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A Quantitative Comparison of Teacher Education: students' experiences at two colleges in England and the Republic of Ireland

KATHY HALL, PAUL MARCHANT & NAWAL GHALI

SUMMARY *This paper examines and compares some aspects of the academic and social experiences of first-year teacher education students at two colleges, one in England and the other in the Republic of Ireland. It describes the transition from second level (and, for some, the transition from further education) to third level education and offers an account of the integration of first-year students into the academic and social system of their institution. In comparing the experiences of students in both colleges, we use inferential statistics, thus assuming the legitimacy of inferring differences in the populations from which the samples come. Although we have no reason to believe that the students and colleges in our study are untypical of teacher education students and their respective colleges more generally in England and Ireland, we acknowledge the need for tentativeness in making the leap to the broader population and for further research to explore the national and international comparisons using a wider range of students and colleges.*

RÉSUMÉ *L'objectif de cet article est d'examiner et de comparer certains aspects des expériences sociales et académiques vécues par des étudiants de première année en formation d'enseignants provenant de deux établissements différents; l'un étant situé en Angleterre et l'autre, en Irlande du Nord. Nous présentons la transition du niveau secondaire (et pour certains, du niveau post-secondaire) au niveau tertiaire et analysons le degré d'intégration des étudiants de première année dans le système académique et social de leur nouvel établissement. La comparaison des expériences des étudiants de ces deux établissements repose sur l'utilisation de statistiques inférentielles. Bien que nous n'ayons aucune raison de penser que les étudiants et les établissements qui font l'objet de notre étude ne soient pas caractéristiques des étudiants et des établissements du reste de l'Angleterre et de l'Irlande, nous admettons cependant qu'il faut être prudent avant de généraliser les résultats de notre recherche. Nous soulignons donc le besoin de recherches supplémentaires à une plus grande échelle.*

RESUMEN *El presente artículo examina y compara algunos aspectos de las experiencias tanto académicas como sociales de estudiantes de primer año en dos institutos de formación del profesorado, uno en Inglaterra y otro en la República de Irlanda. Se describe la transición del*

segundo nivel (y, para algunos, de la educación no formal) a la educación de tercer grado, y se reporta sobre la integración de los estudiantes de primer año en el sistema académico y social del instituto. Las experiencias de estudiantes en ambos institutos se comparan utilizando estadísticas que permitan inferir diferencias en las poblaciones originales. Aunque no haya razón para creer que los estudiantes e institutos en este estudio no sean representativos de los estudiantes e institutos de formación del profesorado en Inglaterra e Irlanda, las conclusiones e inferencias sobre la población general se hacen con gran cautela, y se recomienda llevar a cabo un estudio que explore las comparaciones nacionales e internacionales usando un rango más amplio de estudiantes e institutos.

ZUSAMENFASSUNG *Dieser Artikel untersucht und vergleicht einige Aspekte der akademischen und sozialen Erfahrungen von Studenten, die sich im ersten Jahr ihrer Lehrerausbildung befinden. Der Vergleich bezieht sich auf eine Hochschule in England und eine in Irland. Beschrieben werden der Übergang von der Sekundarstufe zur Hochschule und die Integration der Studenten/Studentinnen in das akademische und gesellschaftliche System ihrer Hochschule. Bei dem Vergleich der Erfahrungen der Studenten/Studentinnen an beiden Hochschulen gehen wir von der Annahme aus, dass es zwischen den Bevölkerungen, denen die Stichproben entnommen sind, Unterschiede gibt. Obwohl wir nicht annehmen, dass die Studenten und Hochschulen in unserer Studie untypisch für Lehramtsanwärter bzw. ihr Land sind, akzeptieren wir, dass sich keine definitiven Schlüsse auf die ganze Bevölkerung ziehen lassen, und dass mehr Studenten und Hochschulen in die Stichprobe einbezogen werden müssen, um nationale und internationale Vergleiche zu ziehen.*

