

Why do students leave higher education?

Findings from Qualitative Research in Ireland

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Overview of Irish Higher Education

Higher Education Authority (HEA) oversees the Irish 3rd level sector.

Circa 214,700 undergraduate students, of these:

53% in the University Sector (7 universities)

41% in Institutes of Technology (14)

6% in other colleges (mostly small, offering limited range of courses)

‘Free’ undergraduate courses but students pay approximately €3,000 per year in the university sector



Research Questions

1. What qualitative data is currently available on student non-completion and non-progression across the HE sector in Ireland (NFQ Level 6 and above)?
2. What does this data inform us about the reasons for student non-completion?
3. Are there particular indicators of students at risk of non-progression?
4. What commonalities or differences exist across programmes and institutions in the Irish HE sector?



Methodology

- **Interpretivist Qualitative Approach** to understand student behaviour and decision-making based on pre-existing primary and secondary sources
- **Content Frequency Analysis** (using NVIVO) to generate key themes.



Accessing the data

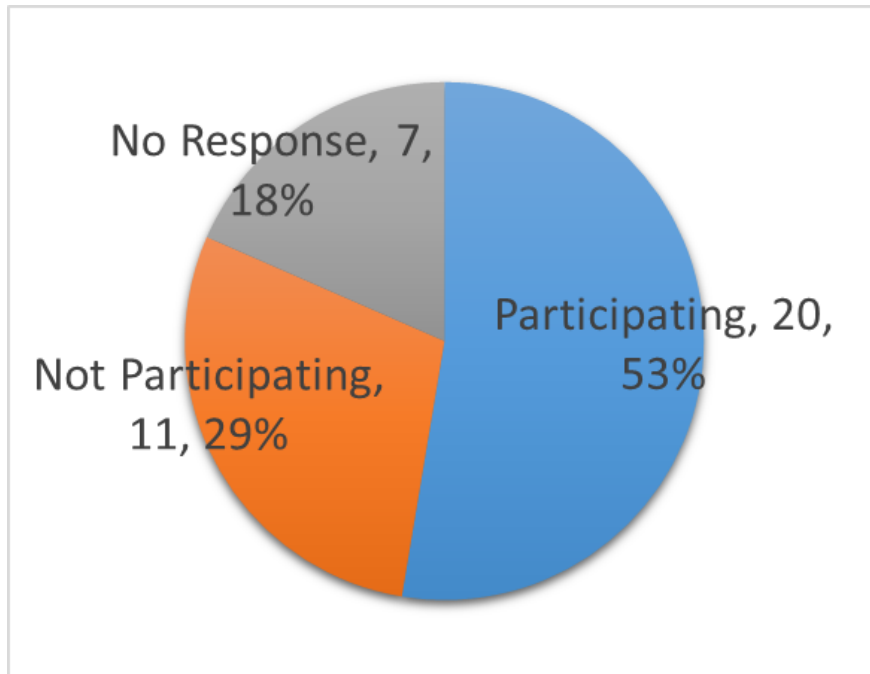


Figure 1: Initial Response of Institutions to Participate (n=38)

