Supporting the first year experience in Higher Education in Ireland: Impact on Student Engagement, Teaching Practice and Institutional Policy.

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Abstract

Many students are not prepared for the demands of third level education and first year experience programmes are designed to support this transition and supplement the necessary academic and life skills. In 2009, a first year experience package was introduced in two higher education institutions following strategic innovation funding, which was awarded by the Higher Education Authority in Ireland. This package consisted of: a Learning With Peers (LWP) programme led by trained senior student leaders; and a Skills Development Module (SDM) which is led by lecturers and is worth 5 ECTS[2]. The main aim of this research study was to explore the first year experience over two higher education institution sites. It investigated how two initiatives (i.e. the LWP and the SDM) impacted on student engagement, teaching practice and institutional policy, using a mixed methods approach. A number of major themes emerged from the data analysis including: creating connections; making friends; understanding expectations; creating learning communities; teaching challenges; and resourcing and supporting the first year experience. Furthermore, this study found that first year students want to make connections with their learning experiences. Institutions need to establish 'student learning communities' from day one, which will enable first year students to connect and belong while lecturers enjoy collaborating and sharing resources that support students' development. Finally, there seems to be a lack of understanding among senior managers as to what is the 'ideal operational resource team' that would support first years effectively and ultimately meet an institution's financial and strategic objectives.

Keywords: student engagement, first year experience, teaching and learning strategies, peer assisted learning, learning communities, institutional policy, change management.

Introduction

Research Study Aim

The aim of this paper is to explore the first year experience over two higher education institutions in Ireland (an Institute of Technology and a University). This paper explores first year student and staff engagement with two first year experience initiatives: a Learning With Peers (LWP) programme and a Skills Development Module (SDM).

Background to the Study

The higher education system in Ireland comprises of the university sector (7), the institutes of technology (14) and the colleges of education (5), all of which are substantially state-funded, autonomous and self-governing. In 2004, the Irish Government introduced the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) to stimulate innovative thinking and action within and across higher education institutions in Ireland. SIF was all about creating a collaborative culture with a particular focus on: the quality of teaching and learning; improved graduate education;

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[2] European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (**ECTS**) is a standard for comparing the study attainment and performance of students of higher education across the European Union and other collaborating European countries.

broader access to higher education; and better managed higher education institutions. The HEA was responsible for the allocation of the SIF funding to the Universities and Institutes of Technology in Ireland. To date there have been two cycles of SIF funding.

In 2008, an Institute of Technology which serves as one of the cases for this study was awarded SIF cycle II funding of €2 million to lead a three year 'Student Leadership Programme'. The institute also collaborated with higher education institutions in the project areas under *Student Led Learning* and *Curriculum Reform.* I was appointed the programme manager and led the development of a range of student engagement initiatives. The student-led learning project outputs from the Institute of Technology included a Learning With Peers programme (LWP) and a Skills Development Module (SDM). During the collaboration process I shared the LWP programme with a SIF II project partner, the School of Business in a University which serves as the second site in this research study, to support their plans in developing a first year experience programme. The undergraduate student population of the Institute of Technology is approximately 6000 and of the University is approximately 12,000. A range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes is available at both institutions in Business, Engineering, Science, Computing, Medicine, Humanities, Art & Design, Hospitality, Tourism, Education and Nursing.

In 2009, the Learning With Peers (LWP) programme and the Skills Development Module (SDM) was introduced in the Institute of Technology to support first year students' transition to higher education. In 2010, the LWP programme was introduced in the University and this was followed by the development of the SDM in 2011 (see Figure 1 for programme description by site).

The rationale for the introduction of LWP and SDM at both Higher Education Institutions was to help first year students:

- integrate more effectively into college life;
- gain a better understanding of lecturers' expectations of them;
- develop learning and study skills to meet the requirements of their chosen programme;
- improve their understanding of the subject matter of their programme;
- prepare better for assessments.

With growth in class sizes and the increasing diversity among the student population, LWP offered students a distinct advantage as it encouraged first years to engage with each other and reflect on their programme of study. The LWP programme in both institutions involves a group of senior year students undertaking student leadership training. Two student leaders work together with a first year group of up to thirty students in a weekly timetabled, one hour session engaging with a variety of topics.

Figure 1: First Year Experience Initiatives – Programme Facts by Site

	Institute of Technology	**University**
LWP	A weekly one hour study session facilitated by senior students from the same degree programme to help students: settle into college life; study together: and work on assignments from all modules. No Assessment or Participation Link with SDM	A weekly one hour study session facilitated by senior students from the same degree programme to help students: settle into college life; study together: and work on assignments from all modules. Participation in LWP over one semester is 10% towards SDM module
SDM	A weekly three hour 5 credit module led by a lecturer and covers a range of academic development skills including; time management; plagiarism; personal development plans; research skills; communication skills; note taking methods; stress management; and team work.	A weekly three hour 5 credit module led by a lecturer and covers a range of academic development skills including; time management; plagiarism; personal development plans; research skills; communication skills; note taking methods; stress management; and team work.

The SDM for first years was also designed to support first year students' transition to higher education. Some distinguishing features of the SDM is the fact it is led by the lecturer in both institutions, it is delivered over three hours per week and the main aim is to help first year students develop the academic skills required to be successful in third level.

Since the rollout and implementation of the SIF programme, there have been a number of changes in the Irish higher education system[3]. In parallel to this, the National Higher Education Strategy was published in 2011 and this sets out major changes for the sector going forward. Hunt (2011) explains how the strategy is framed against a range of new challenges that are facing higher education:

> The capacity of higher education has doubled over the past twenty years and will have to double again over the next twenty. Those entering the system now and in the future will have very diverse learning needs, and many will be 'mature' students. Higher education itself will need to innovate and develop if it is to provide flexible opportunities for larger and more diverse student cohorts. It will need to do this while simultaneously enhancing quality and relevance, and connecting better with the wider needs of society and the economy, while operating in a more competitive globalised environment.