Brief Theoretical Background

Over the past two decades or so, pre-service teacher education has had unprecedented attention in England both from policy-makers and researchers (see, for example, the *Journal of Education for Teaching* for the period). Following a search of a variety of sources, including the *Register of Theses on Education Topics in Universities in Ireland*, the authors found little research on pre-service teacher education in the Irish context in the same period, although there are plenty of studies on in-service education (for example, *Irish Educational Studies*, 16, 1997). It is likely that the scale of the changes in the way teachers are trained and in the way funding is allocated for this purpose in England explains this relative difference. In Ireland, in contrast, the nature of teacher recruitment, initial teacher training, and the allocation of government funds to teacher education institutions have changed little over the decades, possibly explaining the absence of research in Ireland. However, in neither case was there much evidence of the study of the social and academic experiences of teacher education students while in their first year at college, although such experiences for higher education (HE) students in other fields of study are well documented (Tinto, 1987; Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Somers, 1994, 1996). And the existing research within other fields of study concentrates mainly on academic performance rather than the social and academic experiences of students. While clearly the former is a vital outcome, indicating that the student has fulfilled the institution's academic requirements, on its own it ignores that the institution is also a social system, which the individual student has to interpret and adjust to.

The current study results from the first author's experience as a teacher educator in both the English and Irish systems and from an examination of some of the literature

on how first-year students adjust to the academic and social demands of their new institution. While a comparison of students' experiences in both countries is worthy of study in itself, it is also justified on the grounds that the push to recognise teacher education qualifications across the European Union implies much more transparency about all aspects of provision, including how students experience their training.

The theoretical basis for our focus here stems from the work of Entwistle & Ramsden (1983) in the UK, Tinto (1987) in the USA and, more recently, Somers (1994, 1996) in Ireland, who expanded on previous models. To summarise this evidence, the initial move to a HE institution involves separation from the previous community, transition to membership of a new community, and eventual incorporation into the life of that new community. As suggested by Tinto and developed by Somers, the process of integration is influenced by the attributes of the individuals, and specifically their perceptions of their learning context and the nature of their interactional experiences within the HE institution. Entwistle & Ramsden (1983) point out that, while it is the student's perception of her or his learning context, rather than the actual context, that influences her or his approach to studying and ultimate academic performance, the average perception of the whole class provides a good indication of the actual learning context. The latter definition of 'learning context', elaborated below, will be used for the purpose of the present investigation.

Social integration occurs through informal peer interaction, semi-formal extra-curricular activities, and more formal non-classroom interaction with tutors. These three types of interaction reinforce perceptions of congruence with the new social system and reduce the likelihood of social isolation. The third of these also particularly reinforces academic integration—the *raison d'être* of the institution. Academic and social integration can be viewed as distinct processes, with the demands of the academic system being viewed, to some extent, in competition with the demands of the social system, but they are inter-dependent. One aspect of students' experience that has not been a strong feature of the existing research base is the student's financial circumstances or students' perceptions of their financial situation. In view of the trend among HE students, in general, to work on a part-time basis in order to support themselves, we considered it important to examine and compare students' interpretations in this regard in order to shed light on the possible influence these might have on their academic work.

Aims and Research Design

We have already analysed data and reported on the factors that predict academic achievement of teacher education students in their first year of study (Hall & Marchant, 1997 and in preparation). The current research aims to

1. describe the first-year academic and social process in teacher education;
2. compare the student experiences in the two countries; and,
3. where possible, explain 'college' differences in these experiences.

Among the student experiences to be examined are: satisfaction with pre-college academic achievement, satisfaction with their current course, academic expectations, perceptions of the learning context, time spent studying, development since coming to college, financial circumstances and perceptions of needs. The data come from all first-year, teacher education students in two colleges of HE in the university sector—one in the Republic of Ireland and one in England. Data were obtained from three sources but only source (ii) is used in the study reported here:

- (i) the student records office in the case of the English college, for pre-college, academic achievement and for end-of-year academic results;
- (ii) a detailed questionnaire survey to all students for information about their academic and social experiences;
- (iii) a further short correspondence for end-of-first-year results from students themselves in the case of the Irish college.

