limit students' ability to recognise the need to acquire new skills essential in their new environment and immediately disadvantage them. To the contrary, Fazey and Fazey (2001, 346) argue that confidence may have positive consequences by motivating students 'to engage in achievement behaviours'.

However, given the diversity in the student body, not all students will approach the beginning of their university career with positivity. Research by Cooke et al. (2006, 514) found that the start of the first year of university is a particularly anxious time for personal as well as academic reasons. In their findings, Lowe and Cook (2003) report that the majority of those living away from home anticipated problems with missing family and friends and with their ability to cope with living away from home. Hockings et al. (2007, 227), in a study of pre-entry students in the UK, found four key social concerns were anticipated by respondents: financial, making friends, identity and whether or not they would be treated fairly and as adults. Similar issues were raised by respondents in Lynch and O'Riordan's (1998) study of the impact of social class on Irish working class students in higher education who feared being isolated and feeling like an outsider (1998, 462). In the current 'mass' system, it may be more difficult for students to feel like they 'belong' at their chosen institution (Read et al. 2003). Wilcox et al. (2005) argue that social support

from friends is essential to student success and this is perhaps one of the issues why peer mentoring schemes have become widespread as part of many orientation programmes.

Time allocation and management

From a practical perspective, the transition to university is often characterized as liberation from the structured nature of secondary education. While the flexibility to manage their own time is a key opportunity for students, it is often one of the most difficult aspects of the transition for students to manage. Time management skills are seen by many as crucial to incoming university students, as indicated by their prominence in many student 'how-to-study books' (for example see Price and Maier 2007, 54–76 and McMillan and Wyers 2006, 46–53). There is some evidence of a link between time management skills and GPA (see for example George et al. 2008; Brittan and Tessor 1991). There is also evidence that good time management can help students avoid academic stress (Misra and McKean 2000), and that time management skills can be learnt (see Zimmerman et al. 1994, 192–195 for further discussion).

Kuh (2007) reports that, in the United States, first-year college students expect to do far more than they actually do; they study, read and write less than they had anticipated. In contrast, Lowe and Cook (2003) report that students' estimates of the weekly time they would spend in lectures and private study (36.8 h) were slightly lower than the notional hours for a full-time University of Ulster student (40 h) (also see Byrne and Flood 2005). However, similar to Kuh's (2007) findings, in a follow-up survey, students' reports of actual hours spent in lectures and studying were lower again (27 h). These are important findings as time and effort impact significantly on academic success. If students are coming to university with unrealistically low expectations, institutions need to more clearly communicate their expectations about the time demands and commitment expected.

One of the most widely discussed aspects of the time management/allocation debate has been the balance of time spent between paid and academic work. Krause et al. (2005) report a decline in the amount of time Australian students spend on-campus and in class, and an increase in the time spent in paid employment. This has led to concerns about the consequences for student attainment and is supported by the work of Lindsay and Paton-Saltzberg (1993) who found that working during term time negatively impacted on grades and likelihood of passing. However others, for example Harvey (2005), point to the positive consequences of relevant work experience for students' employability and this may become more important as the labour market becomes tighter and more competitive. Rather than assuming a uniform impact, we need to better understand how paid employment and other outside commitments impact on different students (Winn 2002).

In an Irish context, Darmody and Smyth (2008) suggest that during the recent economic boom in Ireland, there was a growth in the jobs available for students. Their 2004 research on Irish higher education students found that 61% worked during the academic term, an increase on previous figures. The majority worked in the service sector with an average working week of 14 h, a figure similar to the UK context. Female students were more likely to be in paid employment and students attending universities were less likely to be employed that those attending other higher education institutions. Similar trends elsewhere have led to concerns about the impact of paid work on a range of outcomes. Our research investigates the assumption that students spend a significant proportion of their week in paid employment and highlights some surprising results.

### The first year experience project

In 2007 UCD identified the first year experience as an area of strategic institutional importance. A team of four university fellows in teaching and academic development, from a range of disciplines, were appointed to focus on this issue. The first year experience project, initiated by the team, examined students' recollections of their motivations, expectations, concerns and perceived skills on entry. The study explored students' behaviour during their first 8 weeks at university, in particular their time allocation and levels of engagement. This was undertaken with a view to developing empirically informed policy enhancements to support the first year experience.