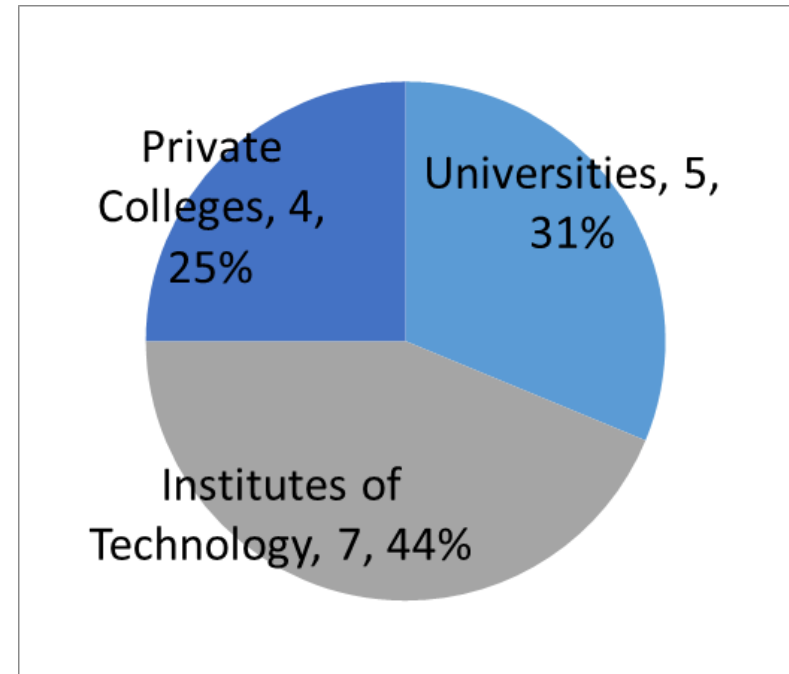


Figure 2 Proportion of Participants by Institution type (n=16)



Data Gathered

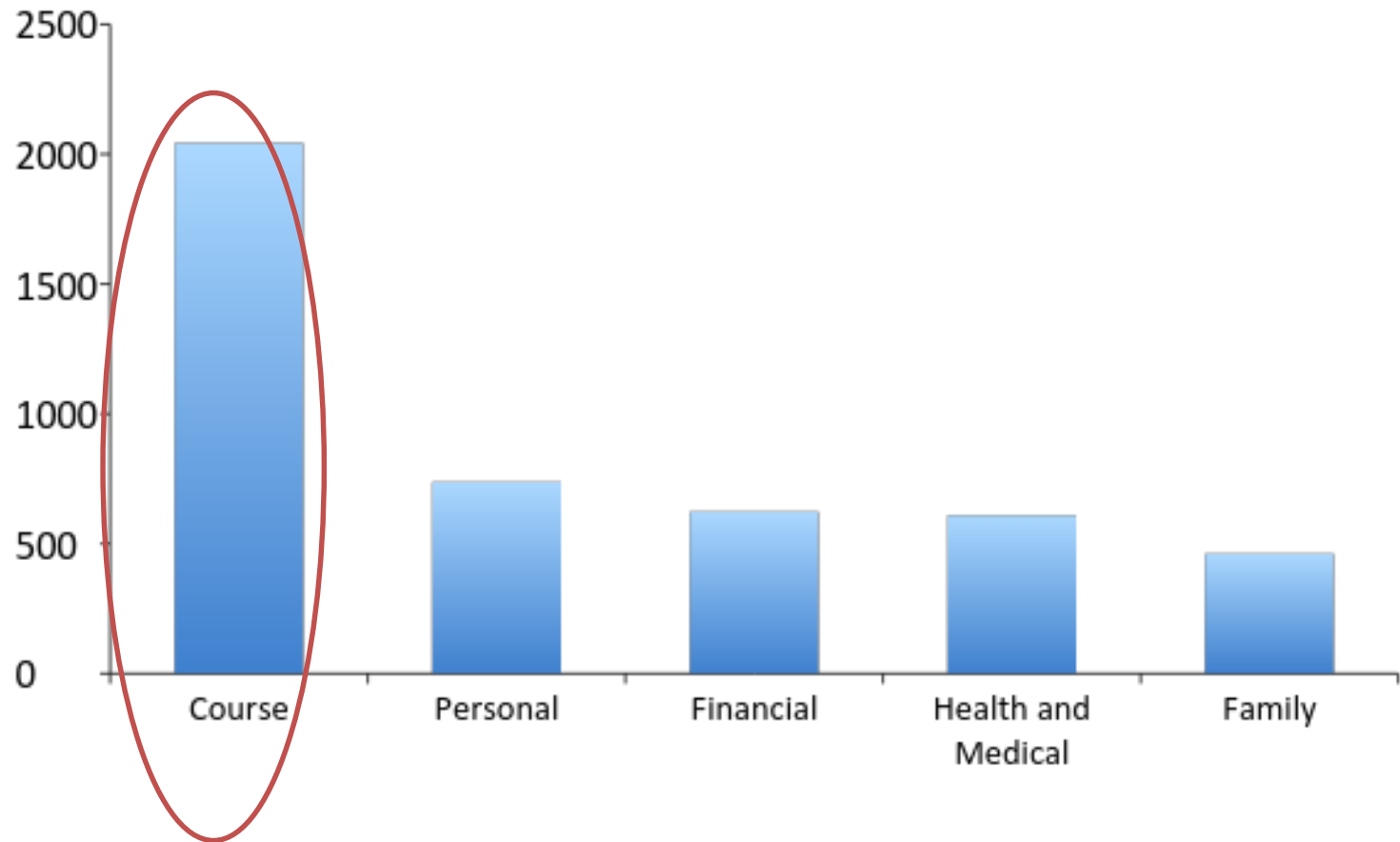
- **4,036** responses were gathered from **16** higher education institutions in Ireland.
- Data sources:
 - Survey reports
 - Internal reports
 - Qualitative responses for the years between 2011 and 2014 including student exit interviews



