

Student success in technological higher education:

An exploration of reasons why students consider withdrawing from their programmes



1. Context

This publication is the first of a planned series of papers exploring the many varied factors which influence the success of students within technological higher education. Prompted by the agreed focus to explore student success, technological higher education institutions decided to offer an additional optional question item to students taking part in 2019 fieldwork for the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE). All students registered on first year and final years of taught programmes leading to major awards at NFQ levels 6 to 9 are invited to participate in the ISSE during February – March. Data is typically presented for various cohorts of first year undergraduate, final year undergraduate and taught postgraduate students.

ISSE has facilitated individual institutions to add a limited number of optional question items to the core questionnaire for their own students for a number of years. Previous examples include the use of nationally agreed quality evaluation questions (known as “QA3” questions) by many institutes of technology and the use of additional questions by a number of universities in advance of impending institutional reviews. Only a limited number of additional questions are approved in order to maintain the explicit engagement focus of the ISSE and to rigorous design undertaken to date.

11 of the then 14 institutes of technology (9 of the current 12 technological HEIs) chose to offer the optional ‘withdrawal’ question items to their students in 2019. While it is noted that responses originate from students still present in February – March, and that this does not capture those students who may withdraw before the fieldwork period, the resulting data does provide a new evidence base to inform further consideration of the issues in play.

2. Question item

Question: *Have you ever seriously considered withdrawing from your degree programme? (select all that apply)* with response options of:

- *No, I have not seriously considered withdrawing*
- *Yes, for financial reasons*
- *Yes, for personal or family reasons*
- *Yes, for health reasons*
- *Yes, for employment reasons*
- *Yes, to transfer to another institution*
- *Other (please state)*

More than 7,500 students from the technological sector responded to the question by selecting at least one of the options. As is usual practice with ISSE data, the following percentages are based on the number of students who selected at least one option i.e. completely blank responses are not included but respondents who selected one or more response options are all included.

3. Data for all respondents

Figure 1 illustrates that a large majority (59%) of those students who responded to the survey in February – March 2019 report not seriously considering withdrawing from their programmes.

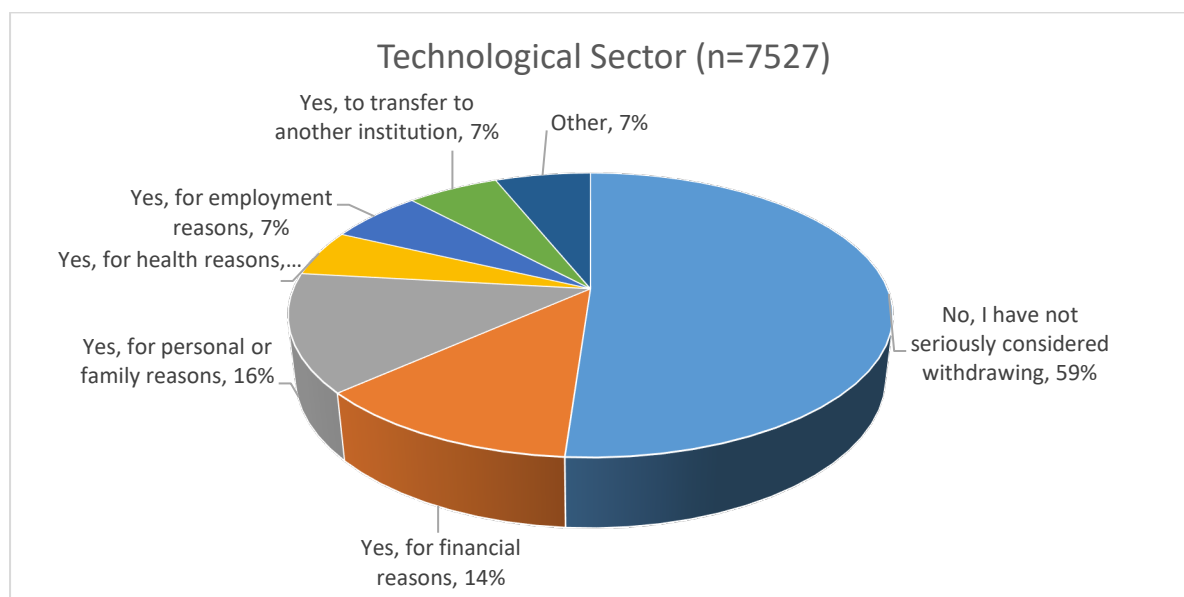


Figure 1 Results from all respondents

Of those who had given consideration, the most frequent responses identified personal / family reasons (16%) and financial reasons (14%). Reasons of health, employment, institutional transfer, and 'other' all received similar numbers of responses at 7% (health at 6%). It is noteworthy that the vast majority of respondents reported not seriously considering withdrawal and that the other options do not appear to be within the ready control of an institution. The fact that less than 7% of respondents selected 'other' and provided additional open text commentary is also of some interest.