### Methodology

An online survey exploring motivation to attend higher education, expectations in relation to teaching, learning and other issues, a self-evaluation of abilities and skills, and personal experiences of the first months of university was administered to all first year students at the end of week eight. This is an important time in the first year for students. They have had an opportunity to engage in university life and evaluate their choice of course and university. The skills, aptitudes and capabilities needed in this new environment are also becoming evident. The majority have completed their first assignments, many will have received feedback, and the prospect of end-of-semester exams begins to loom large.

The questionnaire design was informed by the work of Keup (2006) and Lowe and Cook (2003) and used a mix of closed and open-ended questions. A web-based survey was chosen as the most appropriate and efficient method to obtain the data required. A self-selecting sample of 1,227 stage one students completed the questionnaire, a response rate of 28%.

Following an initial screening of the qualitative answers by two of the researchers, a coding frame highlighting key recurrent themes was developed and individual answers were then coded. Once the data was coded, academic and demographic information related to age, sex, entry qualifications, programme of study and home address was linked to the survey data. The data was then imported into SPSS where descriptive analyses were undertaken. Pearsons ($r$) and Spearman's rho ($\rho$) correlations were used to test the significance of observed associations between variables.

### Quality of sample

In 2007, University College Dublin had 4,402 full-time stage one (first year) students, distributed across its five colleges, 93% of whom were under 23. The sample we obtained was a convenience rather than a representative one, but our respondents were broadly similar to the wider first year student body. The mean age was 19.9 (compared to 19.79); the sample was 58% female (compared to 54.3% female) (Blaney and Mulkeen 2008, 19) and their entry score was slightly higher than the mean. The distribution of the sample across the colleges was also similar to the wider population, with three Colleges slightly under-represented and two over-represented (see Table 1 below). Collecting data at college level allowed us to investigate disciplinary difference which we considered potentially of interest, given that universities are not homogenous entities, and that students' experiences across disciplines may be different 'both cognitively and socially' (Ylijoki 2000, 339).

One key difference in the group of respondents was that the number of students living at home was 83%, a figure much higher than the overall population, where approximately 60% of first year students live at home.

**Table 1** Distribution of Stage 1 students, survey respondents and respondents as % of Stage 1 population across colleges at University College Dublin

| Colleges | Stage 1 population by college | % of respondents by college | Respondents as % of Stage 1 population |
|---|---|---|---|
| Business & Law | 18 | 16.9 | 26.1 |
| Engineering, Maths & Physical sciences | 21.4 | 26.3 | 34.2 |
| Life sciences (including medicine, nursing) | 19.8 | 21.3 | 30 |
| Human sciences (social science) | 3.4 | 2.4 | 19.9 |
| Arts & Celtic studies | 37.3 | 33.1 | 24.4 |

**Table 2** Extent to which students enjoyed classes early in semester 1 by Programme Area (average response on Likert Scale where 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree)

| Programme area | Mean | N | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| Radiography | 4.22 | 9 | 0.667 |
| Physiotherapy | 3.95 | 21 | 0.805 |
| Sports Mgt and Health & Performance science | 3.91 | 11 | 1.136 |
| Nursing | 3.91 | 89 | 0.913 |
| Law | 3.87 | 82 | 0.782 |
| Architecture | 3.86 | 14 | 0.535 |
| Social science | 3.79 | 29 | 0.861 |
| Medicine | 3.74 | 54 | 0.873 |
| Vet Medicine | 3.7 | 30 | 0.915 |
| Arts | 3.59 | 362 | 1.017 |
| Business | 3.56 | 114 | 0.903 |
| Science | 3.52 | 185 | 0.95 |
| Engineering | 3.07 | 100 | 0.987 |
| Agrifood and Agricultural science | 2.89 | 45 | 0.982 |
| Total | 3.58 | 1145 | 0.976 |

## Results

Three-quarters the way through the first semester in university, students' evaluation of their experience was largely positive. 73% strongly agreed or agreed that 'UCD is an interesting and stimulating place to study', a level of enthusiasm that, according to Bryson and Hand (2007, 359) indicates engagement. In addition 60% strongly agreed or agreed that they had enjoyed classes so far, another indicator of engagement (Bryson and Hand 2007, 359). The extent to which students had enjoyed classes is shown in Table 2 below by programme area.

Differences appear in the levels of enjoyment reported by students across disciplines, with Agrifood and Agricultural Science students reporting the least, and Radiography the most, enjoyment of classes. The pattern for student enthusiasm was broadly similar. It is interesting to note that in the three areas reporting the highest rates of enjoyment average class sizes are the smallest in the university.