(Hunt, 2011, p.10)

As we recover from the economic downturn, HEIs are expected to provide knowledge and learning of 'lasting cultural and social significance'. Objectives outlined in the strategy, for example, include a need to provide new structures that better reflect the diverse learning requirements of our students, both those who enter after the Leaving Certificate, and those

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[3] Including reduced funding by the state and an increase in the student annual contribution fee.

who enter later. It is in this context that this study links appropriately. As HEIs expand the first year experience will play a major role in helping all students connect to third level, and a range of initiatives can be deployed to support this critical transition and enable successful progression.

Literature Review

As the literature on the first year experience is quite extensive, I have chosen to focus on three key themes for this paper: *Student Engagement; the First Year Experience; Teaching and Learning Strategies*; and *managing change in higher education.*

Student Engagement in Higher Education

Various definitions of student engagement are presented in the literature. Kuh has defined it as 'the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities'(2009, p 684). An alternative view, provided by Biggs and Tang (2007) regards the engaged student as one who is a 'deep learner', seeking to develop his/her knowledge, reflecting on the facts and details presented in the lecture related to their own experiences and 'the big picture'. Biggs and Tang (2007) believe this requires a high level of engagement and is achieved by developing theories, applying knowledge to different contexts, relating concepts to everyday behaviours and explaining in detail content delivered by the teacher. Exeter *et al.* (2010) argue that student engagement refers to the time, energy and resources spent on activities designed to enhance learning at third level institutions. The goals of student engagement have evolved from dropout prevention to improved outcomes for lifelong learning (Christenson *et al.* 2012). On the other hand, Krause (2007) takes a much broader view of student engagement and has identified three environments in which students may become engaged with their learning: in the classroom or conducting study related activities; participation in out-of-class activities located either on campus (e.g. the students' union, student clubs and societies, sports, mentoring programmes) or off campus (e.g. paid part-time employment); or in the workplace (i.e. skill-based employment training). In summary, the concept of student engagement has grown in the past two decades from a focus on getting attention from the students in the classroom to a more complex concept which examines cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components. Therefore higher education needs to connect with students' lives rather than vice-versa.

Furthermore, it is important that students have a strong sense of belonging in higher education. Thomas (2012) explains this is most effectively nurtured through mainstream activities with a clear academic purpose that all students participate in. Thomas (2012), in the 'What Works?' report in the UK, synthesised the outputs from seven projects that examined approaches to improving student retention and success using a range of methods. 'Belonging' has emerged as a key idea from the research projects, and it is closely aligned with the concepts of academic and social engagement.

Researchers draw on both psychological and sociological traditions to inform their understanding of these issues.

> The psychological literature is used to define belonging at the individual level, while the sociological literature is used to explain how the potential mismatch between a student's background and that of the institution may result in students not feeling like they belong, and leaving early.

(Thomas 2012, p.12).

Goodenow (1993b) describes a sense of belonging in educational environments as the following:

> Students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual.

(Goodenow, 1993b, p. 25)

Other student engagement writers such as Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) echo these findings. They conclude, after reviewing thirty years of literature, that multiple forces operate in multiple settings to influence student engagement, learning and persistence. They conclude:

> . . . the impact of college is largely determined by individual effort and involvement in the academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings on campus. This is not to say that an individual campus's ethos, policies, and programs are unimportant. Quite the contrary. But it is important to focus on the way in which an institution can shape its academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings to encourage student engagement.

(Pascarella and Terenzini 2005, p.602)

In summary, a convincing case can be made that the responsibility for shaping the student experience lies with the learning institution managers, the teachers' approach to curriculum development and the students' motivation to learn. All these factors impact the level of student engagement achieved.

The First Year Experience

First year students find entering third level education an unnerving, isolating and intimidating experience (Kuh 2003; Lowe and Cook 2003; Yorke and Longden 2004; Byrne and Flood 2005). Furthermore, Tinto (1998) describes the experience as moving from one community group to another and by undertaking this transition, students need to separate themselves from their past school associations in order to integrate into third level college life. During this process first years will encounter lots of problems along the way mainly due to the new club they are joining. Tinto (1998) argues any student moving to a new college or community

wants to fit in. Achieving this sense of belonging can depend on the personality of the individuals or of the institution in which membership is sought.

Many students are just not ready to cope with the demands of third level study and this can increase the doubts that students may have. Yorke and Longden (2004) found, for example, that two thirds of withdrawals in the UK happen during or at the end of the first year. There are a number of factors cited that make it difficult for students to adjust to third level life including: financial pressures; the wrong choice of programme or module; difficulties with making friends or being homesick. The biggest factor reported in the literature is the lack of preparation for and an understanding of the type of learning that is required at third level (Pike and Kuh 2005; Schrader and Brown 2008; Brownlee *et al.* 2009; Jamelske 2009; Morosanu *et al.* 2010). The importance of aiding students' transition into higher education is reinforced by appreciating that undergraduates are likely to arrive with learning strategies suitable to second level school life which are less effective in third level learning environments featuring large class sizes and less easy access to staff (Cook and Leckey 1999). Similar to Tinto's findings, Cook and Leckey (1999) consider transition to be the 'greatest hurdle' in higher education.

Pascarella *et al.* (2004) identified several variables that influence the transition to higher education, including academic and social involvement, family background, peer group, socioeconomic status, and academic preparation. 'Involvement' is noted as the extent to which a student participates in academic (Reason *et al.* 2006) as well as non-academic (e.g., social) activities (Kuh 1993; Kuh 2001). These and related factors highlight the breadth of challenges and the vulnerability of first year students in the transition process. Therefore it is clear students entering first year need support on a personal and academic level in order to adjust and settle into their new learning environment.

