

Student success in technological higher education

Continued exploration of reasons why students consider withdrawing from their programmes

Paper 2, March 2021

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1. Context

In December 2019, THEA published the first of a planned series of papers exploring the many varied factors which influence the success of students within technological higher education. It explored data from an optional question set added for 2019 fieldwork of StudentSurvey.ie (previously, the Irish Survey of Student Engagement) which is a national survey running annually since a national pilot in 2013. The use of limited numbers of optional questions is available to individual institutions to add to the core questionnaire for their own students. Previous examples have included the use of various question sets relating to quality assurance processes, in institutes of technology and in some universities, in advance of external reviews. The ability to add small proportions of questions to the scheduled annual national survey helps to limit the overall number of different surveys offered to students and this approach acknowledges, and limits, the “survey fatigue” experienced by students in higher education due to the often very high number of surveys in use.

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 StudentSurvey.ie during February – March each year. The resulting data are typically presented for various cohorts of first year undergraduate, final year undergraduate and taught postgraduate students. Collated national data are presented in a published annual report and individual institutions receive anonymised results for their own students. The data generated by optional questions are retained by each institution and are not, in general, reported upon publicly. The specific data used to inform these papers were made available to THEA as part of a bespoke data sharing protocol with individual member institutions.

This paper builds on analysis of these data from 2019 fieldwork by examining comparable data from 2020.

In 2020, 9 institutes of technology chose to offer the optional ‘withdrawal’ question items to their students compared to 8 that did so in 2019. This means that some degree of comparability of results is feasible as the data represent survey responses from students attending the majority of institutes of technology, with a number of known caveats. Caveats include the fact that responses originate from students still present in February – March and, therefore, that this survey does not capture responses from those students who may withdraw before the fieldwork period. It is also acknowledged that there may be some overlap in respondents from students in consecutive years as the nature of provision using levels 6, 7 and 8 of the NFQ means that some students move from first year to final year Higher Certificate, and / or to final year Ordinary Bachelor Degree, and / or final year Honours Bachelor Degree. These students may be invited to respond to the survey in consecutive years as part of the relevant first year or final year cohorts. In addition, individuals are not tracked from iteration to iteration of the survey due to the anonymised nature of responses. However, all questions ask

students to reflect on their experiences in that current academic year. Within this context, the data certainly contribute to a new and growing evidence base to inform further consideration of the issues in play.

2. Question item

The optional question is presented to participants as follows, with a number of closed response options and one free text response.

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)*

3. Overview of data for all respondents

In 2020, 9806 students from institutes of technology responded to the optional question by selecting at least one of the response options. This represents a notable increase on the comparable number of 7527 responses in 2019. As is usual practice with StudentSurvey.ie 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.

3.1 Percentage responses

Figure 1 illustrates that a large majority (62%) of those students who responded to the survey in February – March 2020 reported not seriously considering withdrawing from their programmes. It is positive to note that this proportion is 3% higher than the comparable percentage reported from 2019 data. The percentage change for each of the other response options varies +/- 1% from 2019 responses.

