

"Bridging the Gap": Addressing First Year Dropout Rates



Adam Gibbons
Aoibheann Tighe
Ben Herron
Patricia Raleigh-Doyle

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Executive Summary

A positive educational experience is an important first step in achieving a successful one. This paper discusses the dropout rates amongst our first year third level students. The two main issues the paper will focus on are students choosing the wrong course (Burroughs, Moore-Cherry, and Quinn, 2015) and also the many transitional difficulties students face, such as living away from home for the first time, managing their finances and adapting to the new ways of learning at college, (McCoy, Smyth, Watson & Darmody, 2014, 132). The paper recommends introducing a post-Leaving Certificate year called 'Bridge the Gap' year. The purpose of this year will be to help students be more informed about course material and future job opportunities their course will offer. It will also assess, through career guidance their ability in their chosen course to help achieve course completion. The paper will suggest modules within the 'Gap Year,' to help students be more confident and capable while undergoing the transitioning process. It will focus on encouraging a hands-on approach from the third level institutions. This will include on- and off-campus interaction to help facilitate any questions or concerns students may have about college life. School visits from college representatives are vital to build a rapport and understanding of the expectation of students and the educational institutions. Our rationale for addressing the drop-out rates is both an economic and a personal one. The average cost of studying away at college, according to a recent article in the Irish Examiner, is approximately €1,000 a year, with rent making up between €3,000 and €4,000 depending on whether it's in or outside Dublin (Irish Examiner, 2015). This financial loss for the student, if he or she fails to progress beyond first year, will have a negative impact on the student and their family. The ability to get the grant is also compromised. The emotional impact on the student is also a factor as it can have a lasting effect on the student's confidence. Another important reason high drop-out rates are something our colleges want to avoid is one of reputation. A high retention rate is an important attribute to any educational institute in acquiring new students and appealing to companies deciding to invest in Ireland. Having these companies here is important as they offer many internships for our graduates (Employers survey-graduates, 2007). Although there may be challenges in the creation and implementation of the 'Gap Year', as it will need investment from the government and a positive affirmation by the students and their families, we feel it is a positive step in addressing the first year drop-out rates and making the first year at college a more successful and enjoyable experience.

Introduction

This white paper discusses the dropout rate by first-year college students as a result of poor course choices (Burroughs, Moore-Cherry, and Quinn, 2015) and transitional difficulty (McCoy, Smyth, Watson & Darmody, 2014, 132).

A smooth transition from secondary school to third level education is a challenge, but important in achieving a successful outcome and obtaining an undergraduate degree which can be extremely helpful in the labour market. However, in examining the dropout rates, wrong course choice seems to play a huge role in students' failure to progress beyond first year in their chosen course. In a study by Burroughs, Moore-Cherry, and Quinn (2015) it was found that over 45% of university drop outs were attributed to "wrong course choice". Other significant factors included financial, mental, disinterest in course and difficulty with college life in general.

The personal transition for students from second level education to college life also features as having a negative impact on first year retention rates. Students as young as sixteen and seventeen years old, when entering third level education can find it a daunting, overwhelming time in their lives. In the 2014 ESRI report by McCoy, Smyth, Watson and Darmody, students felt it difficult to adjust to such a huge change, with one student saying, "... it's just a bit of a shock, it's harder to adapt to it than you'd be expecting because you're coming from doing such work every day to no one bothers you so. (Anthony, Park Street, higher education)", (McCoy, Smyth, Watson and Darmody, 2014, 132). Addressing the dropout rates of these students is of the utmost importance from an economic, personal and reputational perspective. The impact financially on the student and their family may prevent the student re- entering the educational system as the grant will be no longer accessible.

The importance of addressing the issue of dropouts in our third level institutions is crucial in the perceptions of these colleges when attracting inward investment to our country. Having these companies in Ireland is important as they facilitate internships and future employment for our graduates. Many large corporations look to the educational status of their impending work force in making their decisions to invest (Employers survey-graduates, 2007). High retention rates and quality graduates are very important in how we are perceived worldwide in this regard. Striving to achieve maximum retention rates by assisting students in choosing the course most suitable for them and easing the transitional period is crucial going forward in our educational system. Many students are under the somewhat false belief that the IT sector is the only place where the jobs of the future are, causing many to enter into courses that they are ill-equipped to deal with (Araque, Roldán, and Salguero, 2009). It takes a high level of mathematical skills, and many students fail in this regard. In this paper, we aim to 'bridge the gap' between second level education and tertiary education, in an effort to reduce the dropout rate of first year students, which, according to a recent 2016 article published in the Irish Examiner, reached 16% in 2014.

Background to the problem

Wrong Course Choice

In addressing the issue of students choosing the wrong course, it is important that we look at how our secondary school system fails some of our students in this regard. The Leaving Certificate is the culmination of the exam system. It is not, however, without its criticisms. The entire programme is reliant on a points-based system which leads to an overly competitive “points race” to progress to third level education. Critics point out that a lack of career guidance and an emphasis on the points race are causes for students making incorrect decisions with regards to their course choices at third level (Burroughs, Moore-Cherry, and Quinn, 2015).