486 respondents provided additional open text. The responses to the open-ended questions were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The process focussed on identifying categories of themes within the data. The data was revisited on multiple occasions by one analyst to ensure consistency and to test the validity of emerging themes. Figure 2 provides a graphical overview of this data, illustrating that there are a wide range of issues identified. It is noted that this breadth reflects a similar pattern to a larger analysis of open text presented in the national report of ISSE results from 2017. That analysis explored responses from over 9000 first year students to questions asking what institutions do best to engage students in learning, and what institutions should improve to engage students in learning. Responses to the first question generally could be categorised into a relatively small number of themes whereas responses to the second question identified a much wider range of issues.

4. Responses for first year, final year (undergraduate) and taught postgraduate students

Figure 3 illustrates results from all respondents and from each cohort of first years, final year undergraduate (at levels 6, 7, 8) and postgraduate students on taught programmes.

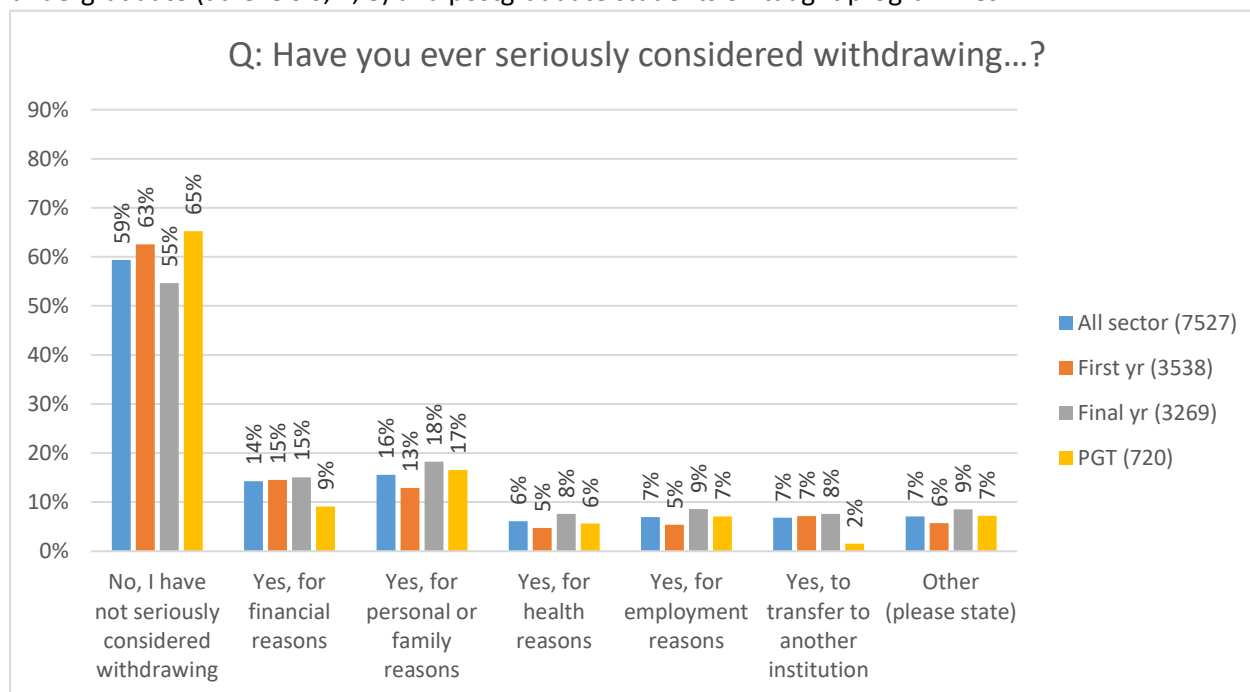


Figure 3 Responses (by cohort / year)

Participating students pursuing taught postgraduate programmes report lowest levels of serious consideration of withdrawal with 65% selecting “no, I have not seriously considered...”. This result may be largely as expected for students who respond to the survey approximately mid-way through what are typically one year programmes. First year respondents are also relatively positive with 63% reporting that they have not seriously considered withdrawal. Only 55% of final year undergraduates report not considering withdrawal.