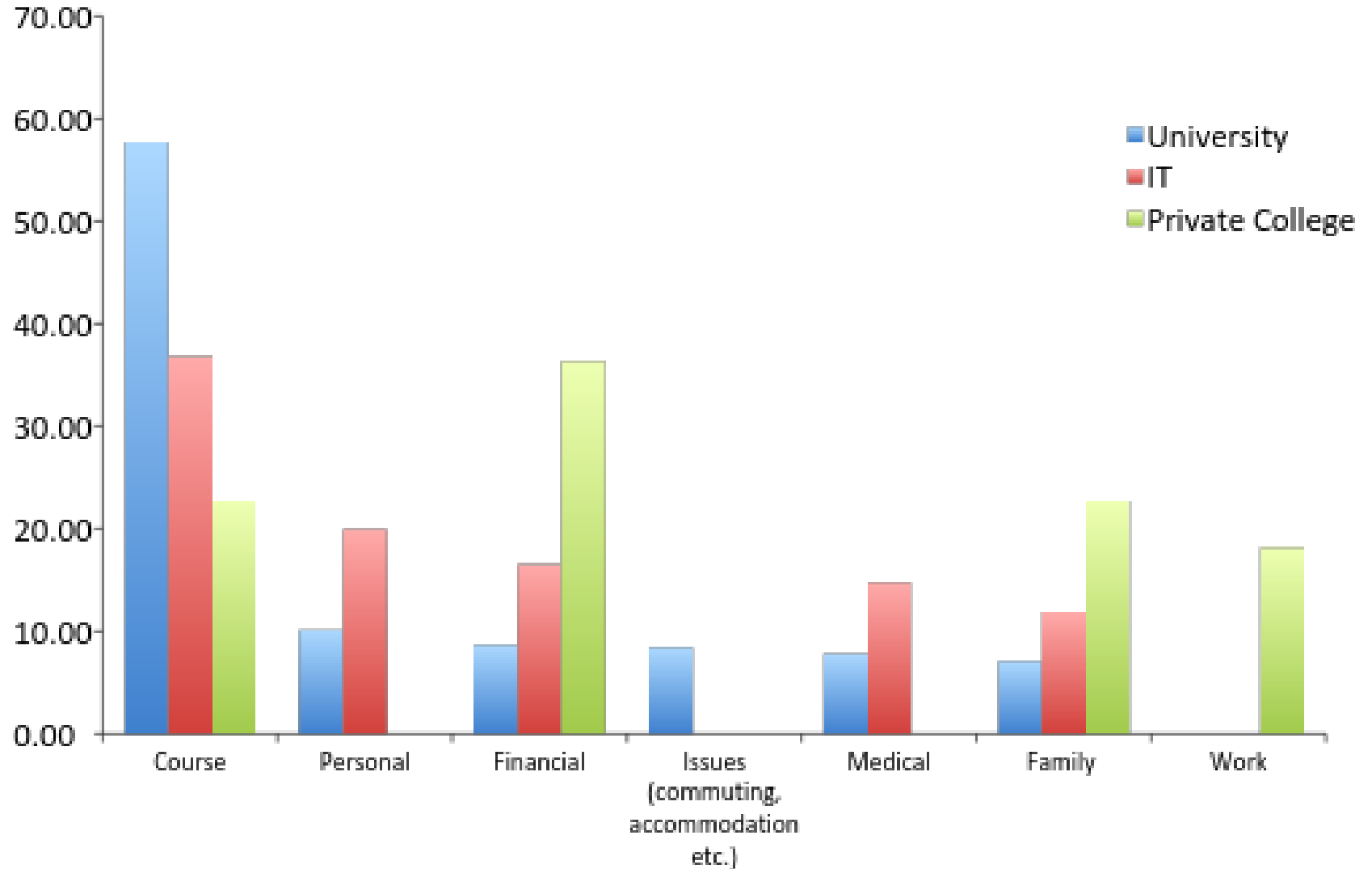


	Institution Type	Data Received	This Includes Qualitative Data?
1	University	Internal Report 2011-2012 Internal Report 2007-2012 Exit Interview Data 2013-2014	Yes
2	University	Survey Report 2009-2010 Survey Report 2010-2011 Survey Report 2011-2012	No
3	University	Graduate Research Internal Report 2009 Exit Interview Data 2013-2014	Yes
4	University	Exit Interview Data 2011-2014	Yes
5	University	Exit Interview Data 2012-2014	Yes
6	IT	Survey Report 2011-2012 Survey Report 2012-2013 Survey Report 2013-2014 Exit Interview Data 2011-2014	Yes
7	IT	Internal Report 2014 Exit Interview Data 2013-2014	Yes
8	IT	Exit Interview Data 2011-2014	Yes
9	IT	Survey Report 2013 Survey Report 2014	No
10	IT	Internal Report Exit Interview Data 2011-2014	Yes
11	IT	Exit Interview Data 2011-2014	Yes
12	IT	Exit Interview Data 2011-2014	Yes
13	Private College	Internal Report 2015	
14	Private College	Internal Report 2011 Exit Interview Data 2011-2014	Yes
15	Private College	Exit Interview Data 2012-2014	Yes
16	Private College	Internal Reports 2012-2014	No