The results demonstrate that by week eight students appeared to know the behaviours usually required for success at university. In order to do well, students recognized that they

should regularly attend lectures (85%), complete assignments (97%) and take responsibility for their own learning (97%). However this knowledge does not necessarily translate into behaviour. Students were not as positive in terms of how they were managing their own studies; 34% strongly agreed or agreed that they felt on top of their studies while 32% strongly disagreed or disagreed with this statement. For the remaining one-third there was uncertainty about how they were getting on. Although those who were not in paid employment were more likely to feel on top of their studies, this was not a statistically significant difference. In the survey, 90% of respondents expected to complete their first year at UCD, and only 2% did not expect to complete. This was another variable where there were differences across the colleges, with students in the College of Business and Law most likely to agree (95%) and Arts and Celtic Studies least likely to agree (87%) with this statement ($\rho = .074$, sig. at 0.05 level). These variations demonstrate the importance of considering discipline specific interventions, instead of a one-size fits all approach to first year enhancement.

Motivation

The primary motivating factor for students entering UCD was to enhance their employment prospects, closely followed by a desire to explore subjects that really interest them, demonstrating the relevance of both extrinsic and intrinsic motivating factors. The postponement of full-time employment was not a motivating factor for most students, but a clear social expectation from family and friends that students will attend university emerged from this study. Table 3 ranks the responses given by UCD students to the reasons for choosing to study at university and is based on responses made in the strongly agree/agree categories.

Bivariate analysis revealed only small variations across programmes in relation to motivations, and these were not of statistical significance. Law, Architecture and Social Science students were more likely to report the desire to postpone fulltime work as a motivation, and Physiotherapy, Sports Management and Vet Medicine students the least likely. Parental influence was reported as strongest for Sports Management, Law and Engineering students, with between 70 and 75% of respondents in these programmes agreeing or strongly agreeing that this was a key motivating factor for them.

For those whose parents act as a strong motivating factor for going to college, there is a small but statistically significant negative correlation with their experience of college in the first months; they have enjoyed classes less ($\rho = -.099$ sig. at 0.01) and feel less on top of their studies ($\rho = -.159$ sig. at 0.01) than students motivated by other factors. In contrast, for those who were very strongly motivated by the desire to study subjects that interest them, there is a statistically significant positive correlation ($\rho = 0.217$ sig. at 0.01) with their experience and enjoyment of college in the first semester.

**Table 3** Motivating factors for attendance at third level education

| Rank | Reason | % | N |
|------|--------|-----|------|
| 1 | To enhance employment prospects | 94.1 | 1083 |
| 2 | To explore subjects of interest | 88.7 | 1020 |
| 3 | Opportunities for active social life | 73.5 | 844 |
| 4 | Normal thing to do | 63.1 | 726 |
| 5 | Parents expected me to go | 56.2 | 645 |
| 6 | Postpone fulltime work | 30.3 | 345 |

Our findings on motivation are broadly similar to Lowe and Cook (2003) and Byrne and Flood (2005) in relation to employment prospects, parental influence, social life and that coming to college was a natural thing to do. One advantage of surveying students when they are well into the first semester of their first year is that possible behavioural consequences can be explored. Our findings suggest that intrinsic motivation appears to have a positive effect on the mindset with which students enter university and on their initial experiences.

### Student expectations

All students enter college with a set of expectations that shape their responses to their new environment. In our survey, 50% of students strongly agreed or agreed that their expectations of UCD were accurate, while 20% strongly disagreed or disagreed. Of interest is the 30% that reported they were unsure about whether or not their expectations were accurate, perhaps indicative of a feeling of uncertainty about their new environment. This may be linked to specific issues identified in the literature as critical to the transition period with which UCD students readily identified.

### Student concerns

A wide range of anxieties about coming to the university were described by the respondents in an open-ended question regarding their concerns. The high response rate for this question (86%) confirms the finding from international research that for incoming students the start of the first year of university is a particularly anxious time. The most frequently cited concerns related to the social aspects of college life, with one third of answers falling into this broad category (see Table 4 below).

Social integration emerged as a key issue for almost one quarter of respondents. The anxiety was described as follows; 'Making friends as I knew no-one in the college before coming here'; 'making new friends and feeling comfortable in my new environment'. For those who already had friends at UCD there was often concern that they did not know anyone in their class; 'getting to know people in my course, as none of my friends were doing the same course as me'. Developing effective social networks is a key part of a successful transition to university life for many and was a source of major concern.

