

# **Experiences of Elective Provision at UCD**

## **Abstract**

There have been numerous calls to broaden the education of third level students and thus prepare them to serve society with an awareness of and sensitivity to the cultural, political, economic and social dimensions of their work. There have been many innovations in recent years to make undergraduate education more student-centred, offering students greater flexibility and choice in 'how' and 'what' they study. In relation to 'how' students learn, novel pedagogical techniques that make students take an active, self-directed approach to their own learning are increasingly common in higher education. In relation to 'what' students learn, most university curricula have gradually evolved into core curriculum as a specified or fixed course of study coupled with some element of student choice in selecting elective or optional modules.

In 2005, University College Dublin (UCD) introduced the 'Horizons' initiative to provide a broader undergraduate education through the provision of non-programme electives for their students. One of the key features of the initiative was the introduction of an element of elective choice for students in the first three years of their studies. The experience of teaching across disciplines from the perspective of students at UCD has been previously examined and the proposed paper will examine the subject from the perspective of delivery by schools and individual academic staff. A survey/questionnaire/interview of a representative sample of Heads of School across the University was undertaken. The results will be presented under the following headings:

- 'Awareness' of the School re. elective provision;
- School philosophy on electives;
- School policy and practice on electives;
- Staff views on electives;
- School views on elective models.

## **Keywords**

Elective modules, School philosophy, Staff perception, Third-level education

## 1. Introduction

There have been numerous calls to broaden undergraduate education and thus prepare students to serve society with an awareness of and sensitivity to the cultural, political, economic and social dimensions of their work (Albritton, 2006). There have been many innovations in recent years to make undergraduate education more student-centred, offering students greater flexibility and choice in **how** and **what** they study. The learner-centred approach facilitates students' different aptitudes, interests, backgrounds, educational objectives and allows students an appropriate degree of choice in managing their own studies (Betts and Smith, 1998). It accommodates varying levels of progression and recognises different levels of attainment. This in turn opens new pathways and opportunities for non-traditional students, promoting wider access to and participation in higher education.

In relation to **how** students learn, novel pedagogical techniques (other than sitting passively in a classroom) that make students take an active, task-orientated and self-directed approach to their own learning are increasingly common in higher education. Felder (2009) defines active learning 'as anything course-related that all students in a class session are called upon to do other than simply watching, listening and taking notes. Learning approaches such as problem-based learning (PBL) have the capacity to create vibrant and active learning environments in higher education. In such enquiry-based approaches to learning, 'students define their own learning issues, what they need to research and learn to work on the problem and are responsible themselves for searching appropriate sources of information' (Barrett, 2010).

In relation to **what** students learn, most university curricula have gradually evolved into core curriculum as a specified or fixed course of study coupled with some element of student choice in selecting elective or optional modules. The free elective system has played a critical role in the development of the modern American university as we know it and is becoming more widespread in European institutions. The benefits of electives include:

- added value to the degree, enabling specialisation in chosen discipline or
- facilitation of students to pursue wider interests or explore an area that is new to the student.

For example, the benefits claimed for broadening the education of professionals include their preparation to serve society with an awareness of, and sensitivity to, the cultural, political, economic and social dimensions of their work (Heidebrecht, 1999). Such graduate attributes include:

- An understanding of the need for high ethical standards in the practice of the profession, including the responsibilities of the professional towards people and the environment;
- The ability to work effectively as an individual, in teams and in multi-disciplinary settings together with the capacity to undertake lifelong learning;
- The ability to communicate effectively with the professional community and with society at large.

## 2. Elective models

Some examples of models of recent elective provision are described below. For example, at Yale University in the U.S.A., an undergraduate must take 36 courses over four years. *Breadth (distribution)* is achieved by requiring students to take:

‘no fewer than two course credits in the humanities and arts, two course credits in the sciences, and two course credits in the social sciences. In addition to completing courses in these disciplinary areas, students must fulfill skills requirements by taking two course credits in quantitative reasoning, two course credits in writing, and courses to further their foreign language proficiency. Depending on their level of accomplishment in foreign languages at matriculation, students may fulfill this last requirement with one, two, or three courses or by a combination of course work and approved study abroad’ (Yale University, 2012).

Thus at least eleven - or almost 1/3 - of a student's total of 36 courses are employed to meet the requirement of breadth. *Depth (concentration)* is achieved by requiring students to select a major from among the more than 70 major programmes available. A major programme usually includes 12 courses in a single discipline taken for the most part in the final two years.