Williams (2001) identified seven topic areas influencing student retention in higher education: academic preparedness; the academic experience (teaching, learning and assessment); institutional expectations and commitment; academic and social match; finance and employment; family support and commitments; and institutional support services. Yorke *et. al* (2004) argues that retention can depend on the student's perception of their experience in higher education. This is affected by economic, organisational, psychological and sociological perspectives, some of which are well beyond the control of an institution (Tinto, 1988). The Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2010) in Ireland reported that the proportion of new entrants in 2007/08 who were not present one year later was 15 per cent on average across all sectors and National Framework Qualification (NFQ) levels. The rates of 'non-presence' differ according to the sector, ranging from 22 per cent in an institute of technology to 9 per cent in a university sector and 4 per cent in teacher training colleges. Furthermore, the HEA (2010) reports that there is a clear and strong link between prior educational achievement and successful progression. Educational achievement is a strong factor influencing whether or not a new entrant progresses beyond the first year of their course of study.

Overall the impact of non-progression on resources is a principal concern for students, parents, administrators and managers of an institution. Bamber and Tett (2001) argue that higher education institutions must accept responsibility and understand the implications when offering access to non-traditional students "that they do not end, but rather begin, at the point of entry" (p.15). In summary, many students are not prepared for the challenges of third level education and first year experience programmes are designed to support this transition and supplement the necessary academic and life skills. These academic and life skills can range from study skills (e.g. research, note taking), time management skills to institutional awareness (e.g. location of the library, students union, IT labs), appropriate interpersonal behaviour and seeking out personnel when personal issues arise. Evaluating programmes developed to address such a wide range of knowledge and skills is an obvious challenge, especially when each FYE is customised for each corresponding university or college. As a result, many third level higher education institutes have implemented first year experience programmes as some form of intervention, formal or informal, in order to increase academic achievement and positive social adjustment. These efforts are focused on increasing retention and graduation rates and peer assisted learning is one example.

Peer assisted learning is one strategy which has been adopted in higher education, as a response to first year experience needs of students. Peer assisted learning is a form of study support whereby experienced student leaders (i.e. PAL leaders) support the learning experience of other, less experienced students (Capstick and Fleming 2001). Peer assisted learning derives from Supplemental Instruction (SI), which draws upon a suite of learning theories that can be described as developmental. It ranges in perspectives from facilitation techniques, information processing, knowledge sharing among peers to academic socialisation to critical thinking and reflection. Peer learning is essentially about developing a learning community. A learning community is something of an umbrella term to describe learning situations where a "group of people come together to meet specific and unique learning needs and to share resources and skills" (Burgoyne *et al.*, 1978 in Reynolds, 1998, p. 6). Furthermore, Tosey (1999) reported that while there is a strong emphasis on personal growth and development, a peer learning community is not a therapeutic community. Peer learning is likely to involve a high degree of personal challenge for the student members.

Teaching and Learning Strategies

Morosanu *et al*. (2010) argues the students' transition to higher education comes with a number of challenges which, if inadequately addressed, may negatively affect their academic performance and psychological well-being. Hence, the question of support and teaching strategies becomes critical and has been reflected in the variety of practical measures to provide support with learning and facilitate newcomers' integration into higher education. To begin with, the teaching and assessment styles in many secondary schools lend themselves to the development of a particular set of study skills and learning strategies (Lowe and Cook 2003). These are no longer relevant to the more independent styles of learning expected in

higher education (Cook and Leckey 1999). Therefore, active learning plays an important role in teaching practice in higher education. According to Seel (2011), active learning is any class activity that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing. MacVaugh and Norton (2012) offer a similar view, describing active learning practice as focusing on a variety of tools that cognitively engage learners to explore ideas, accumulate knowledge and develop schema. They argue that this has several proven advantages, including increased personal motivation, reduction of strategic learning behaviour, improving deep understanding, development of critical thinking and development of reflexive abilities that support life-long learning. MacVaugh and Norton (2012) explain that all of this has become part of the articulated outcomes for higher education worldwide. There are many approaches to active learning and these include: action learning (Revans, 1998 in (Bradbury and Reason 2007); experiential learning (Kolb 1984); work-based learning (Gibbs, 1988) in (Moon 2006); inquiry-based learning (Healey, 2005 in (Lee 2012) and problem based learning - PBL (Savin-Baden, 2003). In the classroom these are manifested in the techniques of: group work; case studies; worked examples; field research; peer teaching; project work; debate and the use of games (MacVaugh & Norton 2012). In summary, active learning activities can help first year students re-programme their learning strategies to be suitable for higher education and include a range of teaching techniques such as: class discussion; questions or challenges lecturers present to students in class; cooperative learning; debates; role playing and the questions linked to programme assessments or examinations.

Pascarella (2005) argues that two-thirds of the gains students make in knowledge and cognitive skill development occur in the first two years of college. The first year in higher education is critical, not only for how much students learn, but also for laying the foundation on which their subsequent academic success and persistence rest. Pascarella *et al.* (2004) estimated that, of the first year to senior year gains that students made in English, science, and social studies, between 80% and 95% occurred in students' first two years of college. Similarly, nearly two-thirds (63%), and perhaps as much as 90%, of the gains students make in critical thinking skills occur in the first two years of college (Reason *et al.* 2006). Furthermore, it is widely accepted that high quality teachers are the most important asset of colleges, but according to Hanushek (2011) this recognition has not led to any consensus on the appropriate policies that should be followed to ensure that we have a good stock of teachers in higher education. These findings support the case made for ongoing investment in the teaching staff and innovative curriculum development that supports students in the early years, as this approach helps retain students on programmes and drives their academic success.

Furthermore, there is a need to create inclusive environments for diverse student populations.

> After 150 years of status quo preservation, the creation of higher education environments that are accepting and supportive of students with diverse needs is a formidable task that requires a major cultural transformation.

