

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

Summer 1 Reflective Report

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September 2022



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Introduction

Reflecting on the motivating factors behind my summer research project, my foremost aim was to research structural issues associated with access to third level study and student non-retention, motivated by a deep empathy with 5th and 6th year students gained from personal experience as a student as well as through volunteering and personal tutoring. I am glad to have had the unique opportunity to grow my analytical skills alongside my leadership and inter-personal skills while working to better understand and remedy these issues.

One of the key recommendations of the European Commission's policy on higher education is to create a university culture in which diversity, in every sense of the word, is an automatic characteristic of each cohort (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2022). I believe that more expansive work on improving online third level outreach and information can not only aid cohorts of prospective students such as the geographically remote or those with disabilities, but indeed all members of a digitally adept generation of secondary school students.

In line with my commitment to "learn something from everyone" as stated in my Personal Development Plan, I designed my research to be inter-disciplinary, engaging with a broad cross-section of literature including internal reports from Irish third-level institutions and nation-wide reports such as *Why Students Leave*, international texts applying marketing theory to the problem such as *Should I Take It Or Should I Not* and economic reviews such as *New Zealand's Student Decision-making By Prospective Tertiary Students*, to list some examples.

These texts were selected based on personal interest as well as advice from contacts previously gained from working on UCD's content management system, from the kind folks at Trinity Access Programme, and from my supervisor Dr. Ailbhe Ní Chasaide. My supervisor in particular brought an extensive and in-depth experience of course administration to my research, which enlightened my student perspective and strengthened immeasurably my commitment to bringing every relevant voice to the table - prospective students, current students, course administrators, and guidance counsellors.

Methodology

Weeks 1-3

I spent the first weeks of my research experience reading as broadly as possible from these texts and becoming acquainted with rich media theory from the world of marketing literature. I was initially

hesitant to abstract the course decision process into an instance of consumer choice between competing products, thinking it would lead my train of thought away from the needs of the very real target cohort I had in mind.

However, I soon judged that at least a partial explanation of course dissatisfaction and non-completion rates as highlighted in internal reports such as University College Dublin's *Student Retention in a Modular World* lay in the fact that university outreach and marketing efforts often fall short of best practices highlighted in the marketing literature, specifically in the lack of focus on rich interaction between prospective students and members and administrators of the course itself, and over-reliance on traditional and often text-based methods.

Establishing email contact with Dr. Wesley Theone, who kindly provided access to his qualitative comparison of the third-level information sources, helped speed up my acquaintance to marketing theory as a student from a non-business background. This rubric of richness became the tool I used during the third week, providing a metric upon which to evaluate the effectiveness of existing techniques used to provide third level information.

Weeks 4-6

From the second half of my project onward I began to focus more on real-world applications of theory met with in my literature review. I invited friends across a range of different courses to sit down for video interviews in order to develop a scalable framework for providing rich interaction between the target audience of prospective students and current students in the courses they are researching.

Iterating over multiple attempts I arrived at a satisfactory format of approximately ten-minute-long videos implementing the key learnings from my review of Media Richness Theory. This included appropriate sound design, mix of quick visual and verbal feedback, and an emphasis on accuracy and candour. To help structure these videos, I drafted a list of ten common questions to ask students, regardless of their course, included in the appendix of this report. Along with a style guide dictating the visual feel of these videos, this list of questions was intended to maximise the consistency of the information presented, thus enabling simpler comparison for the end "consumer".

Surrounded by web developers working on the Phonetics & Speech Laboratory's Abair project, where my research was based, my time also naturally branched into learning introductions to HTML, CSS, and JavaScript frameworks like ReactJS, helping shape my theoretical knowledge of the limits of computer-mediated solutions.

Findings

Modelling the Decision-Making Process

Incorrect course choice is the primary driver of withdrawal in Irish universities and institutes of technology above all other financial, family, social, and health-related motivators (Moore-Cherry, Quin, & Burroughs, 2015, p. 8) (Ryan, 2020, p. 169). From a student perspective, the third level decision-making process has been described as “a complex nexus in which habitus, personal identity, life history, social and cultural contexts, actions and learning are inter-related” (Bloomer & Hodgkinson, p. 46).