Napier University, Edinburgh introduced a range of ‘co-curricular’ modules in 2008, designed to strengthen the employability of their students; these modules are primarily in the areas of languages and business (Napier University, 2008).

In 2010, the University of Aberdeen introduced ‘enhanced study’ options, offering:

- more choice: a student can study around their core subject to gain breadth and context; add a language, a science or business study as an extra subject during the first two years of your degree; or choose from a range of new multidisciplinary courses based on real world problems;
- wider opportunities: a student can broaden their experience and skills through a choice of activities such as overseas study, work placements and voluntary work, all overseen by the University (University of Aberdeen, 2013).

Recently, the University of Swansea introduced the concept of elective modules into the curriculum. The electives allow students to broaden their education by allowing them to pursue a limited number of modules from outside the disciplines associated with their chosen programme of study. Elective modules are taken in place of optional modules and are restricted to a level not lower than the current level of study minus one level. In addition, the elective module chosen must be approved by an appropriate member of staff from the ‘home’ discipline as academically valid (University of Swansea, 2013).

The University of Hull offers a free elective scheme to make its curriculum more ‘student centred’. Students on most undergraduate programmes can choose one free elective module per year. Students can choose a module from any department, and as in any other module, their achievements in the second and third years of their degree count towards the final degree classification (University of Hull, 2013).

In Ireland, there is now some element of elective choice by students in practically all undergraduate programmes. The most common use of elective choice is to allow students to specialise in later years in particular areas of their main discipline. Elective options that allow students to explore other disciplines outside of their main area of specialisation have been much rarer. University College Dublin (UCD) has been at the vanguard of leading universities by introducing significant elective choice for students throughout most of their undergraduate years in 2005 (University College Dublin, 2013). This initiative will be more fully described in the next section by drawing on research conducted as part of UCD's Teaching and Learning initiatives.

### **3. The present study**

The present study focuses on the aforementioned issues in the context of the experience at UCD which has recently introduced a fully credit-based modularized system, so-called the 'Horizons' system. This initiative is a central focus for the study as it provides the policy and pedagogical rationale for electives across the University. Modularisation, when fully and completely implemented, offers important educational opportunities to the University and its students. The modular building blocks can be combined in new and interesting ways to assemble innovative and exciting programmes, whether driven by strategic focus, student demand or societal needs. The use of the internationally-recognised European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) promotes international mobility of students. Periods spend studying abroad can now be fully recognised as part of a UCD programme, and students visiting UCD will return with a clear credit value attached to their work.

In keeping with the philosophy of Newman, the founder of UCD, the UCD Horizon system increases student choice in an unprecedented manner. As illustrated in Table 3.1, under the re-structured curriculum at UCD, in a given academic year, students choose *core* modules from their specific subject area, a number of *options* (if applicable) and *elective* modules, which can be chosen from within the student's programme of study (in-programme electives) or from any other programme across the entire University (non-programme or general electives). The student can choose to take 10 to 60 ECTS credits per year from any subject area across the University (subject to timetabling pre-requisites and the availability of places). The student can select modules within their subject area, deepening their knowledge, or from outside their programme, broadening their learning experience. The philosophy underlying this curricular transformation is to give the freedom of choice to students to broaden their knowledge in different areas or deepen their knowledge in their chosen programme of study. Crucially, Horizons facilitates the formation of graduates that are 'intellectually flexible and globally engaged', central to UCD's Education Strategy 2009 – 2014. General electives can be categorized as being either: (a) general interest (e.g. improving foreign language competence) or (b) generic/transferrable skills (e.g. research skills).