(Pilner & Johnson 2004, p.105)

The higher education system requires some reconfigurations in educational practices. This can include admission policies, changes in curriculum, work placements, teaching practice and developing academic partnerships, and much more (Pliner and Johnson 2004). Many researchers describe teaching practice partnerships, both formal and informal as key to sharing knowledge and working with colleagues effectively. The key to success in teaching practice partnerships however, is a shared vision and philosophy, according to Erickson and Raines (2011). Furthermore, teaching depends heavily on knowledge (Enakrire and Uloma 2012). Tiwana (2002) defines knowledge as a fluid mix of framed experience, value, contextual information, expert insight and grounded intuition that provides an environment and framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. Therefore it is evident that if the right teachers connect and partner up to share resources and learn from each other's student experiences, this could have a real impact on student engagement.

The evidence outlined in the teaching and learning literature all indicate that achieving successful student engagement in the first year and beyond depends on a number of factors. This includes: careful review of course design; developing engaging content; active learning teaching techniques; and an assessment strategy that connects students and takes them on an exciting journey of discovery. The key is that the student is involved and engaged throughout the process, from design input, knowledge transfer, assessment feedback and course evaluation.

Managing Change in Higher Education

The higher education sector has been subject to a plethora of changes over the last 20 years. Carter and Halsall (2000) explains the expansion of higher education raises questions about the nature and purpose of the sector because it challenges existing structures and cultures. Furthermore, Jones *et. al* (2012) explains: an increase in managerial control; an increase in competition; increased scrutiny alongside greater devolved responsibility; and a remodelling of structures and operations on corporate organisations is all impacting changes in higher education.

Coates *et al.* (2009) claim this has resulted in increased academic staff resentment as their autonomy has been reduced and new administrative units have been established. Jones *et al.* (2012) argues that new models of leadership are needed for the higher education sector in order to continue to graduate students with leading edge capabilities. While multiple theories of leadership exist, the higher education sector requires a less hierarchical approach that takes account of its specialised and professional context. In order to build sustainable leadership, Jones *et al.* (2012), advocates a more participative and collaborative approach to leadership and acknowledges the individual autonomy that underpins creative and innovative thinking. Robertson *et al*. (2009) echoes this, stating that systematic change in higher education requires a sophisticated blend of management, collegiality and simple hard work over a prolonged period of time. Early work on change management in higher education by Guba and Clarke (1966 in Robertson *et al.* 2009) suggests that in achieving systematic

change in institutions of higher education there is a difference between what is needed and what is done.

Morgan (1986) claim that the majority of change in higher education arises from systemic and organisational sources in which there are multiple and contested policy initiatives. An example of this lies in the Strategic Innovation Funding (SIF) programmes in Ireland outline earlier. Furthermore, Pennington (2003) claims that the volume, scale and complexity of change create a sense of a roller coaster effect at all levels within higher education institutions. Robertson *et al.* (2007) notes that change of this scale cannot be absorbed organically and requires explicit and skilful management. An earlier study with Dearlove (1997) highlights that 'a top-down change approach' is inevitably resisted and 'bottom-up approaches' are slow. So, as a general rule, they claim, academics tend to resist changes which are top-down driven and are perceived to threaten their core values and practice, which can have a negative impact on individuals and which diminish group autonomy. This links with the impact on academics as a result of the introduction of peer assisted learning programmes, where lecturers can feel threatened that their teaching is being substituted or replaced in some way. Therefore academics naturally resist change initially and need to be convinced of the merits of the programme or project or they need to be actively involved in the decision making process.
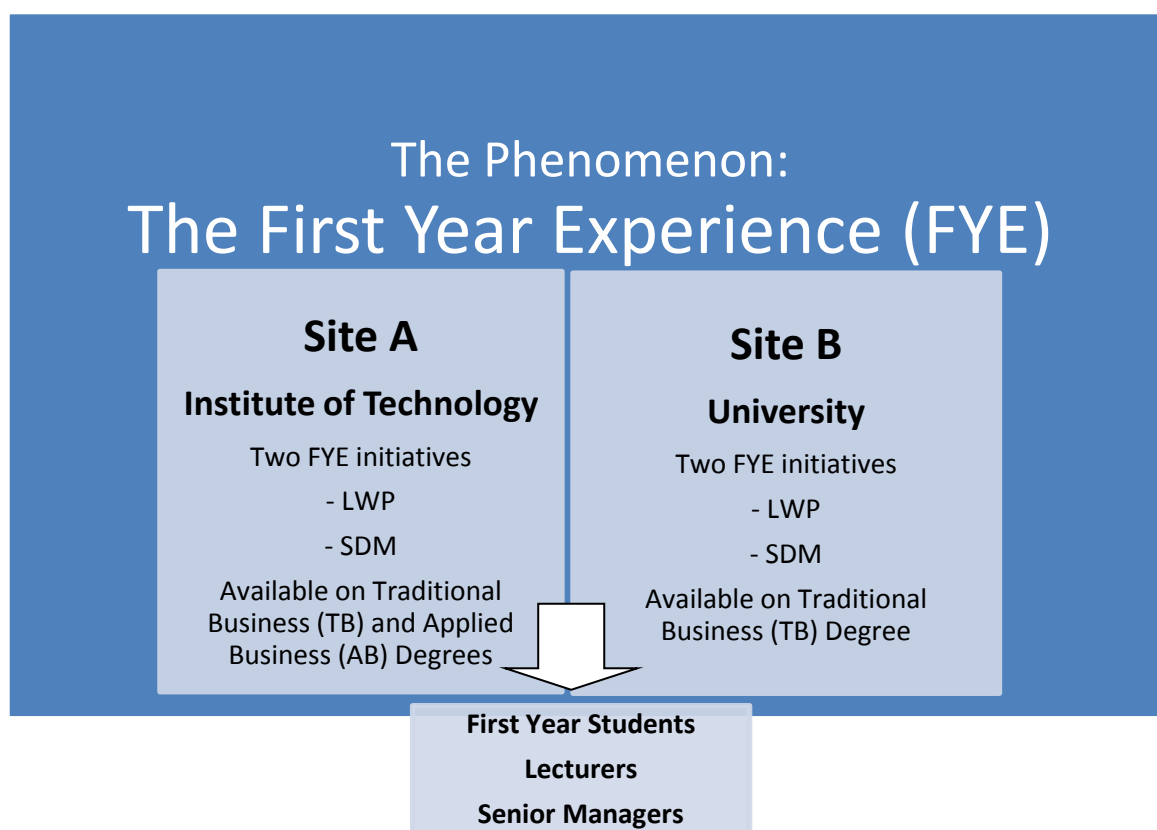
Research Methodology

The paradigm adopted for this study is mixed methods and the research strategy is a case study exploring first year experience initiatives in two higher education institution sites, an Institute of Technology and a University in Ireland. The data collection methods include a student survey, semi-structured interviews with lecturers and with senior managers (see Figure 2).