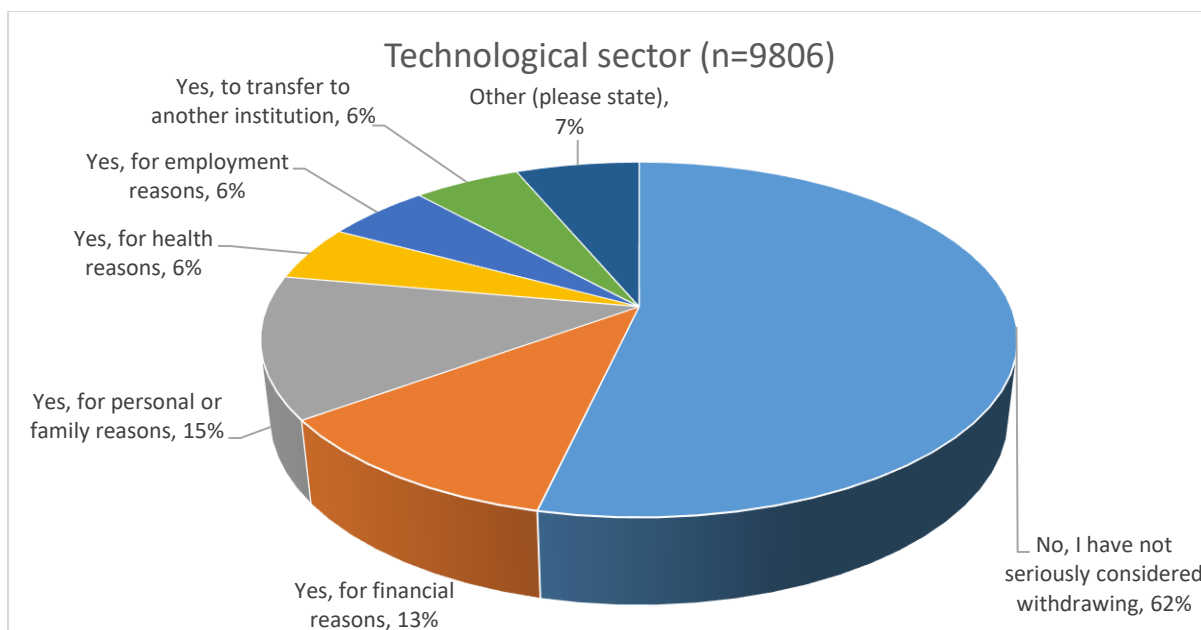


Figure 1 Results from all respondents 2020

Of those who had given serious consideration to withdrawing, the most frequent responses identified personal / family reasons (15%, -1% from 2019) and financial reasons (13%, -1% from 2019). Reasons of health, employment, institutional transfer all received similar numbers of responses at 6% ('other' at 7%). It remains the case that, as in 2019 results, the vast majority of respondents reported not seriously considering withdrawal and that the other response options do not appear to be within the ready control of an institution. The fact that 7% of respondents selected 'other' and provided additional open text commentary is also of some interest.

3.2 Open text responses

717 respondents provided additional open text in 2020. An automated analytical process was used to identify frequently occurring words or topics within the text data. In addition, responses to the open text question 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. The 2019 paper, referenced in section 1, noted that data generated from questions exploring issues for improvement, in many different contexts, often present a large number of issues as the experiences of individual respondents vary considerably. Unsurprisingly, the word 'course' appears very frequently in the data (246 times in 227 responses). The next most frequently occurring terms are 'college' (53 occurrences in 47 responses) and 'stress' (50 occurrences in 48 responses). The words 'course' and 'college' were removed prior to creation of the word cloud in figure 2 in order to provide a better sense of the range of issues included in these open text responses.

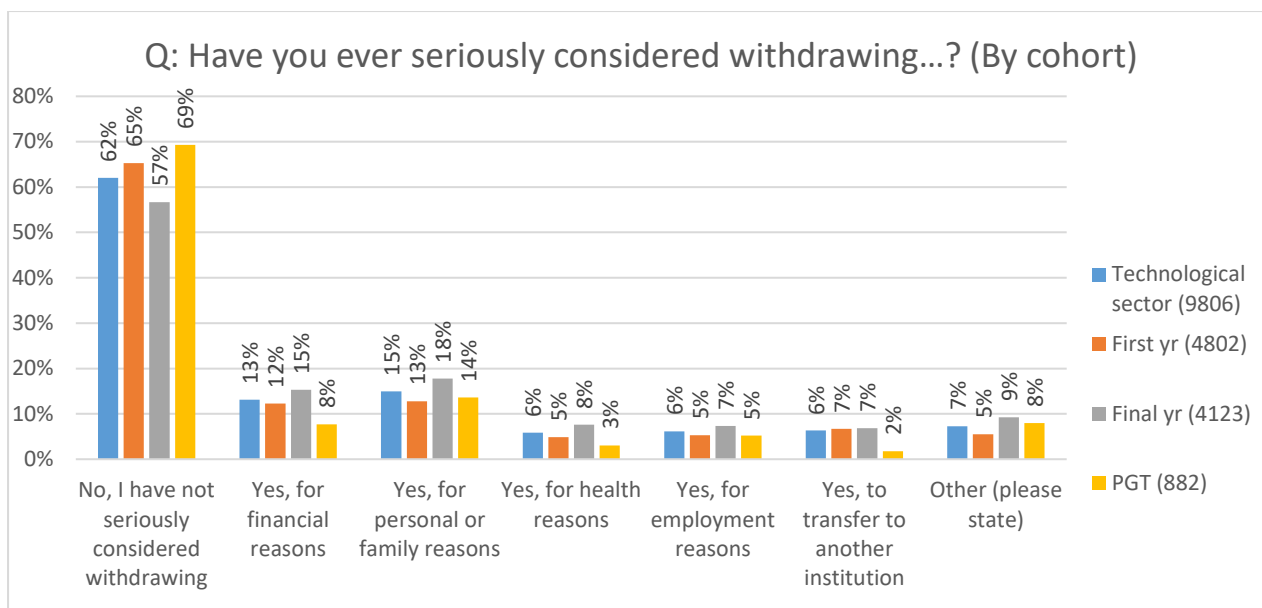


Figure 3 Responses (by cohort / year)

In 2020, participating students pursuing taught postgraduate programmes reported the lowest levels of serious consideration of withdrawal compared to other cohorts with 69% selecting “no, I have not seriously considered...”. This result may be largely as expected for PGT students who, typically, may be mid-way through a one-year programme when surveyed. This figure represents a 4% increase on the comparable proportion in 2019. First year respondents also responded relatively positively with 65% reporting that they have not seriously considered withdrawal. Perhaps reflecting those who have been pursuing programmes for longer periods, only 57% 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 were invited to select multiple responses, where these were deemed relevant. Interpretation of individual response options should not be oversimplified, and totals of individual categories may not match 100%.