The authors of *Student Decision Making* attempt to outline three key stages of the decision-making process. The first stage, *predisposition*, is concerned with a person’s socio-economic background, parental encouragement, self-belief, and academic ability. Early identification of a student’s interests, strengths, and skills during this phase can help them “improve their academic achievement and systematically plan for college” (Leach & Zepke, 2005, p. 16), supporting the idea that students who have had the support and time to explore their strengths from a young age are more likely to be content with their third level choice and less likely to leave their course.

Past this early stage, most information is gathered during the *search* stage in which a person’s peer and family network, along with their initiative in contacting universities and consulting as many materials as possible, helps them close in on a final decision. (Leach & Zepke, 2005, p. 15). Now in the “market” for third-level education, Veloutsou notes that from the marketer’s perspective, “the content and validity of the corporate message is important... if that message is being disseminated via an unattractive source or one perceived as being less reliable then the “sale” will be lost.” (Veloutsou, Lewis, & Paton, 2004). Students will respond to marketing materials that are stylistically appropriate, dynamically updated, and true-to-reality - most else will be ignored.

The *search* stage is complicated by the cognitive “hindsight bias” encapsulated in more senior members of a course discounting the significance of their private information on past decision-making and reducing the apparent need to share key insights (Camerer, Loewenstein, & Weber, 1989). This is despite the fact that during the *search* stage, potential newcomers will look to more senior students, especially those perceived as steadily successful in the course, for these insights, with “experience of source” being correlated with the “relief of ambiguity and post-purchase dissonance”, in marketing terms (Kocak & Serdar, 2011). Failing to access this critical peer exchange

during the *search* stage increases a student's risk of selecting a course during the final *choice* phase with which they will become dissatisfied.

Evaluation of Existing Resources

Prospectuses remain central to the third level marketing mix. Despite being provided as a central aid for navigating a highly equivocal situation, however, prospectus material is largely textual and as such does not signify a rich media interaction. Apart from curated testimonials, they also typically fail to provide candid insight into the lived experience of the course according to current students. With 90% of 15–17-year-olds in Ireland owning a smartphone (National Advisory Council for Online Safety (NACOS), 2021, p. 8) and 74% of 18-24 year olds accessing their news via social media and the internet (Murrell, Park, Robbins, & Wheatley, 2021), it can also be called into question how financially and environmentally viable it is to publish physical prospectus materials, with some UK-based universities such as Gloucestershire and Nottingham among those addressing the issue by redirecting prospectus funding towards the improvement of information sites and social media presence (Edie Newsroom, 2022) (Famous Campaigns, 2022).

Third-party online information aggregators such as Qualifax and CareersPortal also focus on textual content, often reproducing the course description as found on the university's site itself. More bottom-up alternatives to these sites exist: the RateMyProfessor service enjoys ongoing popularity in the United States due to its plethora of information and ease of use (Kindred & Mohammed, 2006). However, the service is imperfect. Its relative lack of rich media, along with its anonymity, numerical reviewing, and biases such as the "halo effect", where only positive traits of professors are recalled, reduces its perceived reliability (Theone, 2011).

Platforms such as Careers Portal and IGC offer online guidance counselling and some, such as MyFutureChoice and Yooni offer varieties of psychometric testing. However, many of these options demand significant one-time payments and therefore place an additional financial burden on the student and their family, making them less accessible to students from underprivileged backgrounds and against an equal-opportunity spirit.

Evidence on the influence of guidance counsellors, or 'academic advisors' as they are sometimes known in the literature, is mixed. An academic advisor can be defined as "a staff member who assists students' individual academic plans to be consistent with their academic interests and abilities" (Midgen, 1989, as cited by Coll & Zalaquett, 2007, pp. 274-275). They have the power to identify a student's academic strengths and inform them of their array of options from early on in the *predisposition* phase. However, having close contact with my previous guidance counsellor

during the course of my research period, it seems that a great difficulty facing guidance counsellors is in maintaining links with past pupils and student ambassadors who would otherwise represent the perfect peer mentors to 5th and 6th years during the more deliberate *search* phase, and whose informal and conversational insight would be of high value to their younger counterparts.