Questionnaire data were collected in both colleges in March 1996 and all data were analysed using SPSS. A variety of statistical procedures were used in the analysis including factor analysis on the data on students' perceptions of the learning context. The next section presents and discusses the results.

Analysis of Results

1. Profiles of Survey Participants

This section profiles and compares the survey participants in terms of age, gender, place of abode during term time, and satisfaction with pre-college academic results.

Two-thirds of all first-year students are less than 20 years old and the vast majority, 83%, are 25 years or younger. Comparatively, students at the English college show more variation in age, with some aged over 40 years, while the Irish cohort vary very little with the majority of first-year students still in their late teens; only 5% of Irish first-year students are over 25 but 26% of their English counterparts fall into this category, with statistically significant differences evident between the two groups in this regard ($\chi^2 = 21.8$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.000$). Two reasons can be suggested for this age difference. Traditionally, recruitment to teacher training courses in Ireland has been buoyant with the demand for places far exceeding supply, which in turn means that the academic attainments of entrants are substantially higher than the minimum qualifications specified by the Department of Education. The competitive nature of entry may act as a deterrent for more mature applicants. In addition, second-chance education is generally a much stronger feature of the English/Welsh system, accounting for the greater number of mature students in the English college.

Overall, 87% of the teacher education students are women, and there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups on this variable. In both countries, primary teaching is a female-dominated profession, and little has changed in this regard over the decades (see, for example, O'Connell, 1993). Taking all students together, 65% reported that they do not live at home during term time. However, this masks significant differences between the two countries. Irish students are much more likely to live away from home—78%—while 56% of English students reported living away from home. This is consistent with the fact that over one hundred institutions spread over a relatively more densely populated country offer primary teacher training in England, so a much larger proportion of students may live at home, if they wish. Provision in Ireland is located in the capital and one other city, Limerick, and this explains the higher incidence of not living at home in this case.

While the vast majority of all students (89%) were satisfied with their pre-college academic results, the difference between Irish and English students is significant here, with a higher proportion of students in the Irish college registering satisfaction with their entry results ($\chi^2 = 4.48$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.034$). The relevant statistics for Irish and English students are, respectively, 94% and 87%. It is difficult to explain this differ-

ence, although we suspect that the demand for teacher education places in Ireland is a relevant explanatory factor. The status of the primary teacher in society in Ireland remains high and, as one researcher recently noted, "many of the best school leavers continue to select teaching as a first choice" despite competition from other career options (Byrne, 1997, p. 13).

2. Satisfaction with Course and Academic Expectations

There were no differences between the two groups in the way they justified their choice of course—the vast majority in each country wished to pursue teaching as a career, although Irish students rated the option, 'to prepare for a good job' more highly than English students. Virtually all students expressed satisfaction with their choice of course. The vast majority of students (77%) in both colleges said that if they had the opportunity again, they would still choose the same course; 23% selected the response 'unsure' to this item and there were no significant differences between English and Irish students in this regard. In line with this finding, virtually all students in both colleges (99%) reported that they plan to continue on their present course if they successfully complete the year.

To obtain some indication of their academic expectations, respondents were asked to say how certain they were that they would complete their teacher education course and obtain their degree. Once again, virtually all students, regardless of country, said they were 'certain' or 'fairly certain' that they would successfully complete their course. Yet another indication of students' academic expectations is their rating of the importance of getting a 'good grade' at the end of the year. There was little or no variation across the two colleges in this regard, with 96% of all students noting that it was important to get a good grade in assignments and examinations.

What clearly emerges from this section is that there is little or no difference between English and Irish students in relation to how they consider their choice of career path, their academic expectations for themselves and their prospects of successfully completing their teacher education course: both English and Irish teacher education students have high academic expectations for themselves, they expect to do well and they plan to remain on their chosen career path.