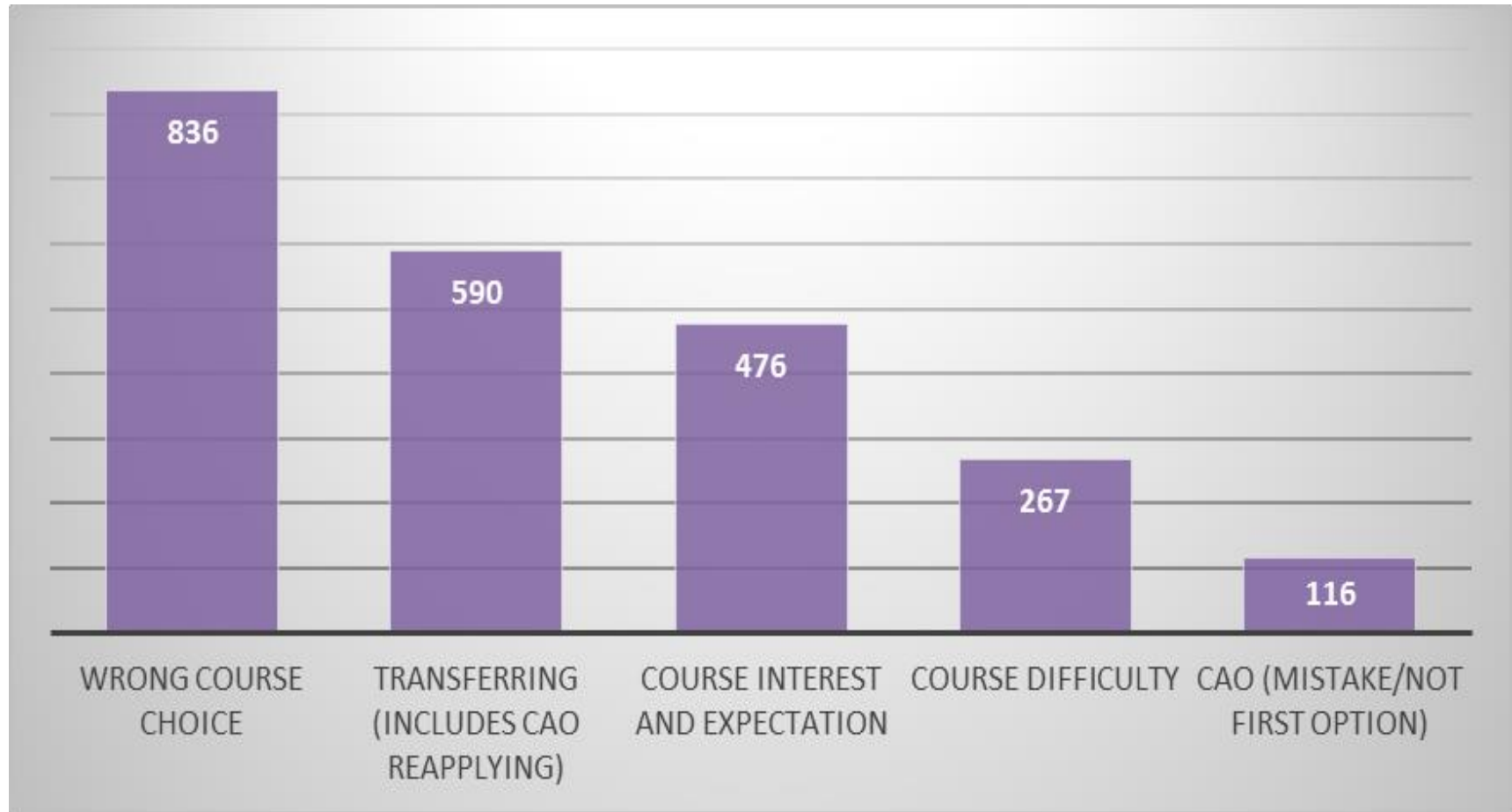
Key influences on student withdrawal



Key influences on student withdrawal by institution type



Disaggregating “Course”



“Course” – student voice

- **Wrong Course Choice**

“I was not as suited to the course as I thought I might be... This wasn’t due to the course content or how it was presented, I just wasn’t compatible with it” (University 5, 697).

- **Transferring and CAO**

“...didn’t really want this course, was my 9th CAO choice” (IT 6, 124).

“I got offered another place in another course that was originally my first choice on my CAO” (University 5, 795).

- **Course Interest and Expectation**

“very few modules related to what I am interested in and what I expected (name of course) to be like” (University 5, 497).

- **Course Difficulty**

“Found the course difficult without computer skills” (University 1, 174).



Other factors – student voice

- **Personal**

“personal circumstances changed, childcare was an issue” (IT 6, 132).

- **Financial**

“Severe Financial Difficulties (Mature student - large credit union loan to run a small shop)” (IT 11, 115).

- **Health and Medical**

“I had a kidney transplant, [I] should not have returned full-time, I needed more recovery (time) (IT 6, 114).

- **Family**

“...father’s bankruptcy, family moved to England (University 5, 1043).