When focussing on respondents who have considered withdrawal, the structure of the question should be acknowledged. Participants are invited to select multiple responses where these are relevant. Interpretation of individual response options should not be oversimplified and totals of individual categories do not match 100%.

It is striking, nevertheless, to note that financial reasons prompt consideration for 15% of first year and final year undergraduate respondents and for 9% of taught postgraduate respondents. The next most frequent responses relate to personal or family reasons with 13% of first year, 18% of final year and 17% of postgraduate taught respondents selecting this option.

Further results are demonstrated by the chart in figure 3. Health, employment, transfer and ‘other’ reasons all feature less prominently than financial or personal / family reasons. It is also worth observing that most of these influences are beyond the direct control of individual institutions, notwithstanding various systems and processes in place which are intended to support students managing their overall commitments and demands.

The following sections of this paper present results disaggregated by programme type and, separately, by broad field of study.

Responses by programme type

Figure 4 illustrates results by programme type. Data presented is limited to undergraduate respondents.

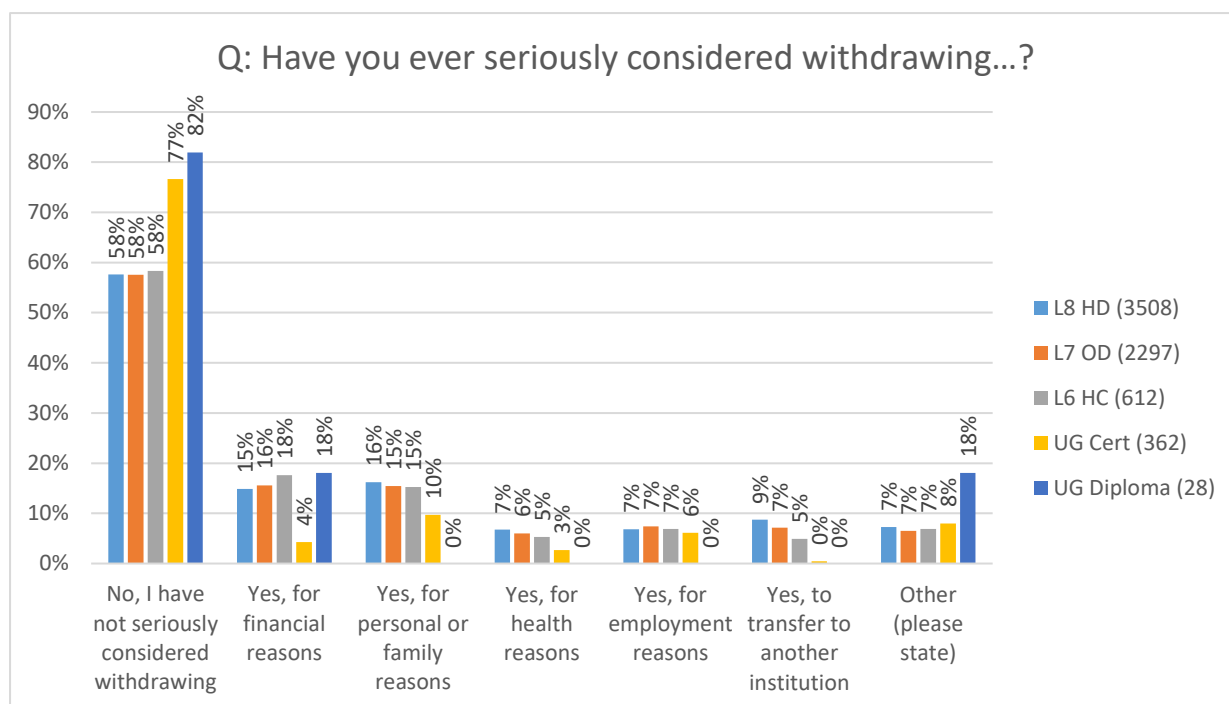


Figure 4 Responses by programme-type (UG)

Results for students on programmes leading to major awards, i.e. Honours Degree, Ordinary Degree and Higher Certificate, are broadly similar when compared to other programme types. One could infer that the profile of students pursuing programmes leading to undergraduate certificate and diplomas may be somewhat different and it is certainly the case that the number of such students is lower - with the number of responses for undergraduate certificates less than 60% of the number of respondents from Higher Certificates. The number of undergraduate diploma respondents is low enough (28) to be disregarded in this paper.