3. Perceptions of the Learning Context

Data on perceptions of the learning context were obtained from responses to questionnaire items adapted from the Lancaster Course Perceptions Questionnaire (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983). Both the Irish and English data are combined in the factor analysis. Responses to 11 items were factor analysed using principal components extraction, followed by varimax rotation. A three-factor solution accounting for 57% of the variance was selected, where the criterion for the selection of factors was that the eigenvalues were greater than one (the Kaiser criterion). The factor structure for the perceptions of learning context items is presented in Table I, while scores obtained for the factors are presented in Fig. 1 and Table II, and these facilitate the comparison of Irish and English students on the three factors. We have conveniently labelled the three factors as 'hardwork', 'unclarity about goals' and 'unhappiness' to reflect their components as sensibly as possible. With reference to Fig. 1, it should be pointed out that the higher the scores, the greater the 'hardwork', the 'unclarity' and the 'unhappiness', respectively.

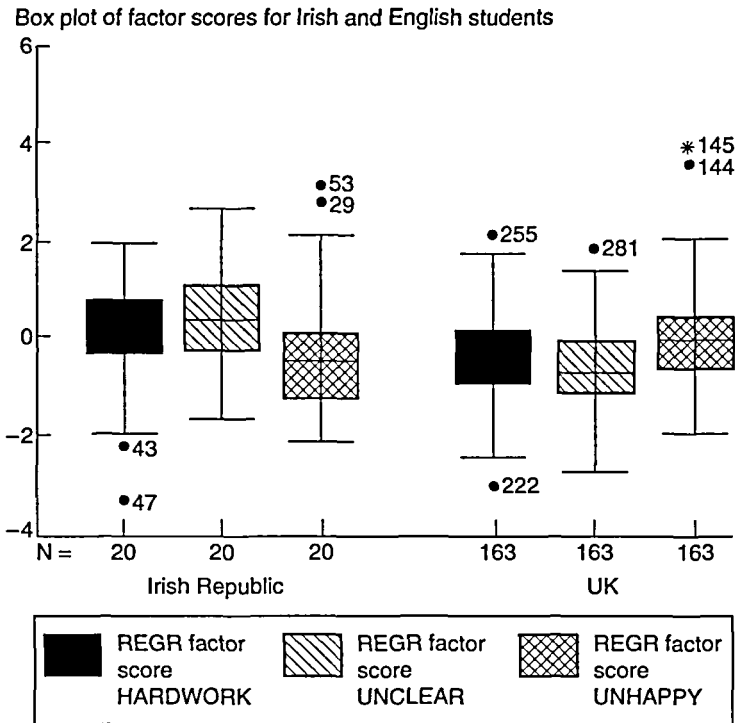


FIG. 1. Box plot of factor scores for Irish and English students.

Differences between the two groups are evident in students' perceptions of 'hard-work' with the Irish students perceiving a much greater workload than their English counterparts. They also appear to be less clear about goals and standards. But they seem to be happier than their English peers (Fig. 1 and Table II). One might speculate that since the Irish students spend so much time in organised academic activities and doing their work (see Table I) and since, inevitably, this time is spent working alongside fellow students, the resultant social atmosphere acts to mitigate feelings of unhappiness. With regard generally to student perceptions of their learning context, it is noteworthy that previous research (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983) demonstrates that a positive evaluation of the learning context promotes a more positive approach to studying and vice versa. In particular, students who perceive that they receive good teaching and/or freedom in how they learn are more likely to use a meaning-oriented approach to studying. A reproducing approach is more likely to be used by those students who perceive a heavy academic workload and/or a lack of freedom in learning. Also, it is likely that clear goals promote a favourable attitude to studying, and there is evidence that some students actually modify their approach to studying in the light of their perceptions of the assessment demands of their course (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Thomas & Bain, 1984). (These three factors along with other factors and variables (for example, approaches to study, time spent studying and prior achievement) were used as predictors in regression models to explain academic performance in both countries—this is described elsewhere (Hall & Marchant, in preparation)).