The data from 2020 retains many similarities with 2019 data. It is notable that financial reasons prompt consideration for 12% of first year respondents, 15% of final year undergraduate respondents and for 8% 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 14% of postgraduate taught respondents selecting this option.

Further results are presented 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 the majority of the factors influencing students to consider withdrawal are beyond the direct control of individual institutions. It is, of course, acknowledged that institutions have a variety of 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.

4.2 Results by programme type

Figure 4 illustrates results by programme type for undergraduate respondents. Data for undergraduate Diploma is excluded because of a very low number of responses (n=8).

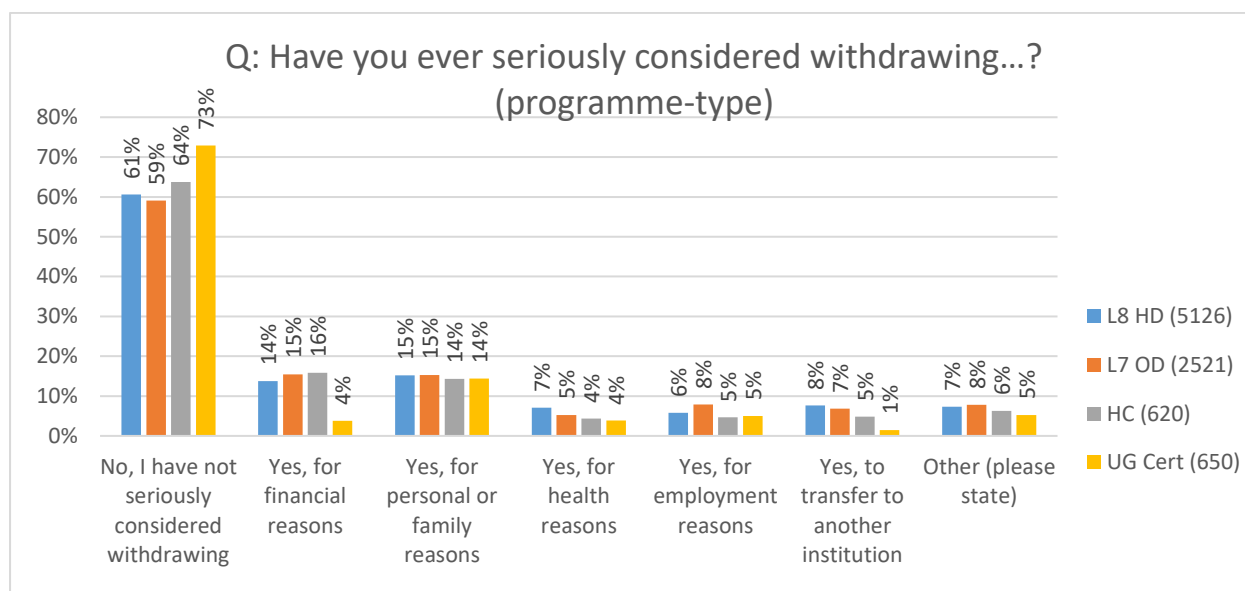


Figure 4 Responses by programme-type (UG)

Results for students on programmes leading to major awards, i.e. Honours Bachelor Degree, Ordinary Bachelor Degree and Higher Certificate, are broadly similar (59% to 64% reported not seriously considering withdrawal, 14% to 16% identified financial reasons) compared to responses from students pursuing programmes leading to undergraduate certificates. A much higher percentage of undergraduate certificate students reported never seriously considering withdrawal at 73% and, of those who did consider it, a much smaller percentage noted that financial reasons were an influencing factor (4% for these respondents). These results are similar to results from 2019 which suggested that the profile of students pursuing programmes leading to undergraduate certificate and diplomas may be somewhat different to those studying towards major awards, as the former programmes are typically of shorter duration and are often associated with part-time studies.

5. Responses by broad field of study

5.1 Serious consideration of withdrawing from programme

Responses to each of the options varied across different broad fields of study. It is important to acknowledge that there are a variety of influencing factors at play including, but not limited to, the potential profile of student cohorts pursuing particular fields of study. Multiple reports on progression, published by the HEA, have drawn attention to additional factors such as prior attainment and gender. These additional factors are not explored in this paper but care should be taken to avoid overly narrow interpretation of results presented here.

The following figures illustrate the responses to each of the options for all respondents pursuing particular disciplines, as represented by ISCED broad fields of study. Following this, 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%.

