**Thematic Review of Academic Student Supports**

**A Case Study – University College Dublin**

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**Abstract**

This paper presents the findings of a thematic quality review of academic student supports at University College Dublin (UCD), Ireland. The review focused on undergraduates, with a particular emphasis on new entrants. The review was intended to facilitate the investigation and implementation of an academic support structure, with a view to facilitating an informal approach on best practice for the provision of teaching and learning supports for students at UCD. The thematic review approach involved the preparation of a self-assessment report, a site visit by a Review Group (3 external experts and 2 internal experts) who prepared a Report with recommendations, and finally, an action plan prepared by the University in response to each recommendation. The main findings suggest, firstly, that as a review methodology, the thematic review approach was found to be a useful mechanism to address the area of academic student supports. Secondly, that academic supports for students provide the necessary structure required by all undergraduate students within which they may realise their full potential. As such, these supports cannot be seen as peripheral services. Further, these supports need to be co-ordinated and coherent. Thirdly, the importance of the academic community in supporting students through their studies and of guiding them to other relevant supports was highlighted. Fourthly, that critical student academic skills (essay writing, referencing etc) should be fully integrated into Year 1, Semester 1 curriculum and built on in subsequent stages of each programme in a discipline appropriate way. Finally, that the importance of family and friends was highlighted and how they can influence and support undergraduates is a finding that should be further explored and harnessed.

***Key Words***

Quality, Thematic Review, Student Supports

**INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

* 1. This paper presents the summary findings of a review of student supports at University College Dublin (UCD), Ireland using a thematic review methodology. The review was undertaken in March 2012.

**Overview of the University**

* 1. UCD was established in 1854, and is a leading comprehensive research university, with over 24,000 students and 2,700 staff (1,300 academic staff): In addition to liberal arts programmes in humanities, social sciences and natural sciences, UCD offers professional programmes in architecture, business, education, engineering, law, veterinary science, medicine and health.

**Context**

1.3 Student transition to university offers considerable challenges to all parties involved. For students, the move to university is a personal investment of the cultural and intellectual capital accrued through school and college education. It is also a significant social displacement which may be intensified, where the student is mature; is the first in their family to attend university; or is from an under-represented group (ethnic, disability, social deprivation) in the university population.

International studies of student transition to university collectively emphasise the interplay between the social and academic circumstances of students and the institutional systems that should support them. It is interesting that many recent studies still cite Tinto’s seminal work on first year student success and progression (Tinto, 1987, p. 139-40)

1. Students enter with, or have the opportunity to acquire, the skills needed for academic success
2. Personal contact with students extends beyond academic life
3. Retention actions are systematic
4. Retention programmes address students’ needs early
5. Retention programmes are student-centred

It appears from the literature that institutions on both sides of the transition bridge are still working out ways to achieve these principles.

Irish higher education policy has prioritised the need for institutions ‘‘to increase the numbers of high quality graduates as well as widening participation in third level education” (National Development Plan, 2007-2013, p. 41). There has been an overall increase in rates of admission to Irish higher education, with a general increase from 20% in 1980 to 55% in the most recent national survey of participation - representing just over 163,000 students in higher education in 2011/12.

1.4 The issue of student success and the factors that impact on this are increasingly important in higher education policy and delivery. The students’ experience of higher education is shaped by many issues and challenges including prior educational attainment, finance, part time work, institutional services and facilities, information guidance and support in addition to the labour market and policy issues impact on student non-completion. Students’ academic performance is of considerable importance for continuing success in college. This is reflected in the most recent Irish studies on student retention.

1.5 UCD has developed a range of generic and discipline-specific academic/learning supports to address students’ study needs. These academic supports are provided by various schools and services in UCD.



*Table 1: UCD Student Supports 2012*

1.6 Current provision of academic support services in UCD, however, tends to be fragmented and uncoordinated. The lack of a co-ordinated approach results in the risk of duplication of effort in some instances and also potential inequities in student experiences and outcomes. Overall, there is a lack of knowledge about inputs and value to students and to the University, of resources invested. Additionally, while the quality of the individual academic supports provided may be excellent, a more co-ordinated approach would allow for greater quality assurance in these services.

**The Thematic Review Process**

**Methodology**

* 1. The identified need for a University-wide review of its provision of academic supports presented an opportunity to pilot the Thematic Review methodology at UCD. Thematic Reviews allow close scrutiny of key areas and their operation across the University. They facilitate a greater focus of attention on the specific area of activity under review than other quality assurance processes may provide. Thematic Review may be best understood as one mechanism in the broader spectrum of institutional quality assurance/quality improvement systems.