5. Responses by broad field of study

5.1 Serious consideration of withdrawing

Responses to each of the options vary across different broad fields of study. It is important to acknowledge that there are a variety of influencing factors including, but not limited to, the potential profile of student cohorts pursuing particular fields of study. HEA reports on progression have repeatedly drawn attention to factors such as prior attainment and gender. These influencing

factors are not explored in this paper but should be borne in mind when seeking to interpret the results.

The following figures illustrate the responses to each of the options for all respondents pursuing the given broad field of study. Each field of study has also been disaggregated into responses from first year and final year undergraduate students. Where there are notable differences, these are mentioned in the text but details are not included for fields of study where the differences in response from each year group cohort are less than 10%.

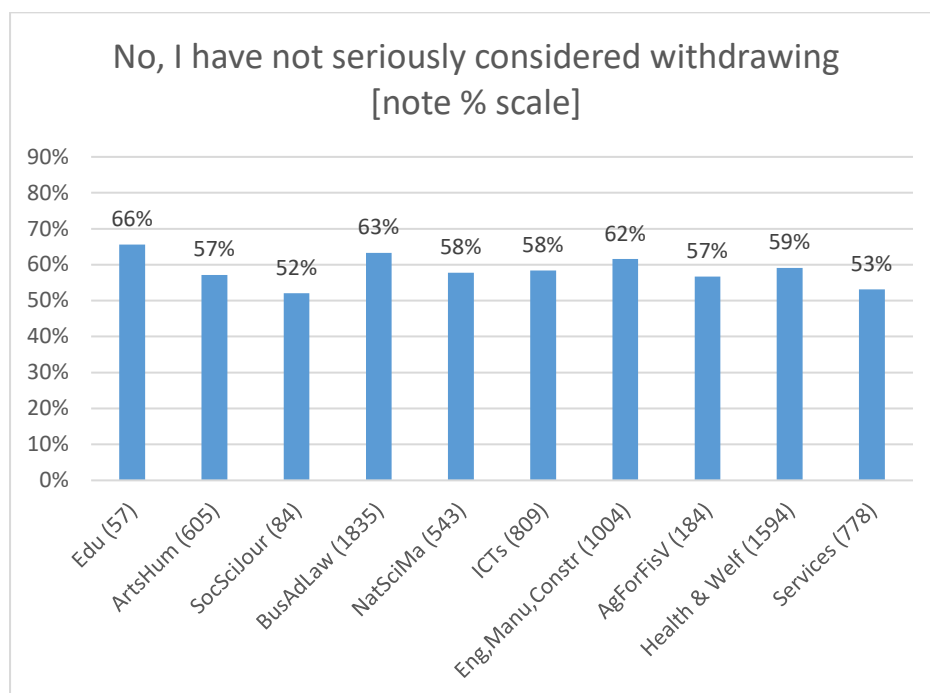


Figure 5 Not considered withdrawing by field of study

Figure 5 presents results for those who have not seriously considered withdrawing. Respondents least likely to consider withdrawing originate from Education (66%), Business, Administration and Law (63%) and Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (62%). It is noted that the number of respondents for Education is much lower than for other fields of study. In contrast to other fields, only 52% of respondents from Social sciences, journalism and information report not seriously considering withdrawing while the comparable proportion for Services is 53%.

When disaggregated to year of study (first year or final year undergraduate), the reduction in the proportion of respondents who have not seriously considered withdrawing across all fields of study is 8% as shown in figure 3 i.e. 63% of first year respondents have not considered withdrawal compared to 55% of final years. This pattern is evident within most, but not all, fields of study. Note that commentary and charts on the results for first year and final year only exclude PGT respondents and that, therefore, totals for each field of study may not match the total number of respondents reported elsewhere in this paper.