Implications of the findings

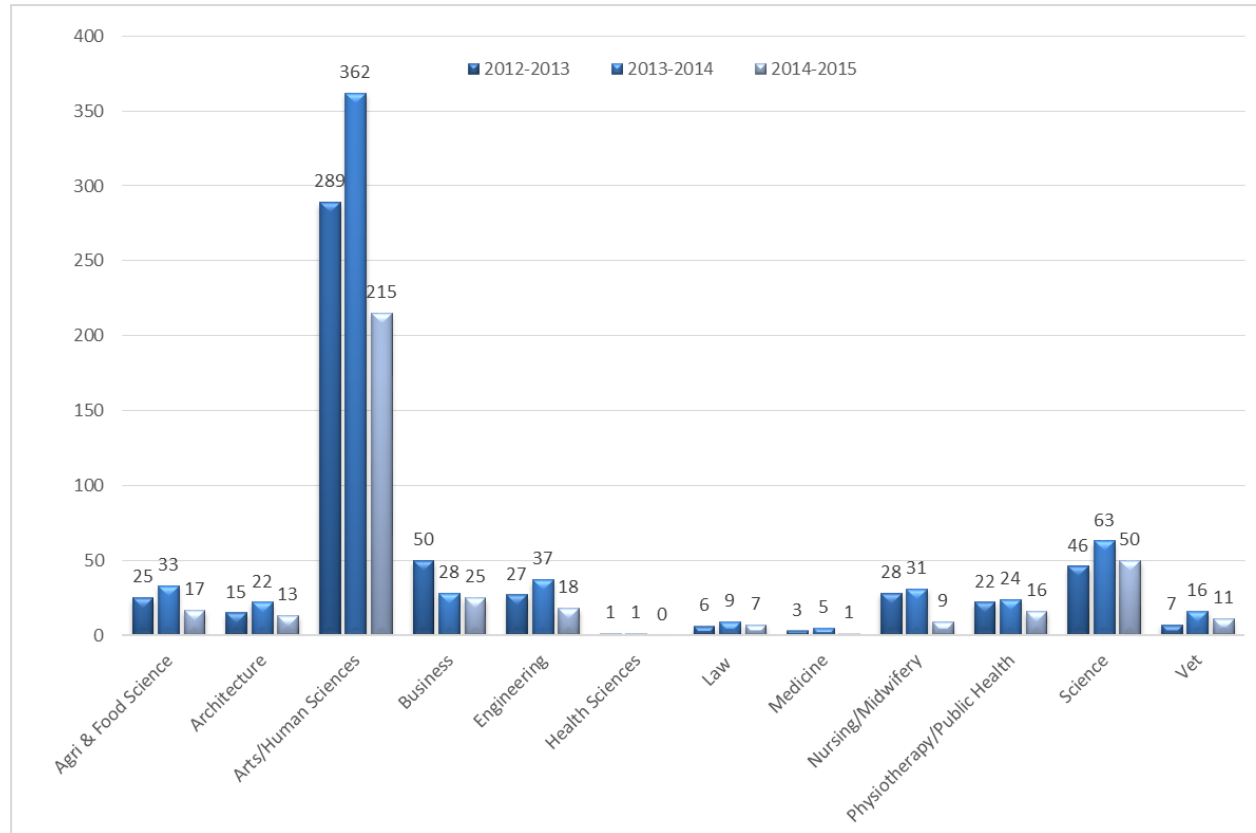
- **For the forum:**
 - Institutions could be more supportive of research projects if the Forum is to provide national added value
 - Designated contact points should have a role specification and be an “appropriate” and influential person within institutions
- **For institutions:**
 - Collaboratively develop an improved and, at least partially, standardised exit forms
 - Additional research on the process of decision-making by students
 - Consider possible relationship between “course” mismatch and recruitment / marketing strategies
- **For policymakers:**
 - More flexibility and mobility – moving from full to part time course, fees / grants, definition of “full-time” student.

