

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from the Department of Sociology's investigation of the First Year student experience conducted in the second semester of 2013-14. Two hundred and twenty three questionnaires were completed by first year students (Sociology and Politics) who also participated in focus group discussions, (representing approximately 50% of the first year student cohort). The report sheds some light on students' intentions to study Sociology and Politics, the reality of studying those subjects and other aspects of the learner experience.

1. Intention to study Sociology

Almost two-thirds of the student sample (63.1%, n=140) intended to study Sociology when they came to Maynooth University in September 2013. However, 14% of them said it would be their first subject choice compared to 50.3% who noted it would be their second choice and 35.7% who identified it as their third choice. An age-difference emerged within the sample. More mature students (76.6%) intended to study Sociology compared to the younger (17-22 yrs) cohort (59.1%).

2. Sociology is more likely to be a third or second choice of subject

Students were asked to compile a list of the three subjects they *intended to study* (prior to registration) and the three subjects they *were actually studying*. 4.9% (n=11) listed Sociology as the *first subject* they were *intending to study* when they came to Maynooth. This indicates that Sociology as a subject registers less well in the student imagination than other more familiar subjects, as it is not currently taught at second-level. The Department strongly supports the introduction of a new Social and Political Life subject at senior cycle in post-primary education.

9.9% (n=22) listed Sociology as the *first subject* they were *currently studying*. More than half the cohort (52.5%, n=117) listed it as their third choice and more than a third (36.3%, n=81) had it listed as their second subject. Since 40% of the first year student cohort ultimately proceeded with Sociology in Second year this suggests that the Department managed to capture a significant majority of those students who rated Sociology as their first or second subject choice.

These findings suggest that introducing sociology at second-level would amplify its scope and remit and enable students to make more informed choices at third-level. For a detailed analysis of the relative position of Sociology and Politics within the three-subject structure see section 2.2.

3. Students rate the Department of Sociology as mostly similar to other Departments

On average 59% of students report similar experiences in the Department of Sociology compared to other Departments. "Similar" and "On Average Better" experiences in the Department of Sociology compared to other Departments were noted by 85.1% of students in relation to Quality of Teaching and 78.0% of students in relation to the Learner Experience. Students of sociology in particular reported positive experiences such as enjoying subject content and developing skills through the discipline.

4. Exemplary pedagogical practice

In particular, very high levels of satisfaction were recorded for the (1) First Year Tutorial Programme (2) Module Content (3) Student Handbook (4) Accessibility of staff outside of class time (5) Access to necessary Library Resources and (6) Moodle as an online Teaching and Learning Resource. 98.2% of students are satisfied with the first year tutorial programme and reported positive learning experiences. Skills development is built into the overall tutorial structure. This includes fundamental skills (e.g. critical analysis, active reading, presentation skills) and literacies (e.g. information literacy) that provide a learning platform in Sociology and *also in other subjects*. Such a high level of satisfaction indicates the positive impact of small group teaching.

The Department of Sociology is committed to the provision of tutorials and small group teaching across the three year degree programme which consumes a significant proportion of the overall Departmental budget. Students nevertheless consistently petition for additional small group teaching, but this would only be possible with the allocation of additional resources.

5. Third level transition is characterised by academic challenge and engagement

From the time that students come to Maynooth well-established misperceptions abound that Sociology may not be as challenging as other disciplines. This explains why many choose Sociology as their third “gap filler” subject. However, the reality of studying Sociology is very different. 85.6% of students noted some degree of difficulty with regard to the complexity of Sociology compared to other subjects. More of the younger cohort (11.5%) noted that it was “Very Difficult” compared to mature students (6.4%). Difficulties included exposure to complex language, challenging readings, comprehension of sociological concepts, and students’ ability to acquire skills and subject literacies. The data also indicate that a high level of motivation can lead to better student outcomes in terms of skills acquisition.

This finding must be set against the demographic profile of the First Year Intake which indicates that almost 57% of student are first in their family to attend university, and that only one-third of the students’ mothers and one-quarter of the fathers have achieved a third level qualification. This profile is consistent with earlier surveys and correlates with the comparatively high proportions of students admitted from the lower ranked socio-economic groups.¹ Our student body is diverse in terms of social class, age cohort, nationality and Leaving Certificate attainment. This study provides empirical evidence that the teaching and learning methods we employ, particular through our tutorial programme, are effective and necessary given the particular profile of our student cohort.

Students remarked on the fact that very little material can be “learned off by heart” in Sociology evidencing the new challenge associated with transition from second to third-level education. Students believe that particular forms of assessment (i.e. 100% exam) are difficult and stressful, and some suggested that more curricular time should be assigned to exam preparation. This exam orientation may be interpreted as a “legacy issue” that is transferring over to higher education from the post-primary sector as students make the transition. An expectation of “teaching to the exam” presents a significant challenge to third-level teaching and learning. One way to tackle exam culture is to offer additional small group learning opportunities and continuous assessment but both interventions would require significantly more resources.

¹ Maynooth University Annual Incoming Student Survey 2014-15. Summary presented at Academic Council, December 8, 2014

6. Mature students are well represented in Sociology and are more positive about all aspects of the programme, than the student cohort as a whole.

Just over one fifth of our sample (21.1%) was made up of mature students which is significantly higher than the percentage of mature students in the first year intake as a whole.² On all the key study indicators mature students responded more positively than the student cohort as a whole in terms of actively choosing the discipline, approval of the services provided by the Department including the tutorial programme and satisfaction with the acquisition of skills. Mature students bring particular life experience to bear in their studies, have often undertaken foundation courses before coming to Maynooth University and have very high levels of motivation.

7. Uncertainty about subject choice for second year

One-third of students (33.0%) noted that they intended to continue with their study of Sociology in 2nd year. More than one-third (34.8%) intended to drop Sociology and an almost similar proportion (32.1%) reported that they were unsure. At the time the study was conducted this meant a potential loss of two-thirds of the student cohort from the Department's register. As of October 2014, 41% of students who completed the first year programme in Sociology registered for second year (180), and 49% of students who completed the first year programme in Politics registered for second year (27), indicating a consolidation of commitment to the discipline by the end of the academic year. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that by March 2014 one third of students remained unsure about their subject choices for second year. This is a university-wide issue and suggests that students need greater supports and academic advice about subject choice and future study trajectories early on in their college careers.

Intention to continue with Sociology and Politics in Second Year is informed by students' positive perceptions of the subjects, their dislike of other subjects, subject compatibility, positive learner experiences, subject constraint (i.e. they must continue with Sociology or Politics as part of their degree programme) and their future plans.

8. Uncertainty about career trajectories

While some students acknowledged the relevance of Sociology to the labour market, this emerged in a limited way. A general sense of not knowing or understanding how the subject might translate into a career trajectory was apparent. In fact, some students suggested that opting out of Sociology in second year might in part be explained by the lack of a clear career pathway after graduation. While the Department is undertaking an initiative to show case the versatility of Sociology in post-college careers, the problem raised is an ongoing challenge for the Social Sciences and the University as a whole. Our students are impacted by factors beyond our control such as labour market shifts, the impact of recession and government cutbacks, catastrophic life events, and the challenges associated with class, race and ethnic disadvantage. We need to be cognisant of these constraints in our pedagogical mission.

² 13% of the incoming cohort of first year students in 2014-15 are mature students aged over 23 years (source: Maynooth University Annual Incoming Student Survey 2014-15 Summary)