A case study involves the study of an example – a case – of the phenomenon being researched. In this case study the phenomenon being explored is the first year experience in higher education and this includes two support initiatives: LWP and the SDM. Cases in education research can consist of individuals, groups, organisations and communities (Bassey 1999). I have chosen this approach as it is a prime strategy for developing educational theory which illuminates educational policy and enhances educational practice. My decision was informed by a number of writers in this area, for example, Bassey (1999) who describes three broad styles of case studies in education research including: evaluative; educational; and action research.

Yin (2011) recognises that within academic communities there can be opposition to the case study approach on the grounds of lack of rigour or little basis for scientific generalization and a tendency for long and unreadable documents. Atkinson and Delamont (2010) argue if case studies are not explicitly developed into more general frameworks, then they will be doomed to remain isolated one-off affairs, with no sense of cumulative knowledge or developing theoretical insight. Therefore I considered Yin (2011) and some central components of case study design and their functions and this included: the questions

posed (i.e. how the first year experience initiatives impacted students); the study's theoretical propositions, suggesting possible links between phenomena; and the study's units of analysis must be at the same level as the study questions. This has supported my approach to focus on an educational case study as it enabled me to explore the phenomena and gain a deeper understanding of two first year experience initiatives deployed in two higher education institution sites and the impact they have had on students, lecturers and senior managers.

Figure 2:   An Educational Case Study Approach

The Phenomenon:
The First Year Experience (FYE)

Site A

Institute of Technology

Two FYE initiatives

- LWP

- SDM

Available on Traditional Business (TB) and Applied Business (AB) Degrees

Site B

University

Two FYE initiatives

- LWP

- SDM

Available on Traditional Business (TB) Degree

First Year Students

Lecturers

Senior Managers

The Research Process

For this study, quantitative and qualitative research approaches were used to investigate the impact of first year experience initiatives implemented in two higher education institutions. The findings from the literature review combined with the research study questions, informed the data collection tool design.

Step 1: Deciding on Sites and First Year Experience Initiatives

The first step involved identifying the sites for this study. I selected an Institute of Technology and a University that had experienced the First Year Experience initiatives that originated from the SIF II programme. I chose these sites for a number of reasons. Firstly,

I managed an educational programme for three years (from 2008-2011) over both sites and collaborated with a number of personnel involved with learning, teaching and assessment initiatives. Secondly, I was instrumental in establishing the LWP programme in both sites in 2009, therefore my involvement as a manager meant that I needed to make it very clear to all participants of my role in the past and they were free to decline in taking part in the study. I made every effort to ensure participants felt free to make any comments. A third reason for choosing the sites was the fact both higher education institutions offered the LWP programme and a SDM to first year students studying business programmes. This enabled comparison over the two sites in the same discipline area.

In the IoT site the SDM was designed by a team of academics in the social science area. The rollout, training and implementation of the module across the IoT was supported by me (as programme manager from 2008-2011), the Registrar, school heads of department, the Students' Union, the library and student services. In the University, the SDM was designed by a lecturer in business management and the rollout and implementation of the module was supported by the administration team in business and student services. In 2011, I completed my role as SIFII programme manager and both initiatives were embedded in the IoT, hence my direct involvement ceased. From 2011, an academic coordinator and institute student services administrator was appointed in the IoT to co-ordinate the LWP programme going forward and the SDM was managed locally in each school through heads of department and teaching teams. At the University, the LWP and SDM continued to be co-ordinated by the lecturer involved with the implementation of the programme initially.

Stage 2: Selecting Participants

Three sample groups were identified in both HEI sites including: business degree students; lecturers; and senior managers. All undergraduate first year students studying a business degree in the Institute of Technology (n=300) and the University (n=300) who had experienced the LWP programme and/or the SDM in 2012-2013, were invited to participate in the survey. 122 students volunteered to do so. All students who participated in the survey were unaware of my initial involvement in developing the programme for the IoT and University. Overall a 20% response rate was achieved. I choose purposeful sampling as business degree students were the only school offered the LWP programme in the University. This limited my examination on both HEI sites to one discipline area (any students that chose to drop out early in semester one - were not included in this survey).

In summary, in the Institute of Technology (IoT) 25% (n=78) volunteered to participate in the survey. This amounted to an even split of 50% applied and 50% traditional business degree students who had experienced first year initiatives including: the LWP programme led by senior year students; and the SDM led by a lecturer. Overall 29% were male and 71% female and out of this 28% (n=21) were mature and just 9% (n=7) were international students. In contrast, the sample in the university student survey was made up of

100% traditional business degree students (n=300) and approximately 14.6% (n=44) volunteered to undertake the survey. Overall there was a good gender balance, with 47% male and 53% female, out of this 11% (n=5) were mature and just 4% (n=2) were international students.

Figure 3: Number of Participants in the Study

HEI Site	Students	Lecturers	Senior Managers
Total Numbers Invited	600	14	2
Total Numbers Invited in the Institute of Technology	300	12	1
Institute of Technology Participants	78	7	1
Total Numbers Invited in the University	300	2	1
University Participants	44	2	1

All lecturers teaching the SDM to first years in the business degree programmes in the Institute of Technology (n=12) and the University (n=2) were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview and 9 volunteered to do so. Senior managers in both institutions (n=2) were invited to participate in a one-to-one interview and both agreed.