1.8 The thematic review approach uses the typical review model, which comprises of four major elements

* Preparation of a Self-assessment Report (SAR)
* A visit by a Review Group (RG) that includes UCD staff and external experts, both national and international. The site visit normally will take place over a two or three day period.
* Preparation of a Review Group Report (that is made public)
* Agreement of an Action Plan for Improvement (Quality Improvement Plan) based on the RG Report’s recommendations; the University will also monitor progress against the Quality Improvement Plan

As a review methodology, the thematic review approach was found to be a useful mechanism to address the area of academic student supports.

**Data Gathering**

1.10 Key data gathered for this process is outlined below:

* Undergraduate Student Online Questionnaire (1,952 responses) – quantitative and qualitative
* Student Focus groups to test perceptions, experiences and recommendations on student supports in UCD (inc. traditional & mature students)
* 3 Staff Focus Groups, configured according to Themes: Advice; Skills; Specialist
* Test to locate UCD Student Supports on Website - tested on students and colleagues from other universities, with no prior UCD 'college knowledge'
* Literature Review
* Co-ordinating Committee’s Response Workshop

**Limitations of the Self-assessment Report (SAR)**

1.11 As the review was a pilot thematic study, it was general in focus and design. The obvious strengths of the thematic process may also be its limitations, as it does not review specific supports or particular programmes. It is therefore limited to reporting on observable trends and patterns.

1.12 The SAR was conducted during a period of financial instability and lack of coherence about funding. The SAR process did not address any funding implications or matters relating to the provision of supports.

1.13 It may be difficult to generalise the findings of aspects of the research to a broad debate on student support, as the findings are based on responses from students who were persistent, in that they were still in university at the end of the academic year. The survey did not capture any students who had withdrawn from the University.

1.14 It would also be inappropriate to assume that the research findings will have general application to all students as the variety of needs and demands vary, and the students may experience the University in different ways.

**Objectives of the Thematic Review of Academic Supports for Students**

1.15 It was decided that this thematic review should focus on undergraduates, with a particular emphasis on new entrants. It was anticipated that this review of academic supports in UCD would inform and complement the various student retention and success initiatives. The issue of student support for post-graduates is no less compelling, but was not included in this phase of the review. However, the outcome of the review should inform future reviews and development of student support in the postgraduate programmes.

1.16 The review was intended to facilitate the investigation and implementation of a coherent academic support structure, with a view to facilitating an informed approach on best practice in order to provide teaching and learning supports for students in UCD.

**2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS ARISING FROM THE STUDY**

2.1 **University Academic Support Services**

A key conclusion drawn from the study was that UCD academic support services do provide the necessary structures required by all undergraduate students, within which they may reach their full potential during their time at UCD. As such these supports cannot be seen as peripheral services, provided only for those students unable to cope at different times. As one group participant put it, *academic supports are for everyone.* Arising from the study, the Review concluded that this fundamental perspective of academic supports needs to be at the heart of the design, delivery and evaluation of all such services in the University.

2.2 **Quality of Supports**

The study has revealed a range of useful and well-used academic support services in use across the University. In particular, these include (i) Programme-level supports such as academic and peer-mentoring, (ii) specific disciplinary supports such as the Maths Support Centre and (iii) University-wide student provision such as Orientation Week for first years and the Library services. The importance of individual Schools, academics and tutors were also noted for the constructive support that they offer students. The study suggests that what needs to be addressed is a lack of connection between existing services, an overall lack of information about these services and an uneven availability of services in different programmes.

2.2.1 **Connections between Services**

A finding of the study has been the importance of the academic community in supporting students through their studies and of guiding them to other relevant supports, where needed. However, the study also showed that academics may have a fragmented understanding of how and where to access other services, relying largely on personal contacts to identify alternative sources of assistance for students. If full-time staff find it hard to understand the connections between different services, it does not auger well for the students’ ability to successfully negotiate their way around such a service network. It was recommended that a clear and coherent outline of academic support services and their interconnection be created.

2.2.2 **Coherent Service Development**

A related finding of the study has been that academic support services, while largely well-structured, have tended to be developed separately from each other. For example two excellent modules on Study Skills, both popular with first year students, were developed independently of each other in different Colleges. This review has made a start in producing an institution-wide overview of existing academic supports. The findings recommend that this work be used as a basis for the on-going management and expansion of academic supports in the future, leading to development of more coherent management and delivery of same.