In a separate question designed to establish students' sense of insecurity (if applicable) at college, respondents were asked to register their level of agreement with the

TABLE I. Factor structure of perceptions of learning context items for total survey group (three-factor, principal components extraction with varimax rotation showing loadings > 0.5)

	Questionnaire statement ^a	Factor loading
Hardwork (Factor 1)	A great deal of my time is taken up by lectures, practicals, tutorials	0.59
	On this course you are expected to spend a lot of time studying on your own	0.59
	The workload here is too heavy	0.72
	I feel under a lot of pressure on this course	0.75
	There is so much work to be done that it's very difficult to get down to reading around the course	0.70
Lack of clarity about goals (Factor 2)	I have a fair idea of the academic standard expected on this course ^a	0.73
	This course gives students a chance to use methods of study that suit their own way of learning ^a	0.51
	It's hard to know how well you are doing on this course	0.67
Unhappiness (Factor 3)	You usually have a clear idea of where you're going and what's expected of you on this course	0.81
	There is a friendly atmosphere on this course ^a	0.80
	It seems to me that most students here are happier and more satisfied than I am	0.68

^aScoring was reversed on these items to reflect the factors concerned.

statement 'I feel insecure at college because I'm worried about my examinations' by selecting one of the categories, 'agree', 'neutral', and 'disagree'. Overall the majority, 60%, of students agreed with this statement, but a greater proportion, 70%, of Irish students expressed worry about their examinations, while the corresponding statistic for English students was 55%, and this represents a statistically significant difference between both cohorts ($\chi^2 = 8.905$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.012$). It is noteworthy in this regard that the administration of the questionnaire occurred at the same time (March 1996) for both sets of students.

The main finding from this section, in the context of the aims of this investigation, is the difference between both groups of students in the way they perceive their learning contexts. We return to this in the Conclusion.

TABLE II. Mean and standard deviation scores on the three factors for Irish and English Students

	Ireland		England	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Factor 1				
Hard work	0.38	0.96	- 0.28	0.94
Factor 2				
Unclear about goals and standards	0.60	0.93	- 0.44	0.80
Factor 3				
Unhappiness	- 0.26	1.07	0.19	0.90

TABLE III. Full weekly time in hours spent studying, by college

	Both groups	English students	Irish students
Mean	14.9	17.6	11.0
SD	8.3	7.8	7.3
N	262	153	109

4. Time Spent Studying

Students were also asked to report the average number of hours they spent studying, outside timetabled activities. For the sake of succinctness and brevity, these data are summarised to indicate the self-reported full weekly time spent in private study (outside timetabled activities). Taking both groups together, the average weekly time spent studying is 14.9 hours, with considerable variation evident across the student body. When these statistics are broken down to compare the responses of the two cohorts of students (Table III), it emerges that English students claim to spend substantially more time per week in private study than their Irish counterparts, and this difference is statistically significant ($t = -6.96, p = 0.000$). This was confirmed by a Mann-Whitney test ($U = 4364, Z = -6.58, p = 0.000$). Once again this can be explained with reference to the reported greater amount of time Irish students spend on timetabled lectures and seminars, thus reducing the available time for independent study.

5. Development since Coming to College

Survey respondents were asked about their development across three aspects since coming to college: intellectual/academic, social and cultural. They were given the options, *yes*, *not sure* and *no*. Given the differences noted in this section between English and Irish students' perceptions of the learning context, it might be expected that differences would be evident in their responses to their development. Three-quarters of all respondents reported that they had developed intellectually/academically since beginning their study in HE; less than a quarter were not sure, and only 2% said they had not developed in this regard (Table IV). However, as might be expected, there are statistically significant differences between English and Irish students, with the former expressing a much higher incidence of intellectual/academic development, 86%, compared with 60% offering a positive response in the Irish case ($\chi^2 = 27.8, df = 2, p = 0.000$) and 14% in the English case compared with 34% in the Irish case saying they were not sure. In our view, this is consistent with the earlier finding in this section that English students are clearer than Irish students about goals, expectations and standards. At a minimum, it explains the difference in the uncertainty between the two groups.