Solutions and Next Steps

Current students should have access to a range of tools and opportunities designed to provide prospective students with critical information on the course's instructors, its topics, the technologies used in its execution, its workload, its physical environment, the character of their peer group, and of course the aptitudes and working habits of the student themselves (Curran & Rosen, 2006). They should be in a position to engage with video interviews built around a similar format to that which I developed as part of my research, as well as being able to share further rich information about their experience including blog posts, module reviews, and through shadowing opportunities.

An executive report on student retention from University College Dublin suggests as its foremost recommendation to "continue to improve the standard of information available to applicants" (Blaney & Mulkeen, 2008). A similar report from Trinity College Dublin prominently suggests that

"All courses should review their undergraduate Prospectus entries and make sure that these realistically describe the course and expectations. Entries should provide web links to course handbooks, especially first year handbooks, and programme and module learning outcomes should be articulated and published. Descriptions of courses in the undergraduate Prospectus should be accessible to young adults and school-leavers, and Schools should seek input from current students on the course description when reviewing entries for the Prospectus." (Callaghan, 2009).

From all this arises the ideal situation whereby course descriptions the country over are managed using a single content management system and according to a consistent style guide, a system that removes as many of the pain points associated with maintaining information as possible. Working to make this a reality, I think it is also pragmatic to advocate for updates to existing course information sites, introducing video, audio, hyperlinks, and up-to-date module descriptions and associated sample slides to otherwise text-led webpages. The closer online experiences can simulate rich, face-to-face interactions the likes of which student shadowing would entail, the more informed 5th and 6th year students, or those of equivalent age internationally, will be when making their ultimate third level decision.

Reflection on Successes and Challenges

I have learned a lot about my preferred leadership style and workflow over the course of my summer research. Compared to the plans outlined in my proposal, I found the project extending further into practical application than foreseen. I believe it is not enough to simply identify a problem – we must also be proactive in offering starting points for real-world solutions. To this end, I found the most enjoyable elements of the research those that involved ideation and trial-and-error iteration on formats of information transfer. I think my biggest achievement was both in this ideation and also in developing my interpersonal skills – collaborating both with other students and strengthening professional relationships with figures from the relevant parties discussed.

I am excited to have built a foundational theoretical framework within which to continue working on this project, but the very fact of trying to suggest scalable solutions to the problem also introduced the challenge of how to conquer a growing problem space through SMART goals. Being able to divide my time purposefully between my literature review, my experimentation with information delivery formats, and the learning of new skills such as web development was perhaps the most notable challenge of the research period. I see this however as motivation that this has only been the beginning of the journey, the stirrings of an interesting and rewarding project I am interested in extending beyond the summer in which it was conceived.

On a personal note, I am also particularly proud of the fact that I persisted in seeing through my final deliverables against the backdrop of the confusing and sudden loss of a close family relation, while also being aware of the fact that I could have done better in reaching out for help from my support systems and in successfully explaining these circumstances to those I was working with at the time.

I look forward to applying the knowledge gained from these experiences to offering a “lasting contribution” in the area of educational access throughout the remainder of the Laidlaw Programme.

Appendix

The following is the current iteration of outline questions for video interviews:

- 1 - If you can cast your mind back, what was the mindset you were in in 6th year that led you to picking this course?
- 2 - How did you find out about the course? For example, things like open days, shadowing, reading course descriptions, reading prospectuses, course marketing events like higher options, knowing past/current students, speaking to course staff, meeting with guidance counsellors, getting advice from teachers, advice from friends and family, taking aptitude tests, subjects in school, extracurricular activities, random interests, etc.?
- 3 - Can you give a general summary of the learning journey from first to final year? How much choice do you have to elect modules or alter this path as you go? What are exams like?
- 4 - What kind of people do you come across in your course, both in terms of the personalities of fellow students and the backgrounds of the teaching staff?
- 5 - What would an average day of study look like in your course?
- 6 - How much time do you have to get involved with societies or keep up with other passions and interests on the side?
- 7 - Where does this course point towards? What kind of doors does it open before and after college?
- 8 - Had you done much of your subject area before going to college?
- 9 - What are the best ways you would recommend for people to find out more about the course if they are considering it? Are there any books, podcasts, websites, Wikipedia pages, etc. that you feel would be a good introduction to the subject area?
- 10 - Lastly, is there any general advice you'd give to a 5th or 6th year student at this formative moment? How can they find a path that is both rewarding to them and useful to society?

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