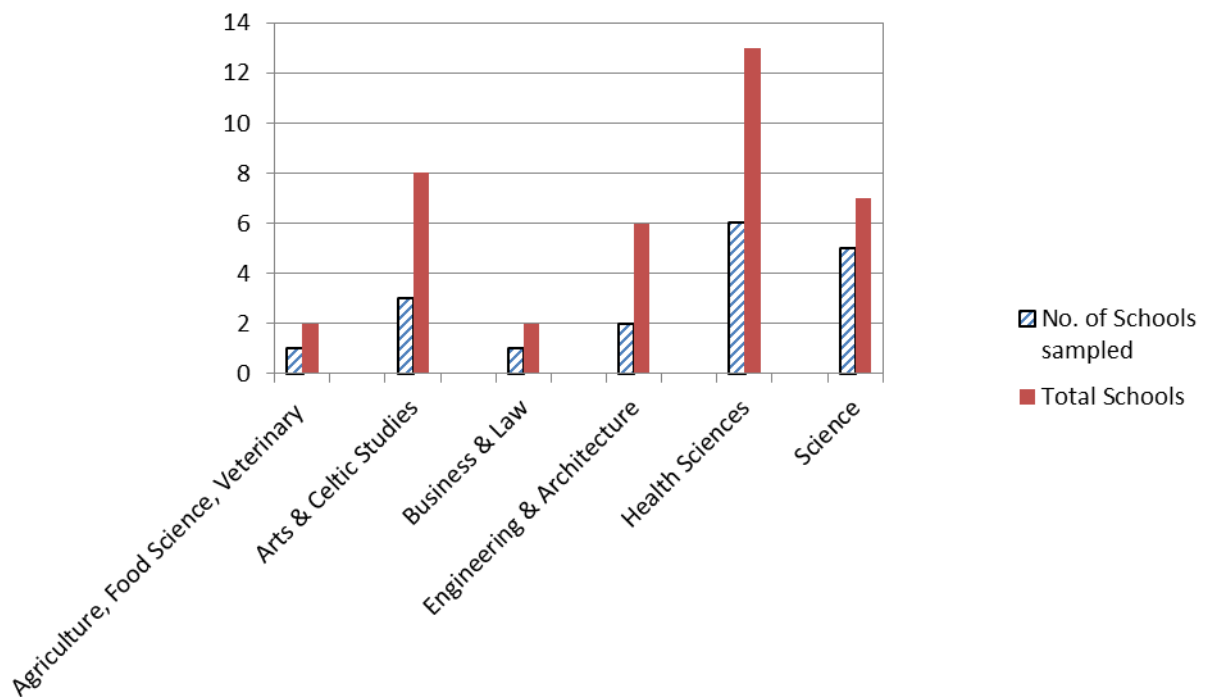
<b>Module</b>		<b>Comment</b>
Core		Students are required to take these modules
Options		Students may be required to select a number of modules from a specified suite of modules
Electives	In-programme	Students can select a maximum of 2 modules per year from a suite of modules offered by the programme
	General	Students can select a maximum of 2 modules per year from any programme across the University, subject to timetable and space restrictions

**Table 3.1: General modular structure at UCD**

The experience of teaching across disciplines from the perspective of students at UCD has been previously examined (Hennessy, 2010). This paper will examine the subject from the perspective of delivery by schools and individual academic staff. In particular it will comment on the awareness of schools regarding this movement of students in and out of their modules and consider the schools responses to that movement.

#### **4. Methodology and sample**

This paper reports on the results of a survey and interviews conducted with a representative number of academic units (schools) across the university. For the purpose of academic governance, UCD consists of 6 Colleges, each College being further sub-divided into Schools, with a total of 38 Schools across the University. The survey was designed to gather data on the awareness of schools regarding opportunities and challenges associated with elective provision. The interviews provided a more qualitative perspective from the Head of School with regard to School policy on electives. In all cases, the Head of School took responsibility for completion of the survey, frequently in consultation with School Head of Teaching and Learning. All interviews were conducted with the Head of School. A representative sample of 18 schools across all six UCD Colleges is included in this analysis (Fig. 4.1).



**Fig. 4.1** Number of Schools surveyed across the six constituent Colleges in UCD

### 5. Registration Data

From student registration data it is possible to extract information about the pattern of elective decision making across the University. This is an important feature of the elective process as it is indicative of what elective modules are popular among the student body. This in turn can be useful in determining the movement of students and whether or not the objective of students availing of *breadth* is being realised. The highest demand for elective places across the University is for modules offered by the Colleges of Arts and Human Sciences. Particular subject areas in these Colleges (e.g. languages, psychology) are significantly more popular than those in the other Colleges of the University (Fig. 5.1).