Less than half those surveyed, 47%, claimed to have developed culturally since beginning their teacher education course; as many as 42% were 'unsure' about this aspect; and 11% claimed they had not developed on this front. Once again, there are statistical differences between the two cohorts ($\chi^2 = 11.2, df = 2, p = 0.004$), but this time the Irish students show a higher incidence of having developed culturally than their fellow English students, 57%, as opposed to 40% in the case of the latter—and many more English students than Irish students were unsure as to their development

TABLE IV. Development since coming into HE, by college ($N = 290$)

		Both groups (%)	English students (%)	Irish students (%)
Academic	Yes	75	86	60
	Not sure	23	14	34
	No	2	0	6
Cultural	Yes	47	40	57
	Not sure	42	50	31
	No	11	10	12
Social	Yes	82	81	84
	Not sure	13	13	12
	No	5	6	4

in this aspect, 50% compared to 31%. The vast majority of all students (82%) claimed to have developed socially since coming into HE and, here no significant differences were found between the two cohorts.

6. Financial Circumstances and Impact on Study

A series of questions sought information about students' financial circumstances and particularly whether they saw themselves as having financial difficulties in relation to living, including studying, expenses.

Thirty-five per cent of all students reported that they have a part-time job and, here, there was no significant difference between the two groups. The mean number of hours worked per week during term time for those with a part-time job is 8.81 (SD = 7.31) and, again, no significant difference was found between English and Irish students. A Mann-Whitney test confirmed this finding.

A further question sought to ascertain the extent to which having a job interferes with studying, and Table V offers a breakdown of this evidence. Irish students reported a much higher incidence of their job interfering with study—almost one-third saying it 'frequently' interferes, while the corresponding statistic for English students is only 11%. This difference is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 7.95$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.019$). It can be explained with reference to the relatively greater amount of scheduled time that Irish students reported having to spend in lectures, seminars and tutorials, and Irish students' stronger perception of having a heavy academic workload and being under pressure (see Section 3 above).

TABLE V. Part-time job and its interference with study, by country ($N = 107^a$)

	Both countries (%)	England (%)	Ireland (%)
Frequently	20	11	32
Occasionally	49	54	43
Never	31	35	25

^aAlthough 101 reported having a part-time job, six more students completed this question about the interference of the job with study.

TABLE VI. Having enough money is a problem, by country

	Both countries	England	Ireland	
	(<i>N</i> = 288) (%)	(<i>N</i> = 167) (%)	(<i>N</i> = 122) (%)	<i>p</i> (χ^2)
Food	29	31	27	0.498
Rent	22	29	15	0.001
Travel (train, bus)	42	43	41	0.729
Books/stationery	75	80	67	0.011
Socialising	83	82	85	0.469
Outings	76	73	79	0.296
Clothes	87	85	90	0.193

Students were also asked to say whether 'having enough money' to pay for a number of specific living costs was a problem for them. Table VI summarises the positive responses to this question, that is, those who reported that they *have* money problems with these expenses. The overall conclusion one must draw from students' own reports of their financial circumstances is that substantial minorities of students in both countries experience difficulty in paying for what could be considered the most basic living expenses—food and accommodation. The vast majority of students in both colleges also claimed to have difficulties buying books and stationery for their course.

A closer analysis of these data shows a greater tendency for English students to have financial problems in the four most basic areas, namely, food, rent (accommodation), travel and books (Table VI), with significant differences evident between the two groups of students in relation to rent ($\chi^2 = 11.2$, *df* = 1, *p* = 0.001) and in relation to books/stationery ($\chi^2 = 6.6$, *df* = 1, *p* = 0.011).

The remaining three areas could be considered 'less basic' than the previous four, and students themselves are likely to have more control over how much they need to spend on these items. The great majority of all students said that having enough money for socialising, outings and clothes posed a problem. It is noteworthy that, across all three of these elements (Table VI), Irish students are more likely to report having financial difficulty, although none of the differences here reach statistical significance.

The relatively greater concern of English students about financial matters is further confirmed by the responses to an item from a series of items about feeling secure in college. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the statement 'I feel insecure at college because I have financial problems'. The total proportion of students agreeing with this statement was 27% but, broken down by country, we found that 34% of English students agreed with this statement, while 16% of Irish students agreed with it. This difference between the two groups is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 15.6$, *df* = 2, *p* = 0.0004).