Due to our low corporate tax rate, Ireland has seen many technology and pharmaceutical companies invest here and are an important contributor to our economy. According to an article in the Irish Times in 2015, multinational companies spend €4 billion a year on goods and services in Ireland (Irish Times, 2015). With a view to future employment many students see science and computer degrees as being very important. It appears that the general consensus is that there are jobs awaiting graduates when they have acquired these degrees. Therefore, students are choosing these courses without proper insight into what they entail and wrongly assuming their abilities, all because of a so called ‘promise’ of a well-paying job at the end of four years. The reality of computer-based courses is that there is a huge proportion of the course devoted to mathematics, a fact unbeknownst to many students who opt to do these degrees. The Irish Times recently produced an article (2017) which claims that “courses with non-progression rates of more than 70 per cent include computing with software development at IT Tralee; computing and games development at IT Sligo; industrial physics at DIT; and computer forensics and security at Waterford IT.” These worrying dropout rates due to the wrong course choice are detrimental to students and must be addressed by the educational system in Ireland.

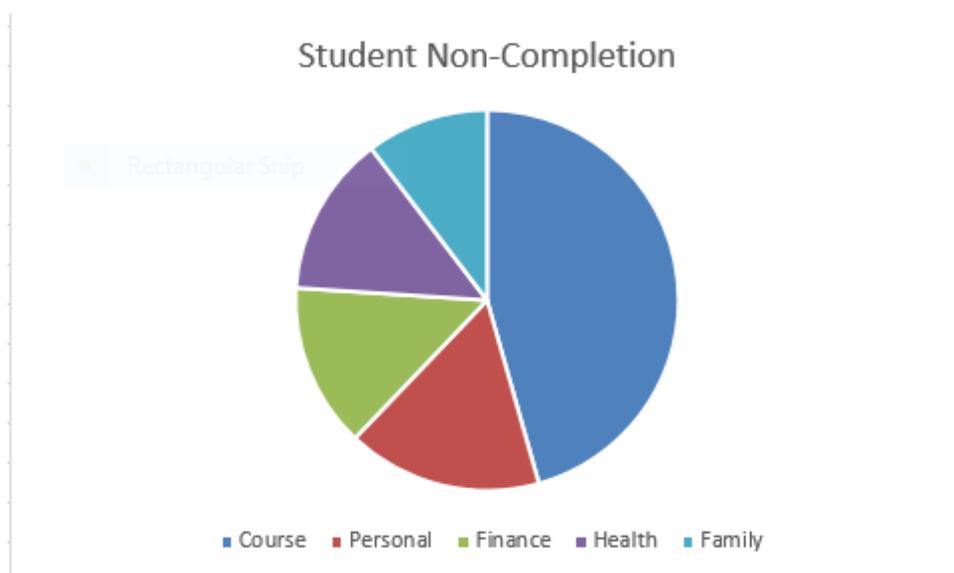


Figure 1 Student Non-Completion: Course (45%), Personal (16%), Financial (14%), Health(13%), Family(12%)

Transition

Overemphasis on the Leaving Certificate and the points race as opposed to helping students to prepare for third level is a crucial element as to why students end up struggling to adapt to college life. Transitional difficulties are caused by students finding it harder than anticipated to jump the huge gap between post-primary education and higher education. The lack of preparation within the leaving cert curriculum is an important factor in this (Mc Coy et al, 2014). Some of these problems faced by students include the change in teaching style, as university learning is independent compared to the ‘spoon-fed’ method applied by secondary schools. There are also lifestyle difficulties faced by students who attend a college that is far away from their home, thus causing problems due to independent living and budget management.

Students who attend higher education such as university are experiencing many transitional problems because of the leap between life as a secondary school student and life as a college student. In the ESRI Report by Selina McCoy, Emer Smyth, Dorothy Watson and Merike Darmody, the students who took part in the study spoke of their adjustment issues and how “some found the transition too difficult, failed exams and either dropped out or moved to a different course/institution” (McCoy, Smyth, Watson & Darmody, 2014, 132).

This research also showed that students who completed a PLC course before going on to university had less transitional issues than those who went straight into further education, as “there was little difference in terms of the structure of the course” (McCoy et al, 2014, 131). This shows that by taking a year to adjust before going into third level education, the transition becomes easier on the student.