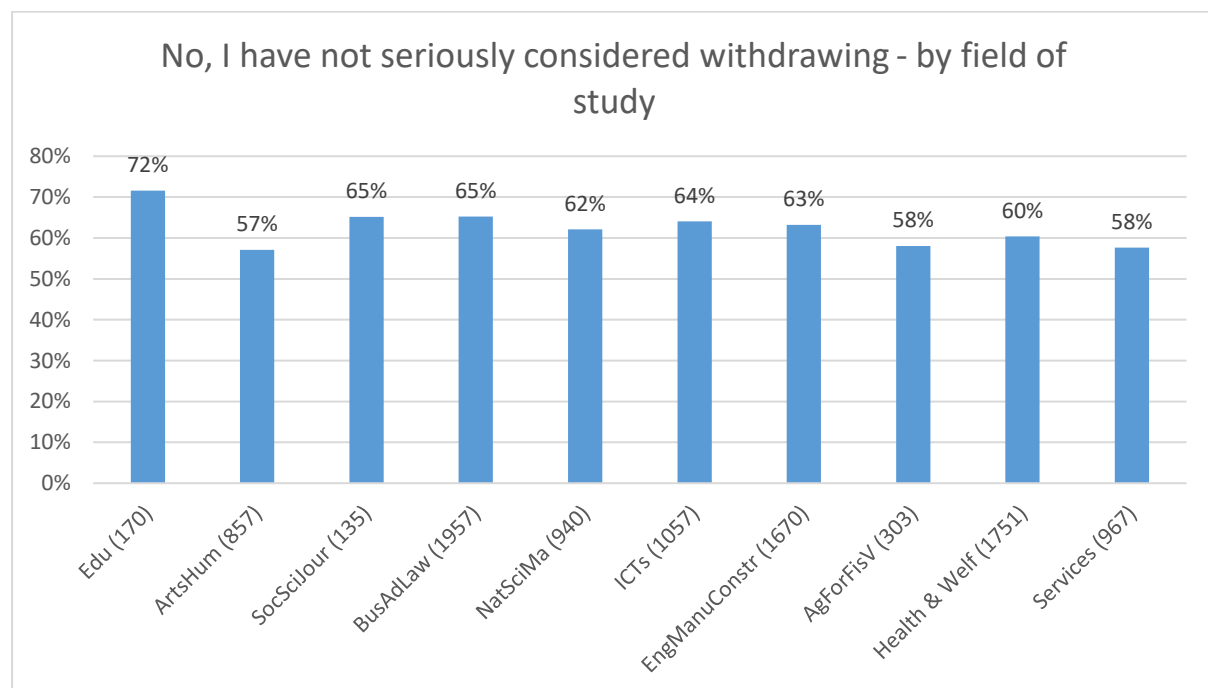


Figure 5 Not considered withdrawing by field of study (all years)

Figure 5 presents results for those who have not seriously considered withdrawing. Respondents least likely to consider withdrawing originate from Education (72%, +6% from 2019), Social sciences, journalism and information (65%, +13% from 2019), and Business, Administration and Law (65%, +2% from 2019). Only 57% of respondents from Arts and Humanities reported not seriously considering withdrawing while the comparable proportions for Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and agriculture, and Services are 58%, (+1% from 2019, +5% from 2019, respectively).

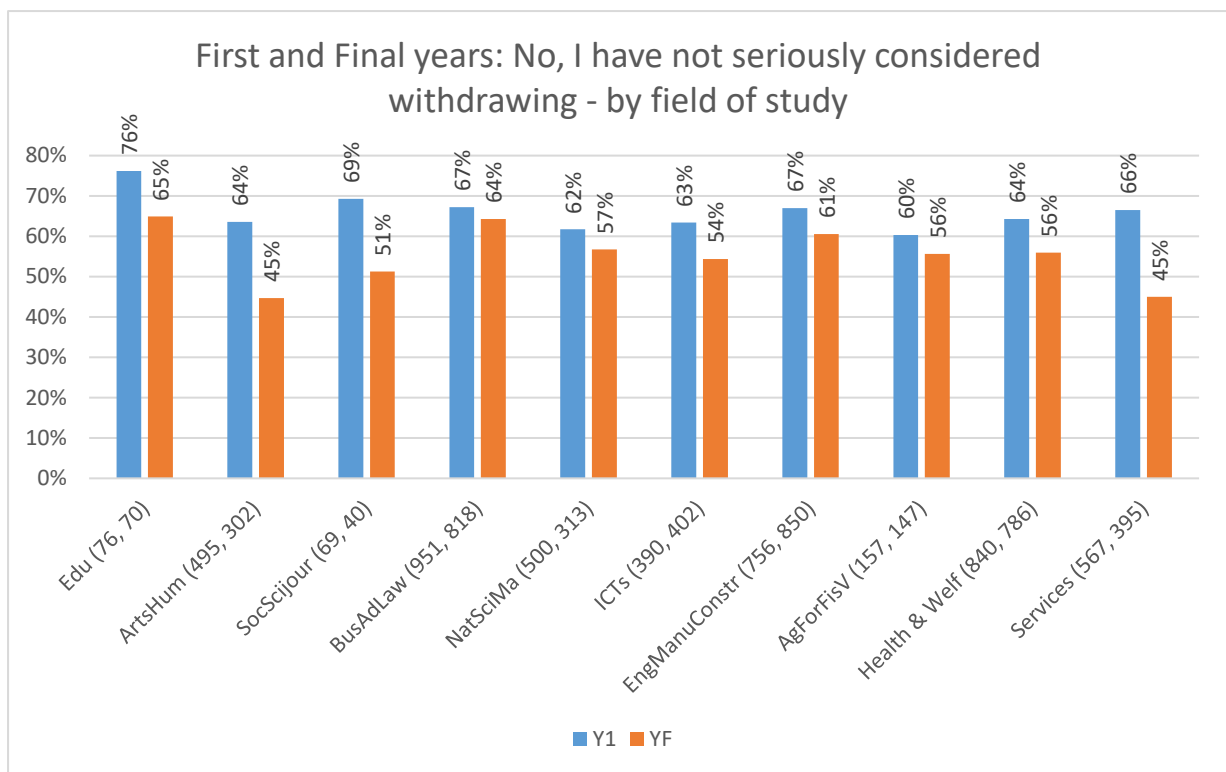


Figure 6 Not considered withdrawing by field of study (first, final year undergraduate respondents)