Subject area	Number of students	
	2008 - 2009	2009 – 2010
Languages	2009	1183
Nursing Studies	1614	1663
Psychology	846	1041
Economics	765	565
Sports Management	678	365
Computer Science	673	676
Politics	644	574
History	605	277
Physiotherapy	602	530
Philosophy	589	586
Law	560	664
English	515	392
Geography	401	378

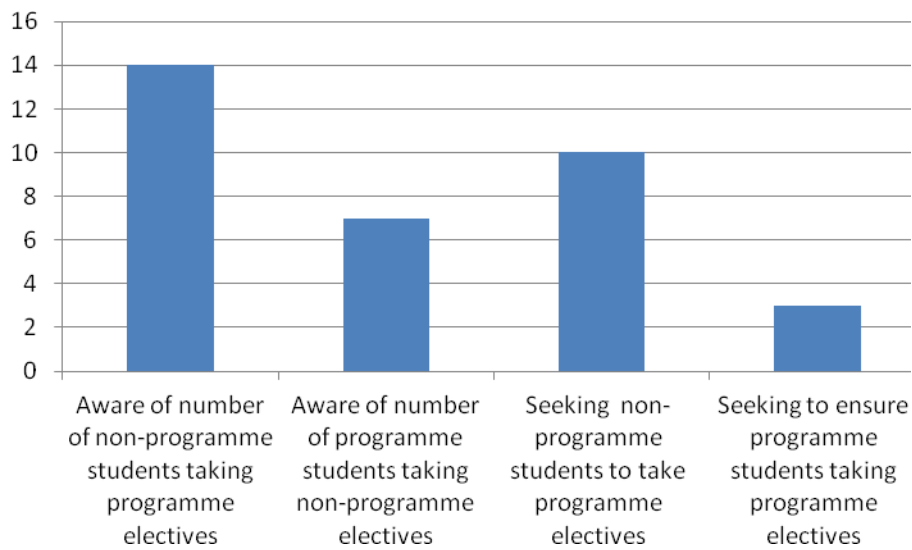
Source: Michael Sinnott, Director of Administrative Services, Registrar’s Office, UCD

**Fig. 5.1:** Subject areas with largest number of elective places taken in academic years 2008-2009 and 2009-2010

## 6. Results

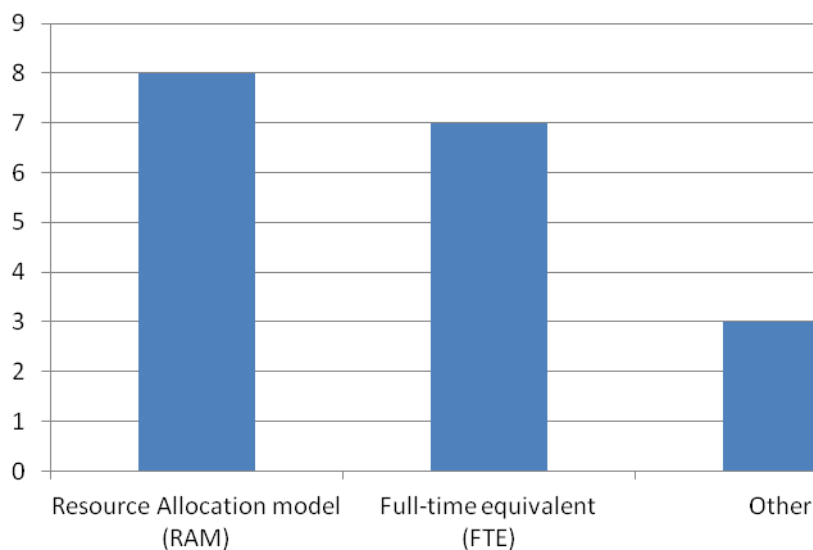
Examination of Fig. 6.1 shows that Schools were more aware of incoming non-programme students taking electives in their School than of their students taking electives outside of the School. The data also supports the view that, while some Schools (n=10) were actively seeking to attract non-programme students, very few Schools (n=3) were seeking to ensure that their students took in-programme electives. This finding indicates that the majority of Schools in the study recognised the value of having non-programme students undertaking elective modules in their programmes. The results, although not conclusive, do at least suggest that most Schools are not actively attempting to retain their own students thus preventing them from taking outside elective modules.