Solution

We are proposing the implementation of a ‘Bridge the Gap’ year in secondary school to help in preventing students making poor course and college choices, and giving them valuable life skills to ensure a successful transition to university life. Our rationale for addressing this issue is a very important one in preventing financial and personal difficulties for our first year students. It is also crucial for the reputations of our third level institutions. Maintaining high quality graduates is significant in attracting inward investment (Irish Times, 2015). This year will come after students complete the Leaving Certificate and will replace the existing ‘Transition Year’. By providing a practical progressive year, it will give students the necessary life skills to aid in a successful transition to university life. It will also give them extra time to make an informed choice on what course, college, and career they wish to pursue in order to prevent poor course choices. We plan to set up various modules within our proposed ‘Bridge the Gap’ year which will be designed to help students to overcome many of the problems that they may be faced with in their first year at college. We also suggest that these modules be graded by college standards, with a 50% or 70% pass rate, rather than using secondary school grading system, to introduce students to the marking system used at university level. As part of the year, students will be given the opportunity to do a module in each of the following areas:

- Basic cooking skills so students can maintain a healthy diet.
- Budget management & financial skills to allow students to manage their money from week to week.
- Interview skills to help students going forward for interview-based jobs or courses.
- Basic computer training so students are prepared for the use of computers in college.
- Critical skills – including fundamental college skills such as referencing, presentation, communication, essay writing, etc. This will prepare students for how things are done in college, when preparing essays or presentations.
- How to fill out CAO forms correctly – this is crucial as many errors are made and can have major implications for the students when applying for their course.

As well as the above modules, each of which we propose should run for approximately two weeks, there will be college visits to allow students to see each of the colleges and the courses that they have on offer. They will also be able to sit in on lectures to get a feel for university life. Alongside this, there should also be time put aside for a representative from each of the colleges to visit the students and give them detailed information about the course options they provide. This will help students to gain valuable information about the colleges and the courses so that they can make an informed decision on what path they wish to follow. They will also learn about college life in general, as well as the possible jobs that they could get out of each course. This should help address the wrong course choice that students are making as wrong course choice is the largest component of the drop-out rate (Burroughs, Moore-Cherry, and Quinn, 2015).

Within the ‘Bridge the Gap’ year, there will also be extensive information given to students about the various other paths they may choose to follow, which are not given enough attention at present. These include apprenticeships, internships, and jumping straight into the labour market. The idea is to open students’ minds to the wide variety of options open to them, so they

are not limited to university as their only pathway. In the ESRI report, many students felt that they had only been given the option of college, with one girl saying “All I knew is that definitely college was an option. There was no way that I’m not going to college, like I did want to go to college no matter what it was. I never saw it as like okay, this is the end of the road, once I’ve done my Leaving Cert I can now start working, it was always college. (Fiona, Barrack Street, higher education)”, (McCoy, Smyth, Watson & Darmody, 2014, 66).

The programmes and courses we introduce are to equip the students with the necessary life skills they will need, especially the students who will be living away from home for the first time. Course choices that are compatible with students’ interests and capabilities are of utmost importance in the successful completion of their first year at third level education. Bringing in qualified professionals to teach these modules will lead to a high rate of competency going forward, which is crucial for students to complete a lucrative transition, and ultimately prevent a large percentage of dropouts due to the problems outlined above, (Burroughs, Moore-Cherry, and Quinn, 2015).



Challenges

There may be many different challenges and opposition to the introduction of this 'Bridge the Gap' year as some students may feel that they are well prepared for college life, and may be impatient to get started. Some students and parents may not wish to alter their choice of course as they have made up their mind. They might view their choice as important, going forward in the labour market. A new curriculum will have to be created specifically geared for this post-leaving year and subsequently new professional staff will need to be employed. Third level institutions will need to be proactive in assisting the students in the 'Bridge the Gap' year to arrange successful on- and off-campus visits. We would hope that students, parents and the academic staff would view this proposal as a positive initiative going forward for all involved. By replacing what can be a negative, overwhelming experience with a positive one will only enhance first year retention rates.



Conclusion

The addition of this post-leaving 'Bridge the Gap' year will have a positive impact on students as they prepare for the next phase in their education. It will also give them more information about the other options available to them, if they decide that an apprenticeship or internship would be more suited to them. This gap year will educate the students in many life skills needed for independent learning and living. It will introduce the computer skills necessary and some of the more important critical skills that will be needed on entering third level education. As wrong course choice featured as the main contributor to the drop-out rate for first years, (Burroughs, Moore-Cherry, and Quinn, 2015), a more detailed analysis of course choices and an opportunity over the year to liaise with the institutions the student wishes to attend. This more intense scrutiny of the course, and subsequent employment opportunities the course will offer, will give the student a more informed choice going forward. It can also illuminate possible pitfalls, for example the compatibility and expectations of the student that he or she has not foreseen. By allowing students to make informed choices about the course they choose and the colleges they wish to attend will only improve the first year retention rates going forward. The student is also one year older and this maturity can be very beneficial, as it gives them extra time to reflect on what they wish to do going forward. Although there may be challenges going forward in adopting this module by students and the relevant government agencies, we feel the implementation of the 'Bridge the Gap' year will have a positive impact on the student's life and the educational system, thus creating a positive outcome for all involved.

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