Figure 6 presents results for each broad field of study, divided into first years and final year undergraduate responses.

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% has already been shown in figure 3, i.e. 65% of first year respondents indicate that they have not seriously considered withdrawal compared to 57% of final years. Similar patterns of higher percentages of final years considering withdrawal are found in most fields of study. The difference between the proportions of first and final years' responses who have not given serious consideration to withdrawal varies from a decrease of 3% for Business, administration and law, to 21% for respondents studying Services (66% first years, 45% final years). 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.

It is evident from figure 6 that the greatest difference in results from first years and from final years are found for Services (Y1 66% and YF 45%), Arts and Humanities (Y1 64% and YF 45%), and Social sciences, journalism and information (Y1 69% and YF 51%).

Within Services, 567 first years and 395 final year undergraduates responded to the question with 21% fewer final years reporting that they had not seriously considered withdrawal. 11% more final years than first years indicated that family or personal reasons were a factor with financial and employment reasons each selected by 5% more final years than first years. 4% more final years than first years reported health reasons as influencing their considerations.

Within Arts and Humanities, 495 first years and 302 final year undergraduates responded to this question. 64% of first years reported not seriously considering withdrawal whereas only 45% of final years did likewise. These students reported a more evenly spread range of factors influencing their considerations with differences between final year and first years results of 7% for personal or family reasons, 6% for health reasons and 3% each for financial, employment, and considering transfer to another institution. It is also of potential interest that 15% of final year Arts and Humanities respondents indicated 'other' factors. This proportion is higher than for any other field of study, which may reflect the breadth of programmes categorised under this broad heading.

5.2 Reasons for considering withdrawing from programme

This section presents results for each of the reasons to consider withdrawal by ISCED broad field of study. Note that, from figure 7 onwards, the percentage scale used in charts is reduced to highlight variations between fields of study.

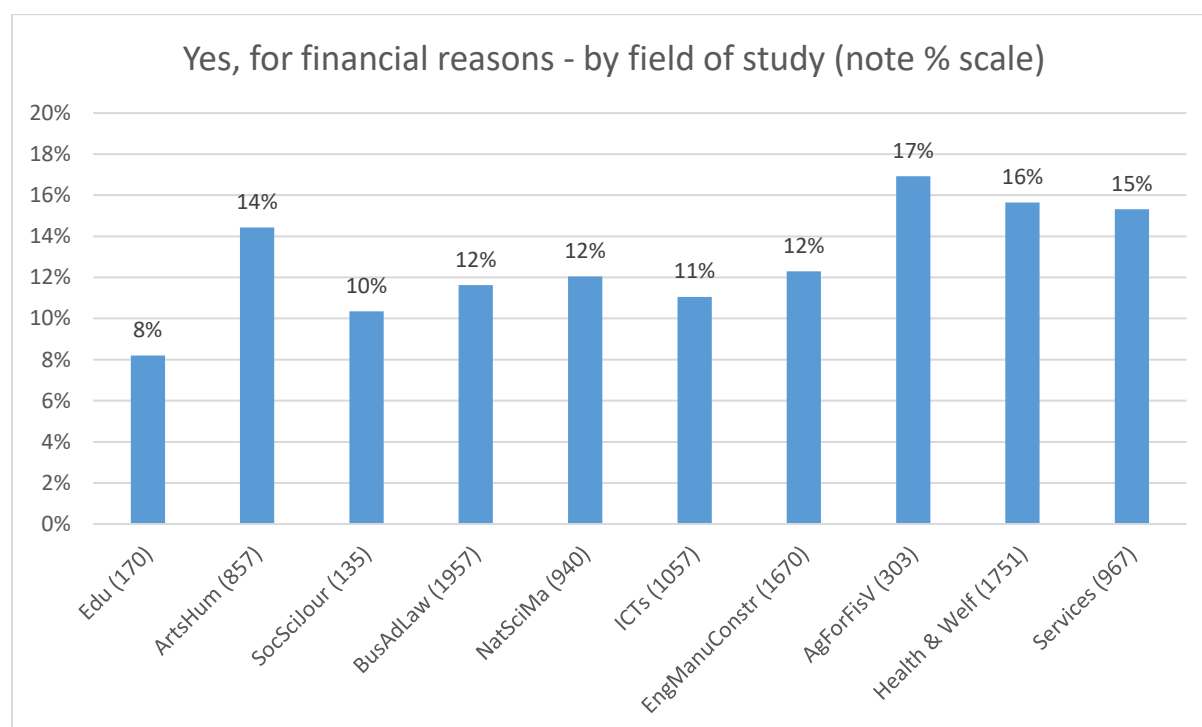


Figure 7 For financial reasons by field of study

In figure 7, the proportion of respondents identifying financial reasons for considering withdrawal ranges from 8% for Education respondents to 17% for Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary. The largest changes from 2019 data are -3% each for Education, for Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics, and for ICTs and +5% for Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary.

