

BACKGROUND

The National College of Ireland offers courses in Business, Computing, Informatics and Community Development. It is a state-funded institution with awards conferred by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC). The BA in Accounting and HRM (the degree) commenced in 1991 and is a three year full-time course providing a general business background for a specialised education in either the management of the financial or human resources of organisations. The course is comprised primarily of students entering directly from second level education with up to 30% of places in total reserved for mature and transfer students as well as students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The degree is accredited by HETAC and has examination exemptions from both the HRM and accounting professional bodies. In year one students study six subjects in total. In years two and three students must select either the accounting or HRM stream. They then study two common subjects and three specialist subjects.

Literature Review

This section examines the nature of the relationship between earlier academic performance and degree performance. This relationship is further analysed by field of study.

Degree Performance and Earlier Academic Performance

Much of the research in this area demonstrates some degree of correlation between final year degree performance and earlier academic performance. The nature of these relationships seems to vary across fields of study and institutions. Early work by Sear (1983) shows a small but significantly positive correlation (0.3) between A level score and final year degree result. Peers and Johnston (1994) meta-analysis of previous studies in the area found that A level and university and polytechnic final year degree performance display a small but significantly positive relationship correlation of 0.28 overall. Peers and Johnston (1994) concluded that success in final year degree examinations is related to success in entry qualifications but is also influenced by other factors such as learning approach and environment. In reviewing literature from Thomas, Bol, and Warkentin, (1991) and Entwistle and Entwistle (1991) they suggested that a close match between entry qualifications and higher education performance is not to be expected or even desired given the expected development of conceptual understanding and more mature study habits at higher education. In American research, House (2000) found that high school class percentile rank and ACT (American College Testing) score were significant predictors of first year degree performance among science, engineering and maths students. In Irish research Moran and Crowley (1979) identified that the pass rate in first year increases monotonically with performance in Leaving Certificate with clear cut differences between students with low and high scores and between different fields of study. The Points Commission (Lynch et al, 1999), found a clear relationship between Leaving Certificate Grade

i.e. from year one to year two, with the exception of the HRM group. The relationships between the explanatory variables and final year ranking are stronger for the accounting group (compared to the HRM group) with the exception of year one.

Discussion and Implications of Research Findings

In this section the findings and implications of the research will be discussed firstly by whole group and then by field of study sub-group. Within each group the discussion is split between entry qualifications and interim degree performance. The findings should be considered within the context of the sample which was selected from one business degree course within one higher education institution. The sample size was 177 and the CAO points range was 300 to 445.

Whole Group - Final Year Degree Performance and Entry Qualifications Performance

As indicated by previous studies (Sear,1983; Peers and Johnson, 1994; Lynch et al , 1999;House, 2000) this study also found a statistically significant positive relationship between entry qualifications and final year degree performance (based on ranking of assessment results). With a Spearman coefficient of .275 this relationship is similar to that reported by Sear (1983) and Peers and Johnson (1994). However, this level of correlation supports Lynch et al's view (1999) that entry qualifications are a far from perfect predictor of performance in higher education. In the light of Peers and Johnson's (1994) comments about the expected change in learning approach from secondary to higher education, this level of correlation seems appropriate. In other words as learning approaches change from one system to the next we would not expect a very strong relationship between performances in both systems. This finding may be of interest to Leaving Certificate students, their families and their teachers. Although Leaving Certificate results are used to gain admission to the degree, performance in the Leaving Certificate is not necessarily reflected in final year degree performance. On this basis Leaving Certificate students should not assume that their Leaving Certificate performance will be consistent with their final year degree performance.

Whole Group - Final Year Degree Performance and Interim Degree Performance

This study also found a strong and significantly positive relationship between interim and final year degree performance. The Spearman coefficient for year one is .681 and for year two is .744. Interim degree performance appears to have a stronger relationship with final year degree performance than entry qualifications do. In essence, the closer the student gets to final year performance the stronger this relationship gets. This increase in the strength of the relationship may be expected for a number of reasons. Firstly, there is a consistency in the measurement of academic performance as each of the stages occurs within the same higher education system.

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