Within Health and welfare, there are 752 first year and 725 final year respondents who selected at least one response to the overall question. The percentage of final years who have not considered withdrawal is only 2% lower than the comparable percentage of first years, at 57% and 59% respectively. By contrast, there are 383 first year respondents and 386 final years in Services. 60% of these first years have not considered withdrawal whereas only 47% of final years report likewise which represents a difference of 13%. For Arts and humanities, 64% of first year (286) and 50% of

final year respondents (247) report considering withdrawing, demonstrating a difference of 14%. In the majority of cases, the reasons for considering withdrawing are varied. This can be interpreted to indicate that a relatively large increase in the proportion of respondents who have considered withdrawing is most commonly related to a variety of reasons. From the example of Services above, there is a difference of 13% between first year and final years who have not considered withdrawing but the differences between first and final years for each of the possible reasons given are 4%, 4%, -2%, 4%, 2%, 4%. The notable exception to this general pattern of multiple factors is in the field of Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary where a difference of 15% is recorded for employment reasons with 7% of first year respondents identifying this factor and 22% of final years selecting the same reason.

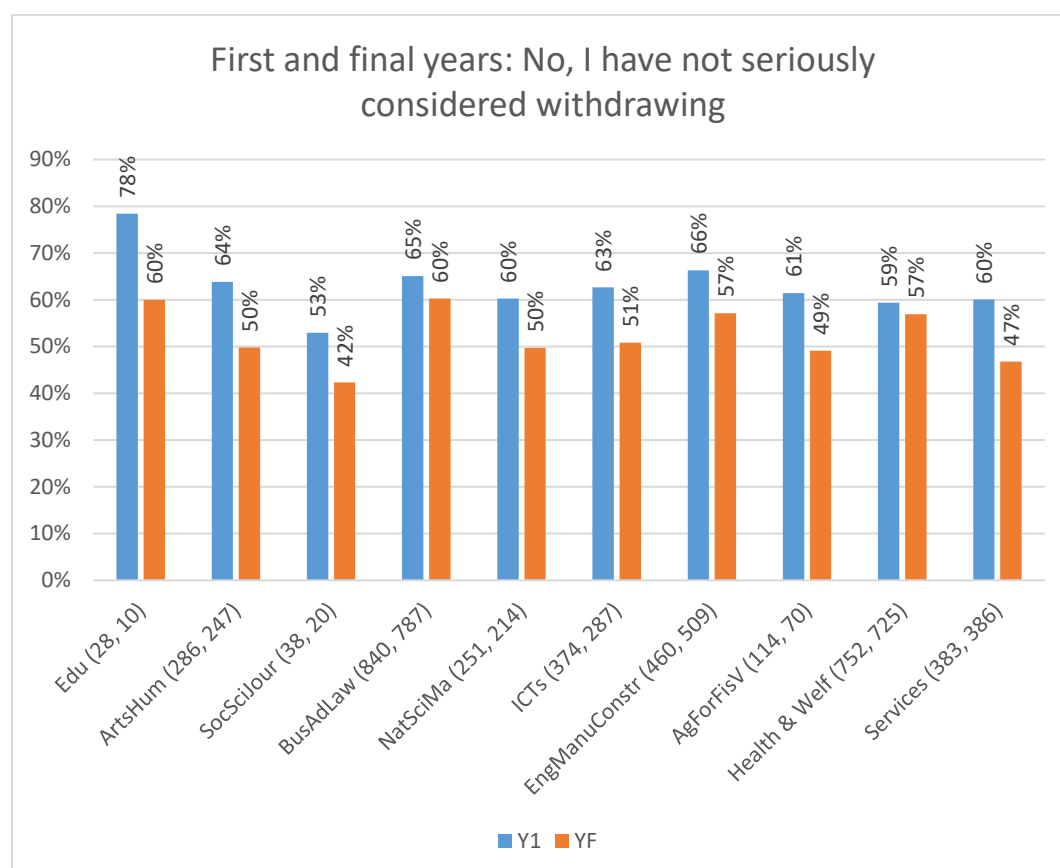


Figure 6 Not considered withdrawing by field of study (first, final year undergraduate respondents)

5.2 Reasons for considering withdrawing

Note that, from figure 7 onwards, the percentage scale used in charts is reduced to highlight variations between fields of study.