**Table 4** Fears and anxieties of incoming students to UCD

| Fear and anxiety | 1st response | | 2nd response (where more than one fear mentioned) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % |
| Fear of social isolation | 353 | 32.8 | 88 | 30.8 |
| Academic concerns (inc workload and transition school/3rd level) | 315 | 29.3 | 101 | 35.3 |
| Concerns about choice | 172 | 16 | 44 | 15.4 |
| Concerns about college life | 82 | 7.6 | 20 | 7 |
| Challenges of new life | 100 | 9.3 | 28 | 9.8 |
| Other | 53 | 4.9 | 5 | 1.7 |
| Total | 1,075 | 100 | 286 | 100 |

The second most important set of issues, raised by 29% of respondents, related to academic concerns and 'whether I would be able to manage it all'. Here students were most concerned about workload (12%) and that the level of the course might be too difficult for them (9%), described by one respondent as a fear of 'being in completely over my head'. A related and surprising issue, mentioned by 16% of students, was a general concern about their university and programme choices. 11% of students were concerned that they wouldn't enjoy either their course or UCD itself. They wondered whether 'I [would] actually like it even though I had always wanted to do it'. One respondent described this anxiety as worrying about 'having made the wrong choice of course and being stuck in it'. This may be suggestive of external pressures on students, perhaps parental or financial, in the initial decision-making processes.

The group of students who were concerned about the challenges of university life, particularly 'the size of UCD and how I would find everything' were a small percentage of the respondents to this question. Anxieties here included logistical issues, such as navigating the campus, and their abilities to manage personal issues such as moving away from home for the first time or finances. Overall the concerns of incoming UCD students were found to be broadly similar to those of students in other universities reported in previous studies.

### Perceived abilities and skills

Because students in Ireland are offered a University place through a competitive points-based entry process, they may have high level perceptions of their abilities and skills sets. To investigate this proposition, the survey required students to rate their skills (see also Lizzio and Wilson 2004) and ambition in relation to their classmates. They were presented with six categories from which to choose: highest 10%, above average, average, below average, lowest 10% and I don't know. In terms of academic ability 10% positioned themselves within the top decile, with the majority rating themselves as either above average (38%) or average (44%). This was positively correlated with points achieved in the Leaving Certificate entry examination ($r = 0.467$, sig. at 0.01).

The pattern is much more skewed for self-reported levels of ambition (Fig. 1). From the responses it is evident that UCD first year students are highly ambitious; 66.3% of all respondents placed themselves in the combined 'highest 10%' and 'above average' categories in relation to ambition.

Nonetheless, only 25% of those who rated their ambition in the top 10% also rated their academic ability at this level. For the remaining 75% a divergence between goals and means is evident, an issue that should be addressed if student expectations are to be effectively managed.

The analysis of the responses relating to skills also revealed differences when explored by sex. Males reported higher self-ratings of academic ability, writing ability and mathematics skills (all significant at 0.01 level), as well as self-confidence, and social skills. This finding is not surprising given what is known about gender and education in Ireland more generally. In the Leaving Certificate girls have done better than boys every year since 1993 (O'Connor 2007, 264). However despite this, Irish girls have a more negative view of their academic ability than boys (Hannan et al. 1996).

### Time allocation and management

In direct contrast to the findings on levels of ambition, the responses relating to time management (Fig. 2), illustrate that 31.7% of the students rated themselves in the
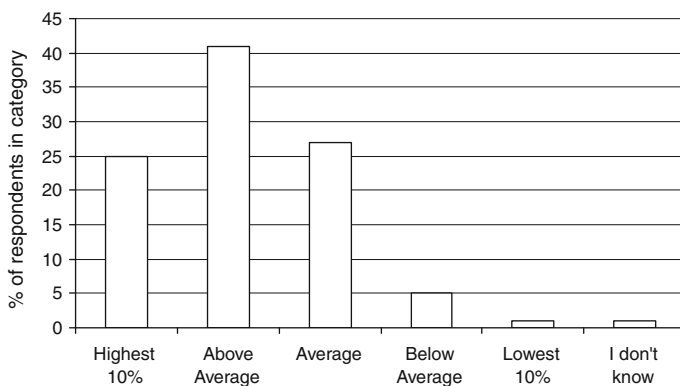
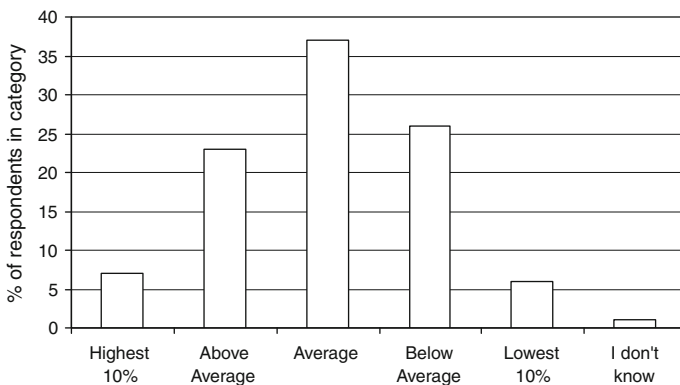**Fig. 1** Students' self-reported levels of ambition relative to their peers



