

An Evaluation of the Information Landscape Surrounding Third-Level Study in Ireland

Introduction:

The aim of this research project is to gain a closer intuition on the difficulties experienced by young people in finding information on suitable courses of third-level study in Ireland, as well as the difficulties experienced by course providers in providing this information. This would culminate in concrete suggestions on how existing efforts to bridge this gap can be improved upon, and how new initiatives and technologies can be introduced to help solve this problem, one which seems to contribute, at least in part, to wider and more complex psychological and economic problems. Moving on through the next academic year and into the second summer of the Laidlaw programme, this would lead to the implementation of an online tool which replicates the time-efficient information gain offered by shadowing days through the use of rich media, interviews, and dynamic course and module information and reviews.

Mental Health Context

Recent reports (Dooley, O'Connor, Fitzgerald, & O'Reilly, 2019) (Cannon, Coughlan, Clarke, Harley, & Kelleher, 2013) have documented rising trends in anxiety and depression among young people in Ireland. These reports gain authority from their engagement with large sample sizes. For example, *My World Survey* collected responses from 19,407 second and third-level students. However, more could be done to document the role career and in particular third-level planning plays in these trends.

At a busy developmental and academic period in their lives, the burden upon young people to invest time in sifting through incomplete, badly organised, or even misleading information about particular courses of third-level study, along with the ramifications of choosing the wrong course or failing to complete a course of study seems to be an under-appreciated contributor to these symptoms of worsening mental health.

Economic Context

Ireland competes favourably with other OECD countries in third-level completion rates, however non-retention rates are still high among certain demographics and in certain areas of study, such as Computing and Engineering. Ireland's Higher Education Authority has aggregated many of the relevant Irish reports of the past 20 years. Many of these cite a lack of student preparedness for college, transitional issues from second to third level, and general feelings of having chosen the wrong course as fundamental reasons behind non-completion (Pigott & Frawley, 2019).

Other reports such as *Report on Retention, June 2009* document the financial waste associated with this problem, modelling a dramatic improvement in calendar deficits at the imagined 85%, 90%, and 95% levels of retention (Callaghan, 2009). This report also issues a list of illuminating recommendations to university colleagues on how to tackle the problem, the first of which being that 'all courses should review their undergraduate Prospectus entries and make sure that these realistically describe the course and expectations'. Elsewhere in the focused research report *Why*

Students Leave, 'wrong course choice' is the primary reason offered by students for withdrawal (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2015).

Research Aims

At any given moment, there are thousands of young people in Ireland planning their third-level path. The overall impression of these findings is that they deserve and quite pressingly need higher quality information about the reality of third-level courses.

From personal experience including working on the content management system of UCD's Schools of Graduate Studies and Medicine, working with Trinity Access Programme, and discussing the issue of recruitment at length with my proposed Laidlaw Supervisor Professor Ailbhe Ní Chasaide, it seems that although course directors desire better lines of communication with suitable second-level candidates, lack of familiarity with existing content management systems along with insufficient resources and time devoted to meaningful outreach endeavours mean they do not feel equipped to attend to these matters directly, even at the simplest level of regularly updating course websites and including helpful information such as contact details of current and past students. This outlook tallies with the conclusions of reports such as Callaghan's.

This suggests that the solution to this problem lies in making it as convenient and rewarding as possible for staff and current students to communicate their highly valuable perspectives to second-level students. This could give rise to the concept of a virtual shadowing experience, whereby prospective students be given access to sample course content (plenty of which has already been digitised by the necessities of the pandemic) as well as a kind of standardised course and module information and review platform with regular updates provided by current students and staff themselves. This and other possible solutions would be developed and phrased more robustly towards the end of the research project.

Methodology

I would start this 6-week research project with a closer review of the existing literature, some of which is introduced above, as well as a report on notable platforms, services, and initiatives, either developed by second and third-level institutions themselves or by third parties, already operating in the space.

I would operate primarily from the under-represented viewpoint of the young student, but also seek a deeper understanding of the positions of guidance counsellors and secondary principals, current third-level students, and course directors and other university staff, many of whom I am already in contact with through engagement with Trinity Access Programme.

Towards the end of the 6-week period I would gain a deeper intuition on the kinds of solutions required to tackle the problem. I would advance a list of concrete suggestions on how to improve upon and create new physical experiences such as shadowing days and outreach events, as well as virtual tools such as content management systems and student-to-student networks, in order to fulfil the dual aims of making it easier for the young person to navigate the third-level information

landscape, and for the course provider to attract more suitable applicants. This report would then serve as the basis for creating useful and 'sustainable resources' for the community in the second summer of the programme.

Supervisor and Collaboration

While the projects seeks input from all university departments, I would work in close tandem with my supervisor Professor Ailbhe Ní Chasaide who serves as Director of Trinity's Phonetics & Speech Laboratory and is centrally involved in delivering parts of the Computer Science, Linguistics, and Language Programme of which I am a student.

She emphasises the importance of this interdisciplinary degree in providing the highly skilled graduates needed in the funded research projects she leads. To this end, she is in fact seeking better ways to communicate the offerings of the CSLL course, which is unusual in focusing on subjects not widely introduced in Irish secondary schools, to potential young applicants around the country. This degree programme therefore represents a highly relevant case study in my area of research interest.

I also hope to work with Associated Professor in Applied Linguistics Breffni O'Rourke, whose research has spanned related areas such as virtual platforms for foreign language exchange.

Bibliography

Callaghan, P. (2009). *Report on Retention*. Dublin: Trinity College Dublin.

Cannon, M., Coughlan, M., Clarke, H., Harley, M., & Kelleher, I. (2013). *The Mental Health of Young People in Ireland: a report of the Psychiatric Epidemiology Research across the Lifespan (PERL) Group Dublin*. Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.

Dooley, B., O'Connor, C., Fitzgerald, A., & O'Reilly, A. (2019). *My World Survey 2*. Dublin: UCD School of Psychology.

National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. (2015). *Why Students Leave: Findings from qualitative research into student non-completion in higher education in Ireland*. Dublin: National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

Pigott, V., & Frawley, D. (2019). *An Analysis of Completion in Irish Higher Education: 2007/08 Entrants*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.