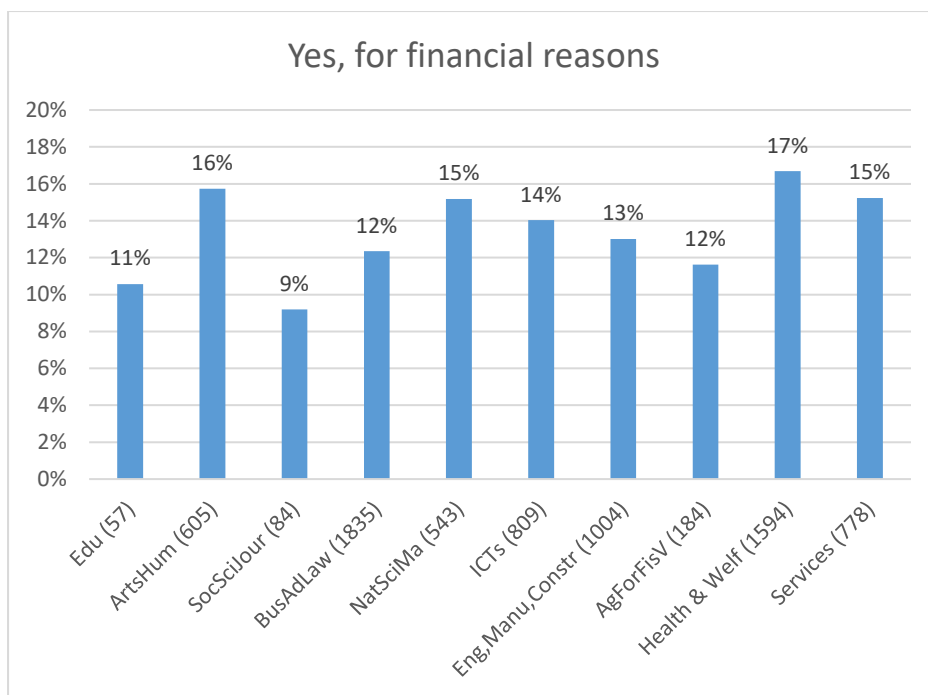


Figure 7 For financial reasons by field of study

In figure 7, the proportion of respondents identifying financial reasons to consider withdrawal ranges from 9% for Social sciences, journalism and information, 11% and 12% for Education and Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary, respectively, to 17% for Health and welfare.

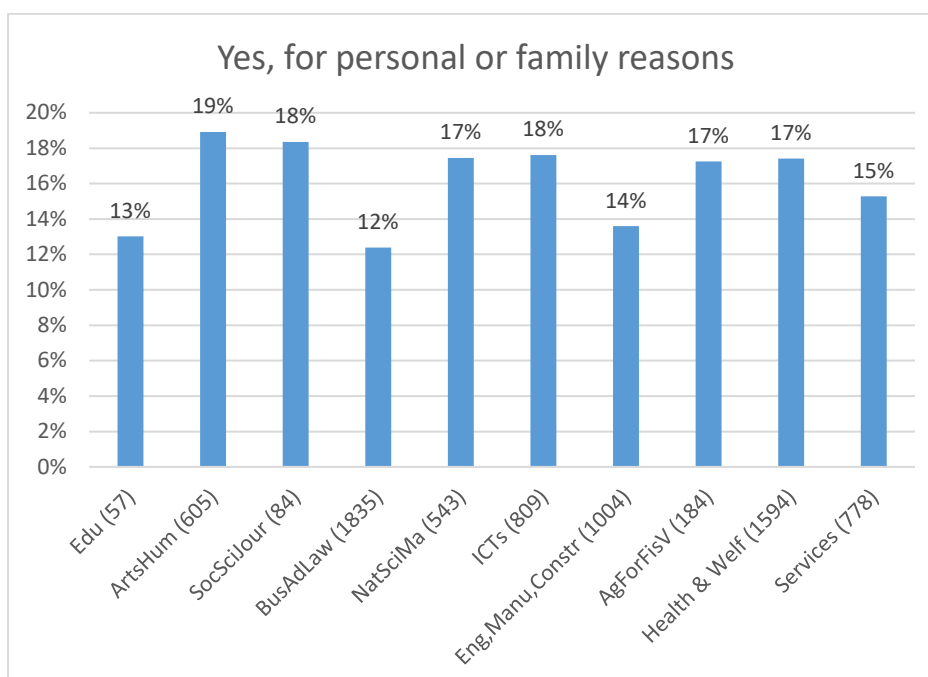


Figure 8 For personal or family reasons by field of study

Figure 8 addresses personal or family reasons. Only 12% of Business, administration and law respondents identified personal or family reasons for considering withdrawal with 13% of Education and 14% of Engineering, manufacturing and construction respondents reporting likewise. In contrast, the equivalent proportion for Arts and humanities is 19% and for Social science, journalism and information is 18%.

