

Expanding student choice through the introduction of a system of general electives: The impact on student experience of learning and identity formation. (0258)

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University College Dublin engaged with a strategic plan to implement a modularised and symmetrised curriculum with a rolling implementation was completed in 2007. The main aim of the plan was to drive curricular reform at programme and module level. Laurillard (2002) noted that many decisions regarding changes in higher education including modularisation had been taken with little evidential support and little evaluation of the consequences. UCD appointed a team of Teaching and Learning Fellows to investigate in particular the role of elective provision within the modularised curriculum.

This presentation will present the findings of preliminary research into the choices students have been making about elective modules and the challenge to the university in meeting the demand for elective modules. It will also address some concerns that have emerged about student sense of identity and the place of electives within a more structured programme of study.

In adopting this new modularised structure UCD offered the newly designed Horizons undergraduate programme. This programme provided students with the opportunity to design at least some aspects of their own curriculum through facilitating provision of elective modules. Students have the freedom to select a total of 6 elective modules over the three year of the undergraduate degree programme. Essentially these electives can be selected from anywhere across the university, timetable and criteria permitting.

The introduction of this elective provision met with mixed reviews from staff and apparently wide support from prospective students evidenced by increased numbers of applicants and in particular first preference applications to UCD in response to the launch of the Horizons programme.

The second phase of this research project will report next year on its investigation into views of schools / staff on elective provision. The current phase of the research has tracked students engagement with the elective choices.

A pattern has emerged which suggests that the elective system has created a flow of students from the sciences, computers sciences and related schools into the arts and humanities. Hence electives are viewed as opportunities to broaden the more technical and scientific programmes while students in arts and humanities are not taking opportunities to expand their experiences into the general sciences or technical fields.

As the elective system has developed it has been possible to identify particular areas of interest for the student body as a whole and to increase resources to meet demand in some areas such as psychology and geology. However the apparently random selection of electives on the part of many students has led to a number of issues about the initiative.

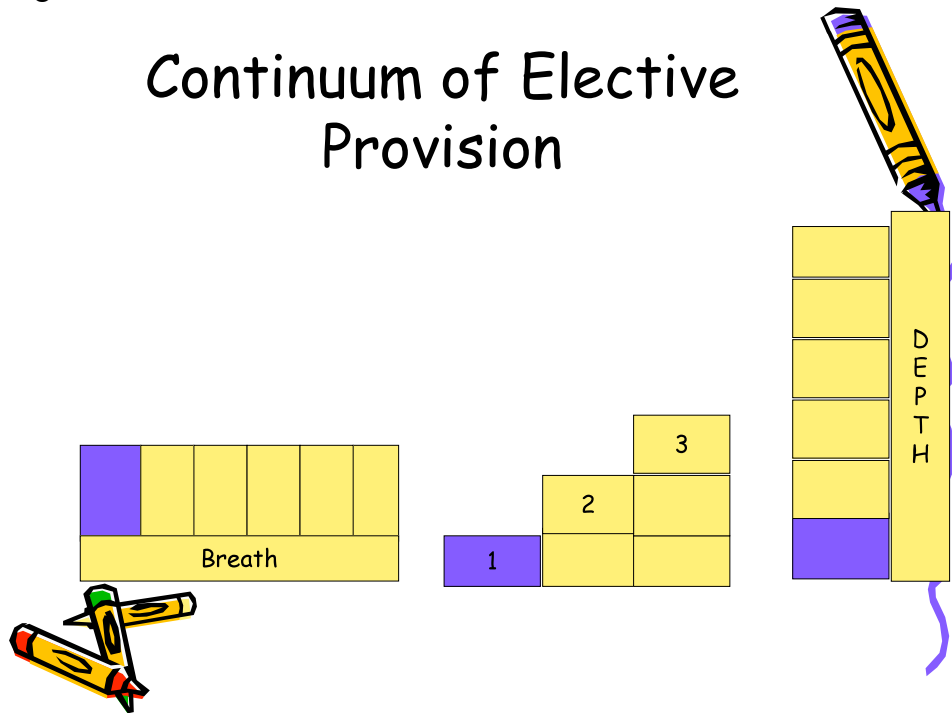
1. Is the system of 6 elective choices across the three years maximising the opportunity to broaden the experience of students? One rationale informing

provision of elective choices is that having choice will enhance student engagement and motivation in learning. Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall (2003: 65) in discussing student motivation report that the main focus of research has been on the distinction between deep and surface approaches to study. Each of these approaches is linked to a certain type of motivation, with deep approaches being associated with intrinsic motivation and surface approaches with extrinsic motivation. They identified a third study type which they call a strategic approach. Student using this strategic approach in fact can vary their approach depending on circumstances. These students are motivated by seeking high grades and they can use either deep or surface study approach depending on their judgement of what will be required to get the grade. There is some evidence that students select electives based on interest but are also aware of grade implications.

2. Would the elective system be better utilised to offer more opportunities for 'depth' perhaps through organising packages of electives that could form a structured special interest? Our research shows that students are selecting electives from a wide range of modules. The selection may reflect an opportunistic rather than a reflective approach to elective choices. It may be that students do not see the opportunities offered through the elective system to engage in depth as well as breadth. On the one hand the development of some 'pre packaged' electives might support further use of electives as sub specialities (depth) but Elliot who established the Harvard Elective System (1886) was critical of this method of elective provision. He held the view that 'those who favor the principle of the elective system, but doubt the capacity or disposition of the students to select studies wisely for themselves, very generally advocate a group or 'block' method, in which studies are laid out into groups of cognate studies'. In spite of Elliot's reservations a continuum model of elective provision has been developed that reflects a range of options from complete free choice in electives to a structured 'mini minor' type of provision, see Fig 1 Continuum of elective provision
3. Does the success of elective provision depend on strong core programme identity on the part of both students and staff or is the concept of subject programmes outdated? The research into both the modularisation process and the provision of electives within the curricula has raised this question about the relationship between core programme modules and the electives. Given that there is general agreement that there are generic skills that students must acquire then it should be possible to embed these skills in a range of elective modules. The issue seems to be more about ensuring that module descriptors and outputs actually address the range of generic skills rather than replicate the same skills set. This seems to support the role of the programme in coordinating overall learning goals.
4. Students can navigate through the flexibility of elective provision unaided but this may not be the most efficient way to maximise opportunities for both depth and breadth that an elective system can provide. The research shows that many students do not gain entry into their preferred electives. A system of information, advice and support is required. This system should also have a component that can track and report on students' experiences of gaining

access to electives. UCD's system can already give us some information about this issue and indicates that there are some very popular electives that are oversubscribed. An electives enhancement scheme has been introduced to deal with this problem and our research is currently investigating the success of this initiative.

Figure 1



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