

Don't Drop Out!

First the good news: if you are a student in Ireland, you are among those with the lowest drop-out rate, according to a recent HEA report.

Only Hungary (9%), Japan (11%), the Czech Republic (21%) and the UK (19%) had lower overall drop out rates, it seems.

But the same report gave cause for worry. The Report suggests that we need more research on WHY students drop out, fail to complete their courses.

Meanwhile, let's look at a few issues raised. Overall, 17% of students who went to university in Ireland failed to finish.

We examined the HEA Report to try and pick up clues that will ensure YOU finish your course!

IN OECD COUNTRIES APPROX. 1 in 3 DROPS OUT OF COLLEGE

The average drop out rate for universities in the OECD was approximately 33%. While the dropout rate for Irish universities was lower at 16.8%, this represents a huge loss to the individuals, their families, and indeed to society.

Above all, for many of those who drop out, it leads to reduced self-esteem and a crises in self-confidence. High dropout rates were found in ALL Irish universities, varying from 1 in 5 to a rather alarming 1 in 3 in one university. However, some courses had a 100% completion rate while one unfortunate course had a 75% non-completion rate !

But why did this 17% fail to graduate? The HEA Report only hints at possible answers but it gives loads of puzzling info that might help you to hazard your own conclusions - and, perhaps, take preventive action in good time.

Is there a link between your CAO Points Score and your likelihood of graduating?

Overall, students on courses with HIGH CAO Points requirements had a LOW dropout rate of 9.2%.

At the same time, in courses with low entry points, more than 20% failed to graduate. More twice as many with a LOW CAO Points Score dropped out.

So, we may conclude: a low CAO Points score MAY increase likelihood of not graduating. And yes, other research (mostly from the US) clearly links academic ability with continuing success in college.

For example, a 1999 study of non-completion carried out in 3 Institutes of Technology reported a dropout rate of 37%. In this study, dropout was clearly associated with low grades in the Leaving Certificate examination.

But, in the HEA study, there were considerable variations in the findings from college to college. Also, a 1998 study on the CAO Points system found that of 74% who graduated, the relationship between Points and final performance was far from clear.

Take a look at these findings:

- Overall, the higher the entry requirements, the lower the dropout rate.
For example, in UL, on one high CAO Points course, 82.8% graduated and only 12.1% dropped out.
- On LOW CAO Points - courses in the same university, 70.4% graduated and 22.6% dropped out.
But this is not always the case.
- In TCD, for example, the percentage of students who do not complete their courses is somewhat HIGHER for the HIGH CAO Points category than for the medium CAO Points category.
- Over-all, dropout rate for males, in all CAO Points categories is 3% HIGHER than for females.
- The average CAO Points Score of students awarded a 1st class Honours Degree was slightly BELOW that of those who were awarded an upper 2nd Class Honours.
Those who graduate with 3rd Class Honour had marginally LOWER CAO points at entry than those who FAILED.
- Also, those who passed 1st year and then dropped out, had a much higher CAO Points score than those who did not drop out.

So, CAO Points Score, while important, is not an OVERRIDING factor in your success.

OTHER FACTORS ALSO INFLUENCE YOUR SUCCESS

- Fields of study.
- Students with identical CAO Points Score had a higher probability of being awarded a top grade in some disciplines than in others. Equally , they were more likely NOT TO COMPLETE their course in some areas than in others.
- Humanities had a dropout rate of only 6% (though with wild variations for some courses) while for Science, it went up to 20%

DIFFERENT DROPOUT RATES FOR DIFFERENT FIELDS OF STUDY

There are major differences in dropout rates in different fields of study.

1. COMPUTER STUDIES has the highest drop out rate. (Maths are an important component of computer courses - students who are weak at maths may have problems.
1. Over 1 in 4 failed to complete their courses.
This drop out rate varied from 25.5% to a staggering 32.4% on some courses.
Unlike other study areas, females fared less well than men when it came to completing courses in Computer Studies. Here, a slightly higher percentage of females than of males failed to complete.
2. SCIENCE has the next highest dropout rate. Just over one in 5 failed to complete their courses.
Slightly more females than males graduated.
3. ENGINEERING (including Architecture) is a third field of study with a relatively high dropout rate.
Almost 1 in 5 failed to complete their course. A gender factor in Engineering and Social Science Gender differences were very much in evidence.

The authors of the HEA report remark that in line with other subject areas, students who embarked on a course that was not typical for their gender tended to do rather better e.g. women who chose Engineering or men opting for Social Studies.

With Engineering, women, though fewer in number, tended to have lower drop out rates. This was also the case with Social Studies. Here, while relatively few males chose to study Social science, their success rate was higher than that of females. Women were twice as likely to drop out.

More than 5 times as many men as women opted to study Engineering. However, more than 1 in 5 men failed to complete the course as against 1 in 6 of the women.

4. Law, Medicine and Veterinary Medicine had the lowest dropout rate.
The dropout rate in Law according to this study was 7.1% (almost 1 in 18). In Dentistry, Medicine and Veterinary Medicine, it was similar: 7.3%. (Compare those figures with 35% for a course in the Computer Studies area or indeed with the extraordinary 75% drop out rate on one course in the Arts area!)

What can we conclude about all this?

It is difficult to say. More research is needed to address this serious problem.

Other factors identified in the HEA Report as increasing dropout rate:

- Unclear career aspirations
- Lack of information and guidance on course and career options
- Unsuitable course choice
- Difficulties with some of the subjects taken.
- Poor communication between staff and students
- Different drop out rates in different course areas
- Financial and work-related problems

Of these 7 factors, at least 5 are almost entirely YOUR responsibility.

MAKE THE RIGHT DECISION!

You may not be able to solve financial and work-related problems, but you should be able to clarify unclear career aspirations.

You should be able to inform yourself on course and career options to avoid unsuitable course choices.

Work from the general to the particular, if in doubt. Start by asking whether you are interested in the Humanities are (languages, literature, philosophy etc.), or the science or technology fields. There is no need to specialise at primary degree level: you will have ample opportunities later.

Your main objective now should be to identify the field of study where all your talents can blossom to the full.

The range of courses available to you is wider than ever before, driven, in part, by the hunger of the Celtic Tiger.

You should also be able to evaluate your ability with subjects involved in various courses. Low mathematical ability seemed to be a problem for many drop-outs from Science courses.

Poor communication between staff and students may be a factor, but don't just blame your Lecturers. At university level, people try to treat you as an adult. They tend not to run around after you as might have been the case in Secondary school. You'd expect to have additional space, wouldn't you ?

But, remember, if you have a problem, don't hesitate to seek help. There is help at hand but YOU must make the first move.