Findings

The findings from the data analysis, provides an insight of the first year experience initiatives (See Figure 4.1 on LWP and SDM) in higher education from different perspectives from a range of stakeholders (i.e. the student, the lecturer, and the manager), in an Institute of Technology and a University in Ireland. A selection of findings are discussed in this paper under three key sections: the first year student experience; the lecturer experience; and the senior manager experience. Themes emerged from each of the participant groups and are presented in Figure 4.

In summary, this section will discuss a selection of the findings that map directly to the research questions and it will be presented over three key sections covering:

- *The Student Experience* explores first year students engagement with the first year experience initiatives (i.e. LWP and SDM) and how they have impacted the students experience with higher education;
- *The Lecturers' Experience* explores the lecturers' involvement with the first year experience initiatives and how this influenced changes in their teaching practice;

- *The Senior Managers' Experience* explores the senior managers' views and how their involvement with the first year experience initiatives has informed changes in institutional strategy and policy.

Each section will also address the significance of context and approach in the Institute of Technology and the University.

The Student Experience

This section presents some of the challenges encountered by first year students, the student experience of LWP and the student experience of the SDM.

First Year Student Challenges

Some of the major challenges that first year students encountered in both institutions were: dealing with assignments; managing the workload; finding classes; understanding the timetable; dealing with variations in teaching styles; referencing and approaching learning at third level. Some students in both HEI's explained the differences between second level and third level and how this transition presented difficulties for them:

> How to study for exams and answer questions with your own opinion and not just list off information given from lectures – very different from the leaving certificate.
>
> Student, AB,
> Institute of Technology – 9:50

> What I found most difficult was writing essays at third level. I wasn't sure if I was using the correct language and terminology.
>
> Student, TB, University – 9:39

> Having to find out everything for yourself, not everything is handed to you in comparison to secondary level education.
>
> Student, TB, Institute of Technology – 8:33

Students also cited social and personal challenges such as: meeting new friends; self doubt; getting to know new people; gaining independence; living away from home; and managing finances. A mature student for example expressed fears regarding their capabilities for third level education:

> I was worried that because I had limited second level schooling that I wouldn't be academically capable.
>
> Student, TB, Institute of Technology – 8:26

> The number of assignments and hours spent studying while trying to balance a social life.
>
> Student, TB, University – 9:41

Students in the University expressed their appreciation for a maths and academic writing support centre and the allocation of 'a mentor' which was an additional support to

LWP and the SDM, as this helped them settle in and deal with the academic challenges of third level education. In the IoT, the Access office was noted as a good learning support outlet, however some students expressed the need for more 'ongoing' supports and this opens the debate on whether academic skills development in writing, communications and numeracy should extend beyond the first semester in year one and right into year two and possibly year three.

Student Experience of Learning With Peers (LWP) Programme

The LWP sessions are led by senior year student leaders and the attendance at the sessions in both higher education institutions differs with 52% of the IoT business programme students attended five or more LWP sessions and 88% in the University business school. The higher attendance rate in the University is partly attributed to the 'University Student Attendance Policy' discussed in Appendix 5 and the fact that attendance at LWP sessions is worth 10% of the Skills Development Module (SDM), therefore there is an incentive for students to attend both first year experience initiatives. Neither of these factors were present in the IoT, where students choose to opt in or opt out of LWP sessions during the term.

Students were asked to indicate to what extent did they agree or disagree with a range of statements relating to their experience with LWP sessions and whether it helped them engage with the challenges of moving into higher education. Overall students indicated a positive experience with LWP with 88% in the University and 64% in the IoT agreeing (*scale: somewhat to very much*) that LWP sessions helped them get a better understanding of the expectations of their lecturers. Approximately 79% in the University agreed (*scale: somewhat to very much*) that LWP sessions helped develop learning and study skills to meet the requirements of third level education and just 53% in the IoT business programmes.

Figure 4: Stakeholder Findings and Themes

The First Year Student

Getting to know people
Learning to work together
Creating connections
Enjoying the lecturer or student leaders
Settling into college life

Making friends
Understanding lecturers' expectations
Time management
Teamwork
Learning academic development skills

The Lecturer

Perceptions on first year challenges i.e. 'loneliness' and 'isolation'
Deprogramming first year students after the leaving certificate
Collaborating with colleagues
Issues with the module name, learning outcomes and assessments
Active learning teaching skills
First year student attitude post Leaving Certificate

Disconnection with other FYE initiatives
Challenge teaching to large groups
Classroom strategies
Managing attendance
Resourcing and supporting FYE initiatives
Creating learning communities
Creating the right classroom environment

The Senior Manager

Perceptions on first year student challenges i.e. 'lonely' and 'burnt out' post the Leaving Certificate examination
Retaining students on degree programmes
Institution attendance policy
Understanding the resources required to support first years

Implementing the learning, teaching and assessment strategy
Appointing institution leaders of the student experience
Institution learning and teaching strategy
School ownership and responsibility
Establishing committees and communications