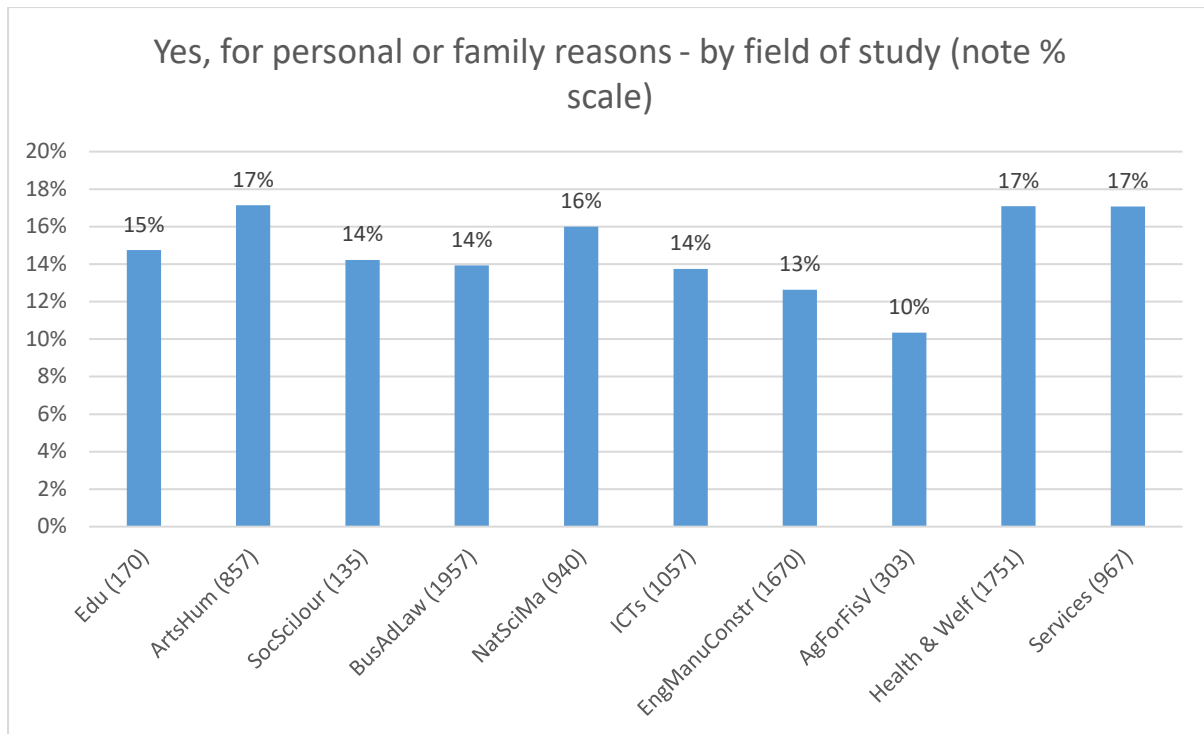


Figure 8 For personal or family reasons by field of study

Figure 8 addresses personal or family reasons. Only 10% of Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary respondents identified personal or family reasons for considering withdrawal which is 7% lower than in 2019. 17% of Art and Humanities, Health and Welfare, and Services participants reported likewise. The largest changes from 2019 data are the -7% mentioned above and then -4% for respondents studying Social sciences, journalism and information, and for ICTs.