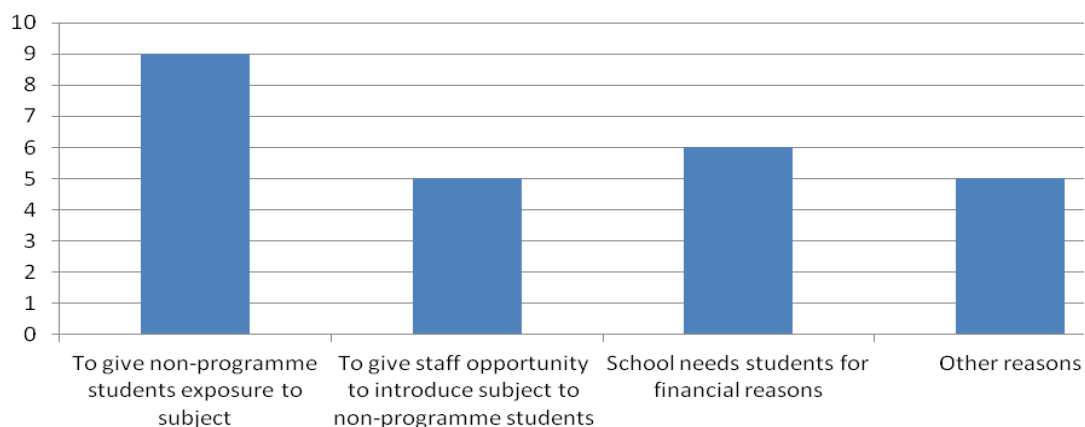
**Fig. 6.1** Awareness of students taking non-programme and programme electives

Since one of the questions raised in discussion about electives inevitably relates to financial implications for Schools the survey sought to identify to what extent Schools are aware of these implications and to ascertain if finance is a consideration in planning around electives. All Schools reported that they were aware of resource implications associated with the movement of students for electives; almost 50% referred to the Resource Allocation System (RAM) system while the remaining referred to student Full Time Equivalents (FTE's) or in the case of 3 Schools they did not specifically name the method of resource transfer but were aware that there were financial implications (Fig. 6.2). While the majority of Schools appreciated the resource implications of elective modules, a minority of Schools, in practice, took this into account in planning elective provision.



**Fig. 6.2** Awareness of resource implications

Despite the awareness of the resource allocations systems only six Schools cited finance as a motivation for promoting elective provision by their School (Fig. 6.2). This finding may, in some part, be explained by that fact that, when asked if they felt that the current system of resource allocation for elective provision was satisfactory, the majority responded that they were satisfied although the qualitative responses in interviews indicated that there was uncertainty in most Schools as to the exact nature of the financial impact on their School. The results suggest that, while just over half the respondents did declare they were motivated by the desire to provide non-programme students with exposure to their subject area, only five Schools viewed this from the perspective of facilitating staff to demonstrate their expertise outside the programme (Fig. 6.3).



**Fig. 6.3** Motivation of Schools for providing elective modules

## 7. Discussion

Since its introduction in 2005 the UCD Horizons system of elective provision has been to the forefront of promoting student-centered choice and engagement with a breadth of opportunities to study modules outside of a designated programme. Registration data indicates that the movement is one-sided with students moving from ‘professional’ and technical’ Schools into the arts and humanities without a reciprocal flow into these Schools. Any initial concern that elective choice might undermine the academic integrity of programmes appears to have dissipated and Schools have adopted a mostly positive view of student participation in electives outside their core programme. From the qualitative data it appears that while almost all Schools are aware of the financial/resource implications of the movement of students the majority value the exposure of their students to other areas of study. It may be that for most Schools the financial repercussions of student taking electives outside their programme are not significant. Some Schools commented that they did not have to retain students since their students generally tended to stay in-programme anyway. Other Schools did comment that while they were willing to offer electives to non-programme students they were doing so in modules that did not require resource intensive to run, specifically excluding elective students from modules such as laboratory-based modules or small-group teaching modules.

It is somewhat disappointing that more Schools were not availing of elective provision to afford staff with opportunities to share their expertise with non-programme students. There is evidence in the registration data that students predominantly choose electives at level-one rather than using elective choices to build on particular areas of interest beyond level-one modules. It may be that elective modules are being developed to deliver introductory material or that they are being specially designed for the non-specialist.

## **8. Conclusions and future work**

The data presented above indicates that academics in UCD are committed to facilitating student engagement with elective modules outside their core programme area of study. This finding is supported by qualitative responses from Heads of Schools who, by and large, are less focused on the resource implications of student mobility and more concerned with pedagogical prerogative. This finding is, arguably, a good indication that elective provision has now become established as a very positive force in UCD's student-centered approach.

Future work on this topic is likely to include:

- An extension of the surveys/interviews to all 38 Schools in the University;
- A longitudinal study of student elective choice from the introduction of electives in 2005 to the present day;
- The effect of some programmes recently reducing the number from 6 to 5 to facilitate an introductory study skills module in first year.

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