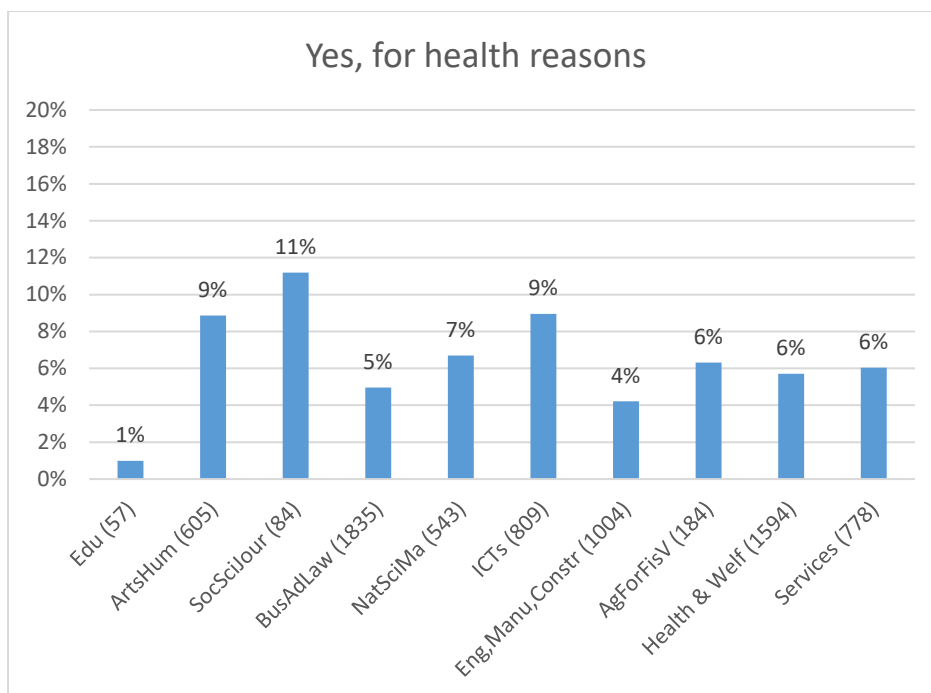


Figure 9 For health reasons by field of study

In general, fewer respondents identified health reasons than other factors with only 6% of total response data (figure 1). Figure 9 shows that the proportions range from 1% for Education, taking care to note the low absolute numbers, to 11% for Social science, journalism and information. It is anticipated that there may be less distinction between ‘personal or family’ and ‘health’ reasons for some students.