**Fig. 2** Students' self-reported time-management skills relative to their peers

**Table 5** Estimate of mean number of hours spent on specified activities

| Activity | Lectures | Labs, tutorials, seminars | Assignments | Study and reading | Paid employment | Sports and socialising (on-campus) | Sports and socialising (off-campus) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hours per week | 12.2 | 4.0 | 3.2 | 4.7 | 2.7 | 3.6 | 4.3 |

combined 'below average' and 'lowest 10%' categories, with 37% rating their time management skills as average. While UCD first year students are highly ambitious, their level of confidence in their time-management skills is much lower. This is a key issue in much of the international literature on the first year experience, but some surprising features emerged from the UCD analysis.

In the survey students were asked to state the number of hours per week they plan to spend on a variety of academic and social activities. An estimate of the mean number of hours spent in each category is shown in Table 5.

Students expected to spend 24.1 h per week attending classes and on academic work. This figure is lower than the Eurostudent study, where Irish students reported spending
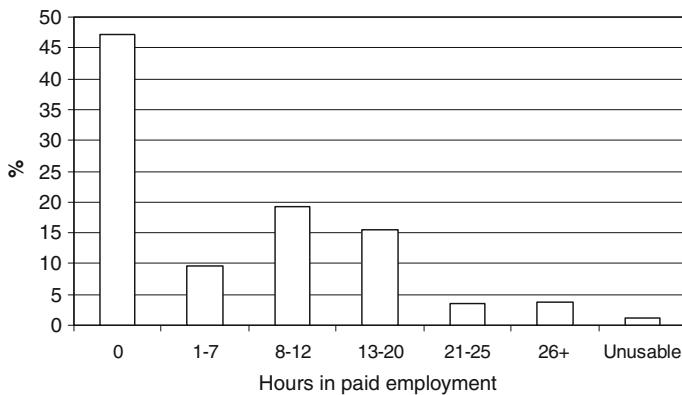
**Fig. 3** Time spent by UCD students in paid employment per week

27.1 h on study-related activities (Delaney et al. 2007). This is also much less than the university notional workload of 40–50 h per week and may suggest that the university is not communicating its expectations to incoming students in a clear fashion. This finding might also explain the previous finding on time management, suggesting that students' difficulties here may be related to insufficient time in their individual time budgets being allocated to university work.

One key difference that emerged related to students' place of residence. Students living at home spent more time socialising and in sporting activities off-campus compared to those living away from home, who socialised and played sport primarily on-campus. The former group were also more likely to be in paid employment ($\rho = -.120$, sig. 0.01). Both of these factors are considered to be negatively related to levels of academic and social engagement with the university.

The most surprising data to emerge was on the numbers of hours spent in paid employment. 47% of respondents reported that they were not in any form of paid employment (see Fig. 3). This figure is low both by international standards and in comparison to other Irish research which suggests between 55 and 61% of students work during term time (see Delaney et al. 2007, 40; Darmody and Smyth 2008). At the other end of the spectrum, 42% of students worked eight or more hours per week, which appears to be perceived as an acceptable level of paid employment and compatible with being a full-time student. This finding may go some way to explaining the divergence in the expectations of UCD as an institution and the students in terms of what constitutes full-time engagement with academic work.

Interesting variations emerge across programmes in relation to paid employment ($\rho = -0.064$, sig. at 0.05 level), with Architecture, Physiotherapy and Medicine students least likely to be in paid employment, and Nursing, Business and Law students the most likely.