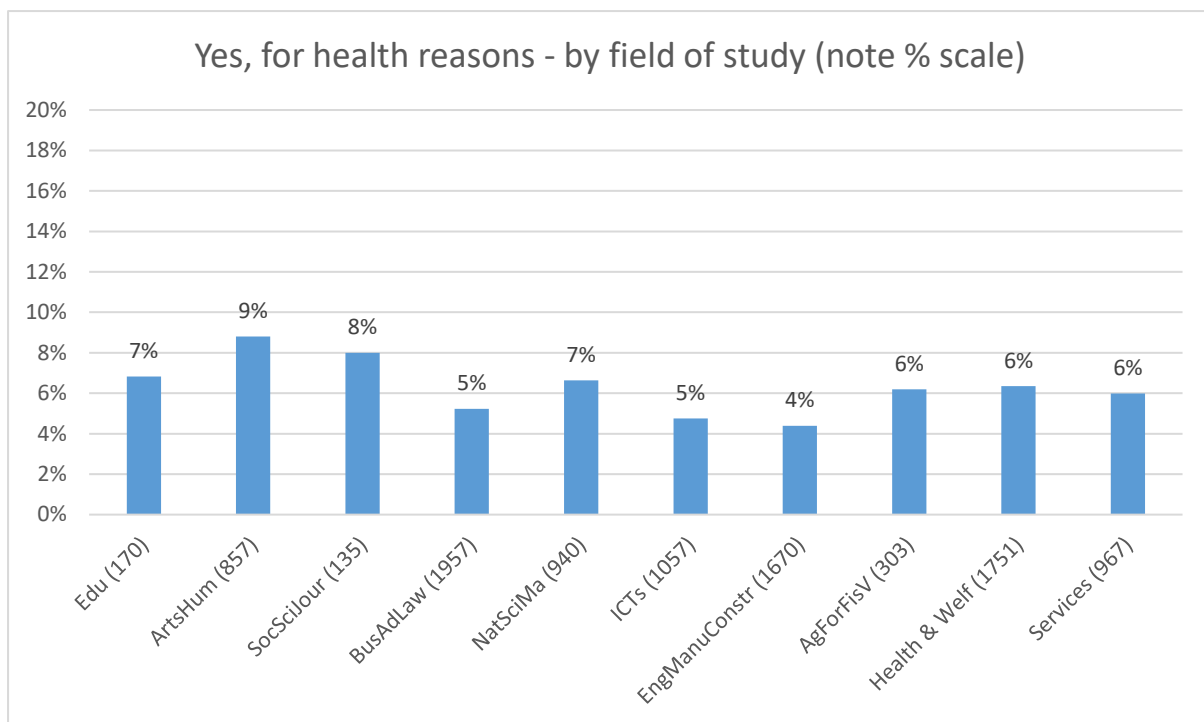


Figure 9 For health reasons by field of study

Figure 9 presents the percentage of responses that identified health as a factor. In general, fewer respondents identified health reasons than other factors with only 6% of total response data (figure 1). This figure matches the overall percentage that identified health in 2019 data. Figure 9 shows that the proportions range from 4% for Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction to 9% for Arts and Humanities. Most of these figures are the same as in 2019 other than +6% for Education, which arguably may be more representative given a much higher number of respondents than in 2019, to -4% for ICTs. It could also be expected that some respondents may have found imprecise boundaries when trying to distinguish between the factors of ‘personal or family’ and ‘health’ reasons, depending on their circumstances.

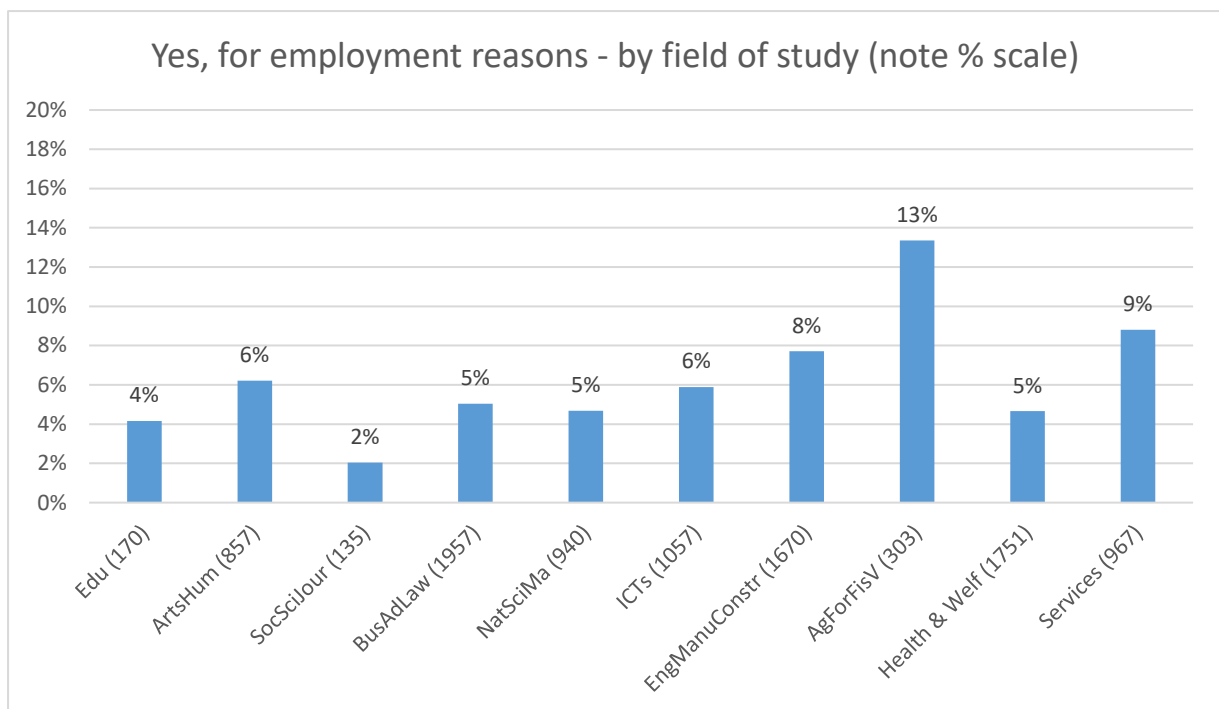


Figure 10 For employment reasons

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 9% from students on Services. These percentages match those reported in 2019 and may reflect the nature of employment / education in particular sectors. The largest change from 2019 data was for Social sciences, journalism and information which was 6% lower in 2020.