2.2.3 **Inadequate Communication of Academic Supports**

The study highlighted a lack of awareness of available supports amongst both students and staff. A particularly instructive aspect of the review has been the testing by non-UCD individuals of the usefulness of the website as a source of information on existing academic supports. In particular it has shown that details of many existing services are presented in a way that is aligned to organisational structures, but not geared towards providing clear communication as to the source of such supports, to students who may be relatively new to a large and complex organisation. Indeed, as already stated, some staff who work in the organisation find it very difficult to access information on support services, arguably exacerbated by the way such information is communicated. It was recommended that, along with a more coherent organisation and management of academic supports, a new communication strategy be developed for the improved dissemination of information of existing academic supports. Such a communication strategy should encompass both electronic and print media for the successful communication of the location of academic supports. It should also consider creating a centralised point that can provide students with a way of finding out who to deal with for a problem.

2.3 **Areas for development**

Academic supports cannot be seen as static entities; rather they should be capable of developing in a flexible manner to respond to the changing student demographics and the evolving nature of higher education. The Review has identified areas for such future development.

2.3.1 **Diverse Student Groups**

It is very likely that Irish higher education is going to enter a period of considerable change driven by the national economic situation, and the need to address the changing needs of the labour market. This will impact on the types of students entering the University, with increasing numbers of older students seeking to either change career direction or up-skill to increase job competitiveness. There is increasing pressure both nationally and from an institutional basis to increase international student numbers and, in its Education Strategy (2009-2014), UCD has committed to widen student participation in higher education and support lifelong learning. It was recommended that all future planning around different areas of academic supports needs to encompass this increasing diversity in the student population, and ensure that the coherent approach to the management and expansion of academic supports includes academic supports for a diverse student population.

2.3.2 **Supporting the Supporters - Friends**

A clear finding from the review has been the importance of family and friends to students, and their reliance on these groups to support them through their time in the University. One of the key messages from students was their need to find a network of friends within which to work and socialise. The review has highlighted the value that students place on being given opportunities to mix and collaborate with their peers both in small-group classroom activities and in wider University activities. It also raises the challenge of how to construct and offer supports to a large, young and relatively dependent student group in a resource-stretched environment.

2.3.3 **Supporting the Supporters – Family**

The move to higher education is largely associated with the move of a young person away from the family home and the beginning of their independent adult life. However, many UCD students will continue to live in the family home throughout their time at university, and family represent an important source of advice support to them throughout their studies. Therefore the more accurate information that families can have about the nature of the students’ higher educational experiences, the better able they will be to offer this advice and support. A number of UCD Programmes, including Engineering and Business, have introduced successful family evenings, allowing parents, partners and children to visit the University and to gain a better understanding of what the student in their family is experiencing. A growing number of parents also accompany first years when they arrive before the start of term and a small number of parents’ events are now provided during Orientation week. The review recommended that consideration be given to how parents and family members can be better integrated into the overall academic support structures, building on the experience and expertise of programmes already working in this area.

1. **WHY INVEST IN STUDENT SUPPORTS?**

3.1 A fundamental question for the University to address is “Why invest resources in student supports?” From the perspective of the Thematic Review there are several reasons to invest in student supports. These include:

1. **Economic** – a student leaving an institution before completion of their programme of study represents lost income for the institution. This income may include fees paid by the student, funding from the Higher Education Authority or professional body and possibly other income such as accommodation costs. Effective student supports should reduce the number of students who fail to complete their programme.
2. **Reputational** – the standard of student support has a significant impact on the University’s reputation. High quality, accessible student support contributes to a positive learning experience which in turn contributes to institutional success in recruiting high quality students. The informal reputation of the University may be shaped by students’ experiences and becomes ‘hot knowledge’ in the communities the students come from. Internet-based social networking for example, ensures that messages from an individual student have an audience of thousands within seconds. If a student has a good experience at UCD they will tell their family, friends and internet contacts. Such information impacts on the choice of university for potential and prospective students.
3. **Ethical** – institutions have a social and moral responsibility to take reasonable steps to enable and promote the success of all students they have admitted and enrolled on their courses.
4. **Legal** – institutions have a legal obligation to review and adapt their policies, procedures and practices to ensure they do not adversely impact upon those enrolled on their courses who have protected characteristics according to equality legislation.
5. **Cultural** – an institution’s success in promoting student retention and success goes beyond the sum of policies and practices therein to consider mission, values and ethos. Retention and success have been linked to the culture of the institution and in particular, efforts to foster a sense of belonging and community amongst staff and students.
   1. In conclusion, Tinto (2010, p.3) stated that students are more likely to progress when they find themselves in environments in which they are able to learn what is expected for success, that hold high expectations for their success, provide frequent feedback about their performance and as needed, directed to academic and social support, and actively involve them with other students and faculty in learning. The key issue is the capacity of institutions to establish supportive educational communities, that actively involve all students as partners.

**References**

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