Creating Connections

Making Friends

Understanding Expectations

Creating Learning Communities

Teaching Challenges

Supporting and Resourcing the FYE

Figure 5: Institute of Technology Business Student Experiences of LWP Sessions

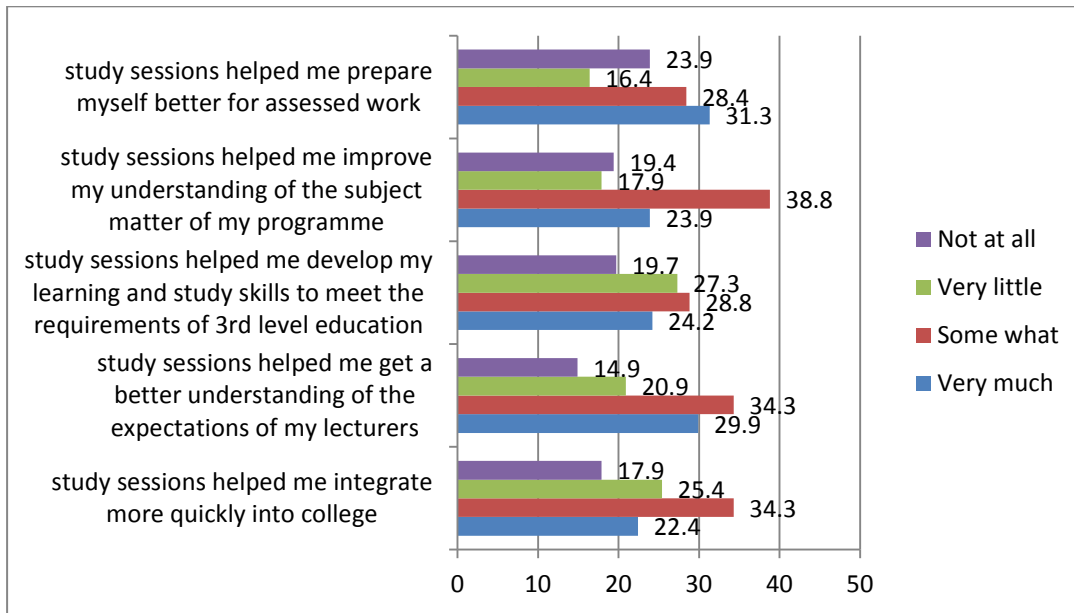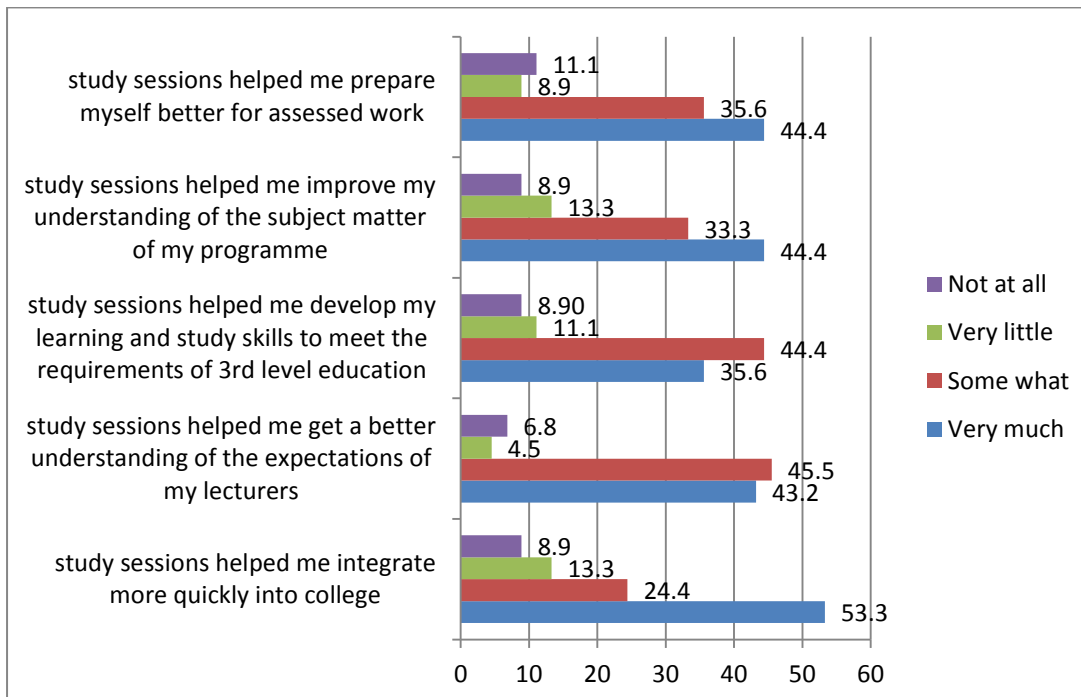Percentage (%) of respondents who agreed with the following statements:

Figure 6: University Business Student Experiences of LWP Sessions

Percentage (%) of respondents who agreed with the following statements:

Students were asked to describe how LWP has impacted on their learning and development. There was a range of open responses to choose from. On review of the questionnaire a number of themes were identified that summarise the student experience and their engagement with the higher education institution. The recurring themes students reported included: *learning to work together; getting a better understanding of lecturer's expectations; understanding how to approach assignments and exams; settling into college; help managing the workload; making friends and networking with the leaders.* Students reported that:

> It really helped by using past exam papers and going through the solutions together. More interactive and you don't feel like you are the only one having difficulties.
>
> Student, TB, Institute of Technology - 16:2

> Getting to know what second year students thought of the college was very informative. The problems they faced in first year are the same problems every student encounters while they are in college. They are able to give you advice on assignments which is very helpful. LWP leaders are roughly the same age as you so it is easy to relate to them and you can ask them for anything.
>
> Student, TB, University – 15:6

These comments indicate a positive impact on the students learning and development and demonstrates LWP supported the students' engagement with higher education. These comments highlight students' admission about how it helped them learn or settle in, which all links back to the challenges they felt coming into third level and how LWP helped them tackle the transition to higher education.

In contrast, some students expressed some negative experiences of LWP and believed it had made no impact on their engagement with their programme, for example:

> The LWP programme did not impact my learning and development in any way. It was not beneficial and I only attended because there was 10% for attendance.
>
> Student, TB, University -15:15

> It has not really impacted me at all to be honest. In saying this it is probably my own fault for not using it like I should have and engaged more when I was there.
>
> Student, TB, Institute of Technology – 16:22

Some comments show an acceptance that they should have tried harder to attend and take part. Other students were merely motivated by the percentage award and don't necessarily understand what the real gains may be in the weekly participation. This finding could indicate a need to further promote the purpose of LWP to the student body and engage more staff across an institute to get involved in supporting the programme.