## Discussion

A key aim of this study was to understand incoming students' attitude and behaviours to provide an evidence base from which to inform academic policy and future enhancements to the UCD student experience. The results highlighted that many international concerns in

relation to the first year experience are mirrored by students studying at UCD in particular related to motivation to study, student expectations and time allocation. In general, students are motivated by extrinsic factors such as the prospect of better employment opportunities but a substantial majority is also studying subjects that are of particular interest to them. What became most obvious from the survey was that students in the more professional programmes are motivated more strongly by extrinsic factors, particularly parental influence. For those who rated this as a strong motivating force, their initial university experiences appeared to be less positive. This key finding is crucial as students in Ireland make decisions on their choice of university programme at an early age and, anecdotal evidence would suggest, with significant parental input. The negative relationship between parental involvement and student enjoyment of university life during the transition period should be highlighted and fed back to parents, guidance counselors and to students at Open Days, as a way of re-shaping decision-making processes. Breaking this pattern, particularly for the high achievers of whom parents may have high career expectations, would be an important step in ensuring that programme choices are made for the right reasons. However parental influence may have a quite different role to play in helping the transition to university life through the encouragement of participation in campus events. Our results demonstrate key differences in student engagement with the institution between those living at or away from home. The former were much less involved with on-campus activities, widely accepted as an indicator of a general lack of engagement. Encouraging and actively facilitating on-campus living for first year students could be an important way to rapidly intensify their engagement with university life.

While students attending UCD had high levels of confidence in their own abilities, they arrived with many anxieties about university life, particularly related to social isolation. Historically, universities have only intervened minimally in this part of student life but given that academic work and the transition to university are influenced by feelings of social isolation this 'hands-off' policy is not a sensible approach. While students' anxieties were largely unfounded and overestimated, they must still be addressed explicitly during the first weeks of semester one. To do otherwise, would be to ignore a possible impediment to the process of becoming an effective university student. In many institutions, peer mentoring has been introduced in a bid to overcome these fears and optimize student engagement. At UCD, this activity has been expanded across an additional two Colleges and appears to be working very well. In addition, the university has made explicit attempts to engage students and build an online community prior to students' arrival on campus. The myucd.i.e website for prospective students now incorporates social networking, using MySpace, Twitter and Facebook, technologies with which the target group are generally comfortable and familiar. Students are facilitated in a very informal way to grow networks of contacts before they physically arrive on campus and to develop a level of confidence in interacting with their peers. Continuing this process during the first few weeks of semester one could potentially ameliorate much of the social isolation felt by incoming students, as they would have a ready network of contacts to draw on in the virtual, if not the physical, university.

Once students arrive on campus they face a new set of challenges that give rise to different anxieties, particularly in relation to time management which emerged as a major issue for first year students in our study. Having left the comparatively highly structured environment of secondary education, many students flounder with what they perceive to be so much time on their hands between classes. This is related to a lack of understanding of the nature of university learning and the importance of autonomous and independent reading and writing. From our results, particularly in relation to time allocation by

students, we would suggest that lack of engagement and poor attendance across many programmes are not solely attributable to students' spending most of their time in paid employment, but rather is related to a misconception of what constitutes 'full-time' study. A greater emphasis on training in time management skills during the first weeks of university life and the basic norms of being a university student need to be clearly explained and continually reinforced early in the first semester. This is particularly true of programmes such as the Bachelor of Arts which has a much less rigorous timetable and has more emphasis on independent learning than programmes such as Engineering and Science where laboratory and practical work make significant time demands.

## Conclusion

As Harvey and Drew (2006) have argued, you cannot talk about 'the' first year experience, as 'there is a multiplicity of first year experiences' (see also McInnis and James 1995). Our study has demonstrated that even within one institution, the student experience is highly variable. However, key issues do emerge that affect large groups and require specific interventions to optimize engagement. These interventions may be relatively simple, such as the development of social networking opportunities or the provision of 'free meet-and-greet lunches' in the first few weeks of semester one but they are required from a range of stakeholders both within and beyond the university and at a range of times prior to and immediately upon entering higher education. While this paper has highlighted how student attitudes impact on student behaviour in the first few weeks at university, it has also provided a clear empirical foundation on which enhancements are being built and implemented.

An increased institutional focus on the first year experience has been facilitated by the dissemination of our findings and a second team of researchers have been appointed to develop this work. Enhancing the first year experience is a key pillar of the 2009–2014 UCD Education Strategy and requires individual Schools and Colleges to explicitly address many of the themes discussed above. The structure of the first year programme is under review in three of the five colleges and the university is currently commissioning a number of online study skills modules, including one on time management. Complementing these supports should be a more explicit information flow at all stages of the application, entrance and settling-in periods to manage student expectations in relation to their own abilities and required workload. As our study has illustrated, this should be programme-specific and will only be effective if the university resists the temptation to adopt a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the first year experience.

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