7. *Guidance with College Life*

One question sought to identify the kind of guidance students would welcome in their first year in HE. The questions probed specific aspects within three areas: academic, accommodation/finance and personal/social (Table VII). While the vast majority of all students said they would like more help with academic matters and study skills, Irish students are more likely to welcome this support. In the case of study skills, this difference did not reach statistical significance, but it did in the case of academic

TABLE VII. Aspects on which students would like guidance, by country

	Both countries (<i>N</i> = 276) (%)	England (<i>N</i> = 156) (%)	Ireland (<i>N</i> = 120) (%)	<i>p</i> (χ^2)
Academic				
academic issues	75	68	85	0.001
study skills	70	66	77	0.056
use of library	26	20	33	0.014
Accommodation and finance				
accommodation	21	21	21	0.495
financial	42	42	41	0.971
Personal/social				
getting on with family	8	6	12	0.113
personal relations	13	9	19	0.336
social life	11	7	17	0.029
living away from home	11	7	14	0.186

matters. Irish students were also more likely to need guidance with using the library. Once again these findings are in line with the differences noted above between the two groups in relation to their perceptions of the learning context, where Irish students expressed uncertainty about academic goals and standards.

Substantial minorities across both cohorts would welcome guidance on matters of accommodation and finance, and there are no significant differences between the two groups on these factors. Smaller minorities would like help on personal and social issues, including getting on with family, personal relations, social life and living away from home. While the numbers here are small, there is a greater tendency for Irish students to want support on personal and social issues. This may be a function of the different age profiles of students in both colleges: as noted earlier, Irish student teachers tend to be younger, on average, than their English counterparts.

Of note also in the context of students' perceptions of their need for guidance is that the vast majority of students in both colleges rarely meet lecturers to discuss social or personal matters and, typically, students meet lecturers only once or twice (outside of normal class times) to discuss academic matters.

Conclusions

How do teacher education students integrate into their first year in college? What is clear from our evidence is that teacher education students in both countries are highly committed to their courses, with vast majorities in both cases expressing satisfaction with their choice of course and planning to continue with their course at the end of their first year. In addition, both groups exhibit high academic expectations and rate academic achievement as very important. In these respects teacher education students appear to be more dedicated to their course and to achieving well than other first-year student groups in HE (Somers, 1994). However, differences emerge between both colleges in relation to how they perceive their learning context. Students at the English college appear to be clearer about goals and standards but less happy than their Irish counterparts, and Irish students experience a more pressured workload and less freedom in how they learn. Furthermore, English students spend more time in private

study. We conclude, therefore, that English students may be better academically integrated into their institution than are Irish students. Lending weight to this conclusion is that English students were much more likely than Irish students to say that they had developed intellectually since coming to college, while a greater proportion of Irish students would like guidance on a range of academic matters. There is evidence to suggest that Irish students are happier at college and some, albeit limited, evidence that a greater proportion of this group developed culturally since coming to college. However, further research could usefully clarify the relationship between academic/intellectual pursuits in college and social/cultural ones. Similar proportions of students in both places have part-time jobs, but this work is more likely to interfere with study in the case of Irish students. In general, while English students rate their financial circumstances more negatively than Irish students, our evidence points to students in both colleges experiencing financial problems in relation to living and studying expenses.

In evaluating our conclusions, we note that the study is based on single-year, single-institution samples and, as a result, the findings may not be descriptive of teacher education students more generally, or indeed may not be applicable to other Irish and English teacher education institutions. In addition, the findings are based on self-report and could not be validated in this investigation through other means of data gathering. Therefore, future research could assess the validity of the student experiences reported here by incorporating methods that would better facilitate the checking and triangulation of the evidence. These may include case study approaches involving interviewing, observation and diary-keeping, to track students' academic and social experiences in college. For truly national comparisons of demographics, national statistics on teacher education students are needed. In our study, the potential confounding of college effect with national effect must be recognised; and although we suspect the two colleges are typical of provision in their respective countries, this potential prevents us from being definitive about differences across the two countries.

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