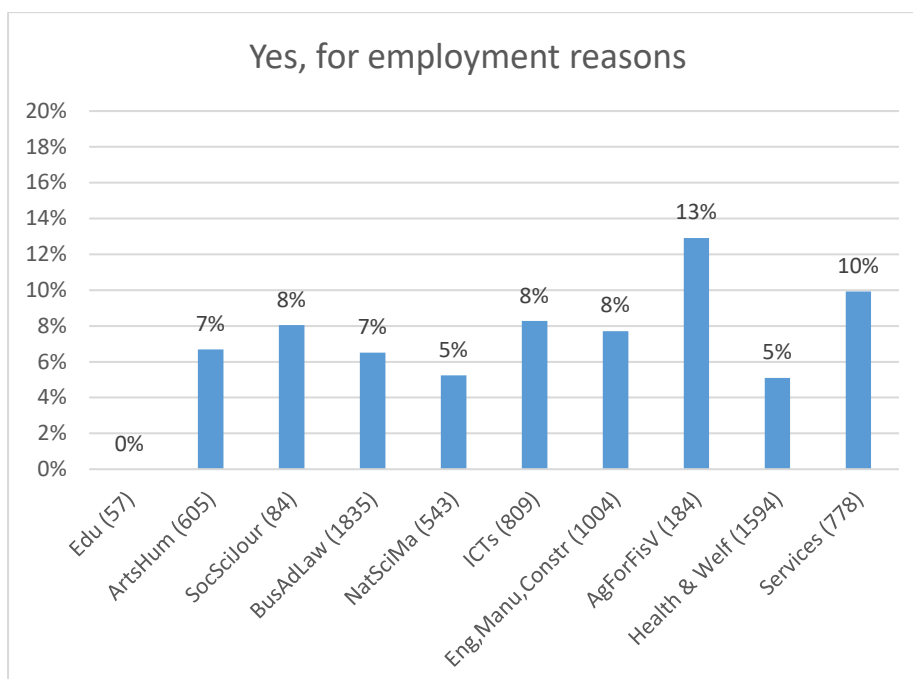


Figure 10 For employment reasons

Figure 10 illustrates the proportion of respondents who identified employment reasons as a factor in considering withdrawal. It is noted that the percentages are relatively low for most fields of study with the greatest proportion of 13% from students on Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary

programmes and 10% from students on Services. None of the 57 Education respondents selected this option.

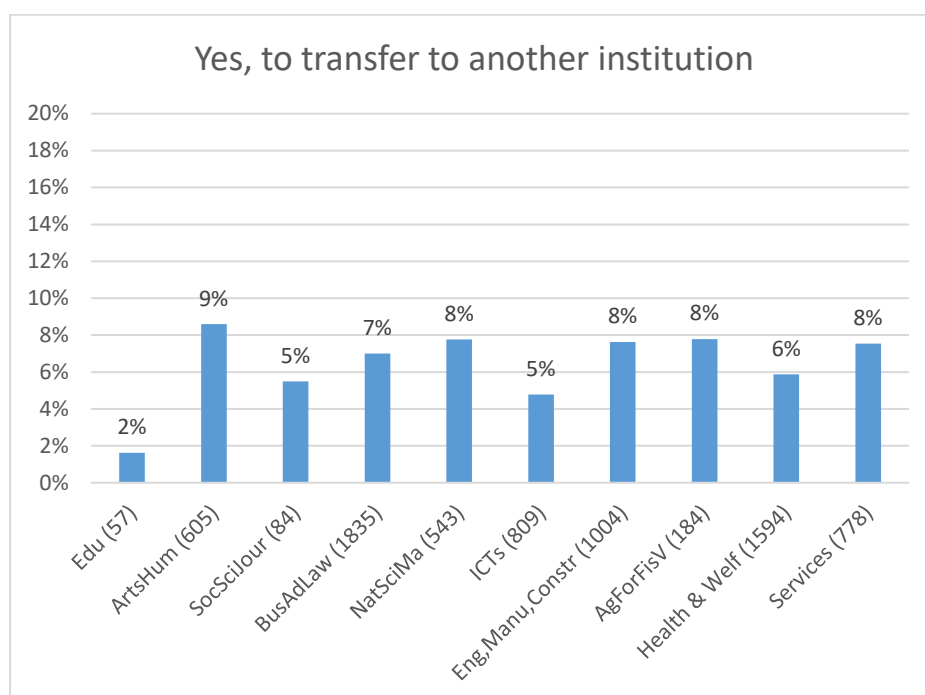


Figure 11 To transfer to another institution

Figure 11 presents results for respondents who reported considering transfer to another institution. 9% of respondents from Arts and humanities selected this response with 8% of those from Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics, Engineering, manufacturing and construction, Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary, and Services reporting similarly.

6. Conclusions

It is noteworthy that, when surveyed in February-March 2019, 59% of all respondents in the technological sector reported that they had not seriously considered withdrawing from their programme. For first years, this figure rises to 63% but is only 55% for final year respondents. Accepting that the question structure influences the resulting data, the next most frequently reported reasons are ‘personal or family’ and ‘financial’. Indeed, when considered alongside analysis of free text responses, these findings demonstrate that many of the factors are not readily within the control of institutions. Further analysis is required using complementary data sets to investigate variations for sub-groups such as field of study. Many of these additional datasets are held in disparate locations and may not be consistently available on a sectoral basis. However, it is envisaged that some sectoral, multi-institutional, data gathered from students who do withdraw will feature in a series of related analyses in due course. A range of other issues will also be explored in future papers, as anonymised data becomes available, relating to other aspects of student success within technological higher education.