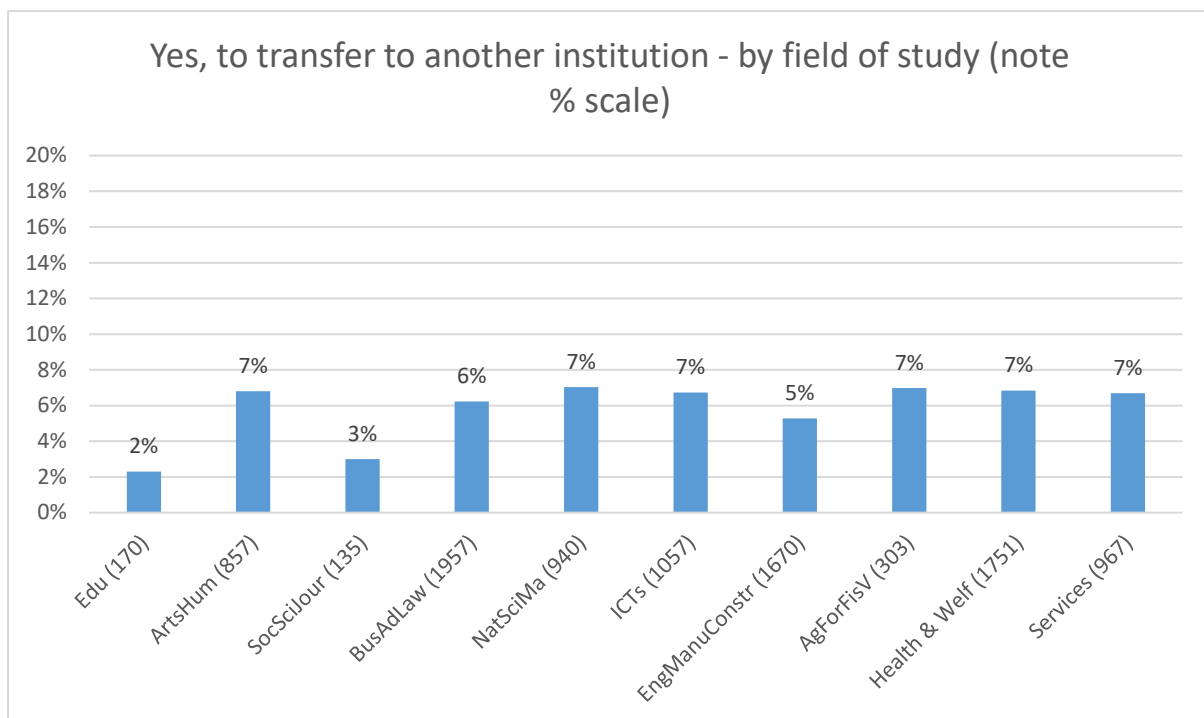


Figure 11 To transfer to another institution

Figure 11 presents results for respondents who reported considering transfer to another institution. These percentages are relatively low, as was the case in 2019. Only 2% of education respondents identified this option whereas 7% of participants did so for six other fields of study. The largest change from 2019 data was for Engineering, manufacturing and construction at -3%.

6. Conclusions

This paper presents the second analysis of data from significant numbers of students studying in the technological higher education sector. It does not capture the complexity of reasons that influence what success means for individual students. It does, however, present a growing evidence base to inform discussions and reflections on related issues. It is noted that, when surveyed in February-March 2020, 62% 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 65% but is only 57% for final year respondents. It is noted that the overall results and each of these figures represent a more positive picture than that reported from 2019 data. One might speculate that some of this improvement is related to ongoing consideration of related issues within these institutions, but this paper does not present sufficient evidence to robustly confirm, or not, that view. It may be of interest to review comparable results of analysis of data from 2021 fieldwork of Studentsurvey.ie, notwithstanding the impact of multiple periods of major restrictions due to Covid-19 on the 2020-21 academic year.

Accepting that the question structure influences the resulting data, the most frequent reasons reported by students for considering withdrawal are 'personal or family' and 'financial'. Initial high

level analysis of open text responses that accompanied the option 'other' appears to confirm that view. These findings can be taken to demonstrate that many of the factors are not readily within the control of institutions. Further analysis is recommended using complementary data sets to investigate variations for sub-groups such as field of study. Such analysis is likely to be feasible only within individual institutions. Many of relevant additional datasets are held in disparate locations and may not be consistently available on a sectoral basis. However, THEA will continue to draw upon that data which can be made available to explore the many and varied factors that impact on student success within technological higher education, to inform ongoing national and sectoral discussion which have increasingly, in recent years, recognised the individualised nature of what success means to different students.

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March 2021