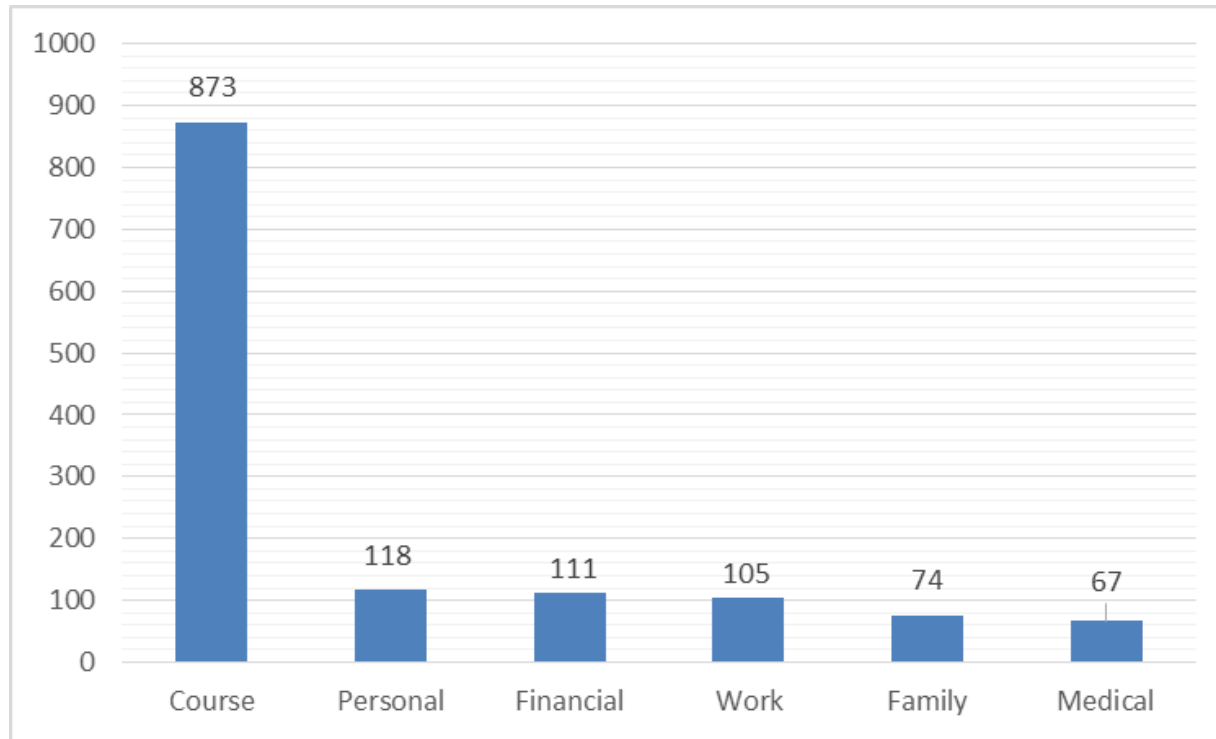


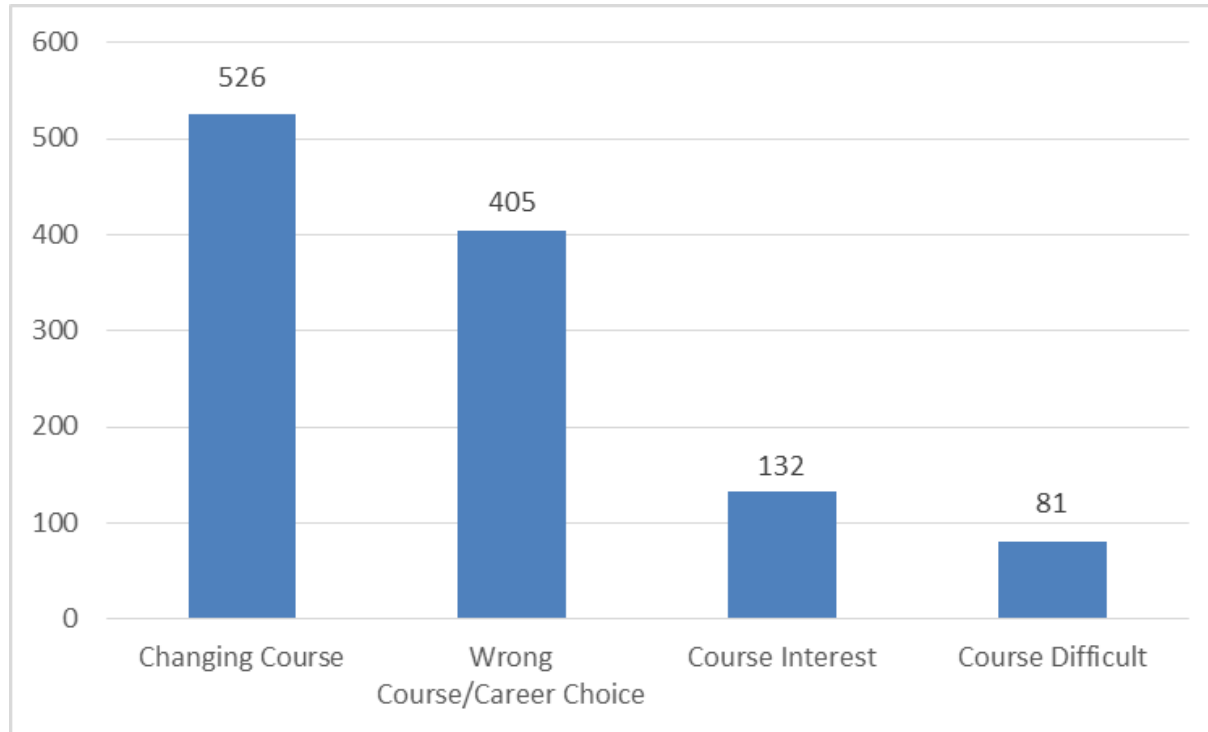
UCD study of student withdrawal

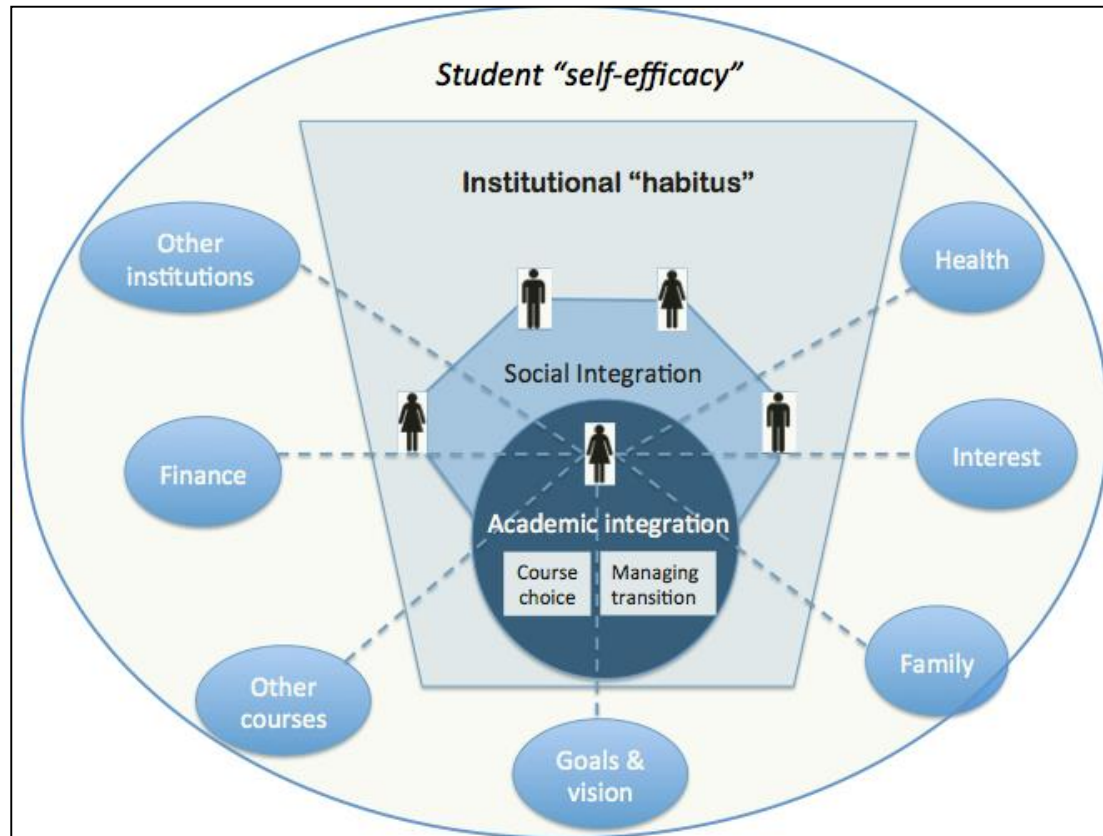
- UCD responses expanded to include 3 years of data up to end of the academic year 2015
- Circa 1,500 responses from exit forms
- Looked at any differences between UCD and national data
- Looked in more detail at withdrawal from the different programmes within UCD











HEA Study on Progression Jan 2016

Non-progression Rates by Field of Study:

Engineering (excl Civil)	13% (11% universities)
Construction & Related Architecture	19% (16% universities) 22%
Computer Science	20% (15% universities)
All Level 8 courses	12% (11% universities)



Current and Future Initiatives to Facilitate Retention

- Development of peer mentoring
- Use of learning analytics to identify potential problems
- Introduction of academic skills development modules
- MOOK to improve transition from 2nd to 3rd level studies
- Proposal for a new progressive points system aiming to reward 2nd level students for taking higher level papers at Leaving Certificate
- Move to more broad entry strategies in the university sector