Student Experience of the Skills Development Module (SDM)

The Skills Development Module on offer in both institutions was led by a lecturer and was contextualised to the discipline area/programme of study. Students in both higher education institutions were asked about how often they participated in specific learning tasks in the classroom, 77% of University students and 67% of IoT students indicated *(scale: often - very often)* they worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources. Approximately 62% of University students and 31% of IoT students indicated that they *'never'* discussed ideas from their class readings or class projects with their lecturer outside of class. The higher figure reported in the University can be attributed to the larger class sizes (i.e. approx. 300) allocated to one lecturer and it can be a difficult challenge to meet all students 'one to one' in a term. When students are split up into smaller groups in the University the class is led by a post graduate student. In contrast, in the IoT all classes and workshops are led by the lecturer and class numbers were smaller and ranged from 40 students on an applied business programme to approx. 160 students on the main traditional business degree. The smaller class numbers can help facilitate more time for one to one meetings. There were limited gaps however, in the weekly timetable for one to one meetings due to the economic pressures increased teaching hours per week as a result of national agreements and other environmental factors.

Delivering an oral and poster presentation was the most popular group assignment reported in both HEI's with over 80% of students engaging in this type of assessment. In second position was a photography/media project, again undertaken as a group assignment. Individual assignment methods experienced by the students included essays (over 90%/n=110 in both HEI's), open book tests, a log book/a reflective journal. The more applied assessment tools such as web page creation were experienced by more students in the IoT (66%) than in the University (33%). This was particularly evident in the IoT students undertaking an applied business programme (see Figure 6 below).

Figure 6: Institute of Technology Business Student Assignment Range
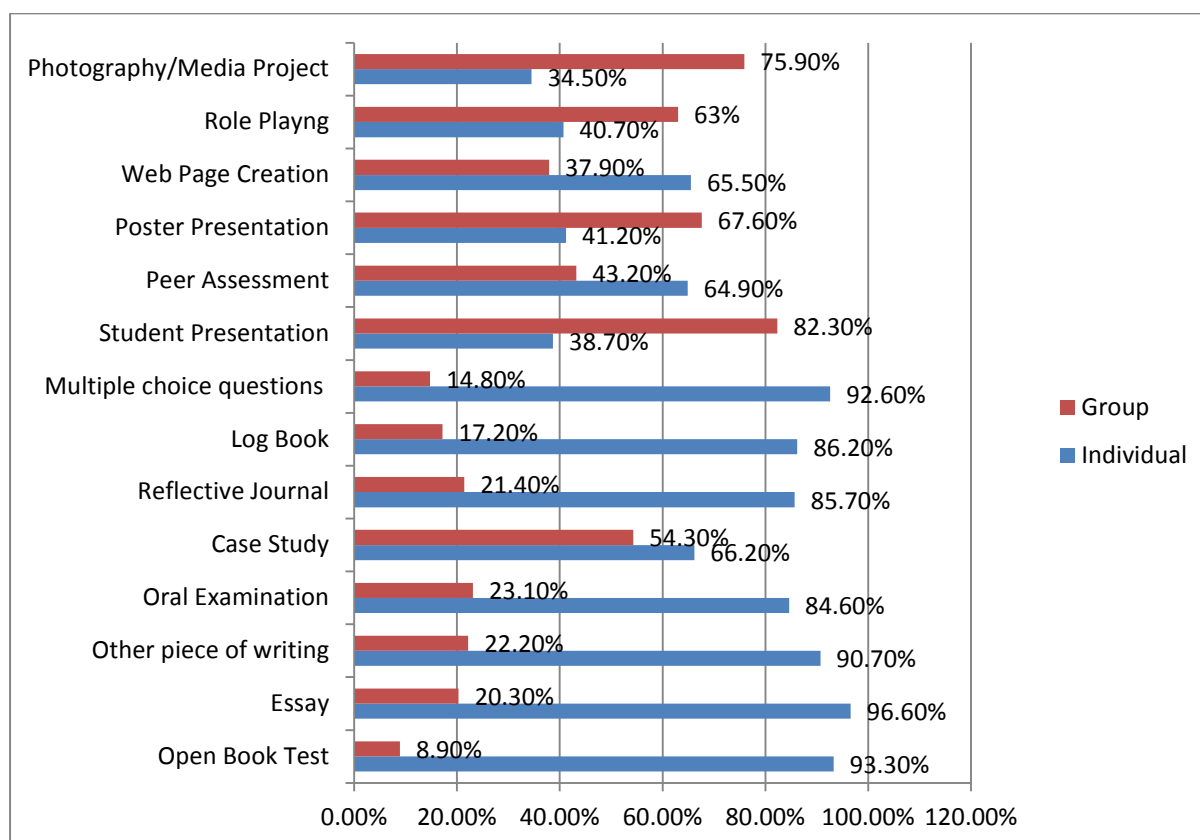
Where students described the activity they learned the most from and explained why, there was a mix of experiences reported and comments included: *referencing; learning styles; teamwork; essays; mind maps; presentations; creative problem solving; and research skills.* First years enjoyed discovering how they learn and their surprise at how much fun it could be. Some students noted that it was the only assignment on the course that they found of value.

In sections of the commentary, students focused their feedback on individual lecturers in relation to their sense of engagement with the module. This was particularly evident in the IoT findings and highlighted the practical elements that students experienced and why they valued this.

> This was a really fun and interesting class but that was only because of the lecturer I had. We were made interact and we really wanted to share our ideas and do well for him in our assignments. I don't think I would have understood plagiarism unless I had this class.
>
> Student, TB, Institute of Technology -28:26

> The teacher was very dynamic and worked with practical things that really helped me that time and after.
>
> Student, AB, Institute of Technology -25:32

21

Overall students indicated a positive experience with the SDM, with 84% in the IoT and in the University agreeing that '*it helped develop my learning and study skills to meet the requirements of third-level education*'. Similarly both HEI's agreed (over 80%/n=98) that the SDM '*helped me prepare myself better for assessed work on all modules (e.g., essays, projects, presentations, etc.) and exams*'. See Figure 7 and Figure 8 which present the experience from each higher education institution.

Figure 7: Institute of Technology Business Student Experience of the SDM

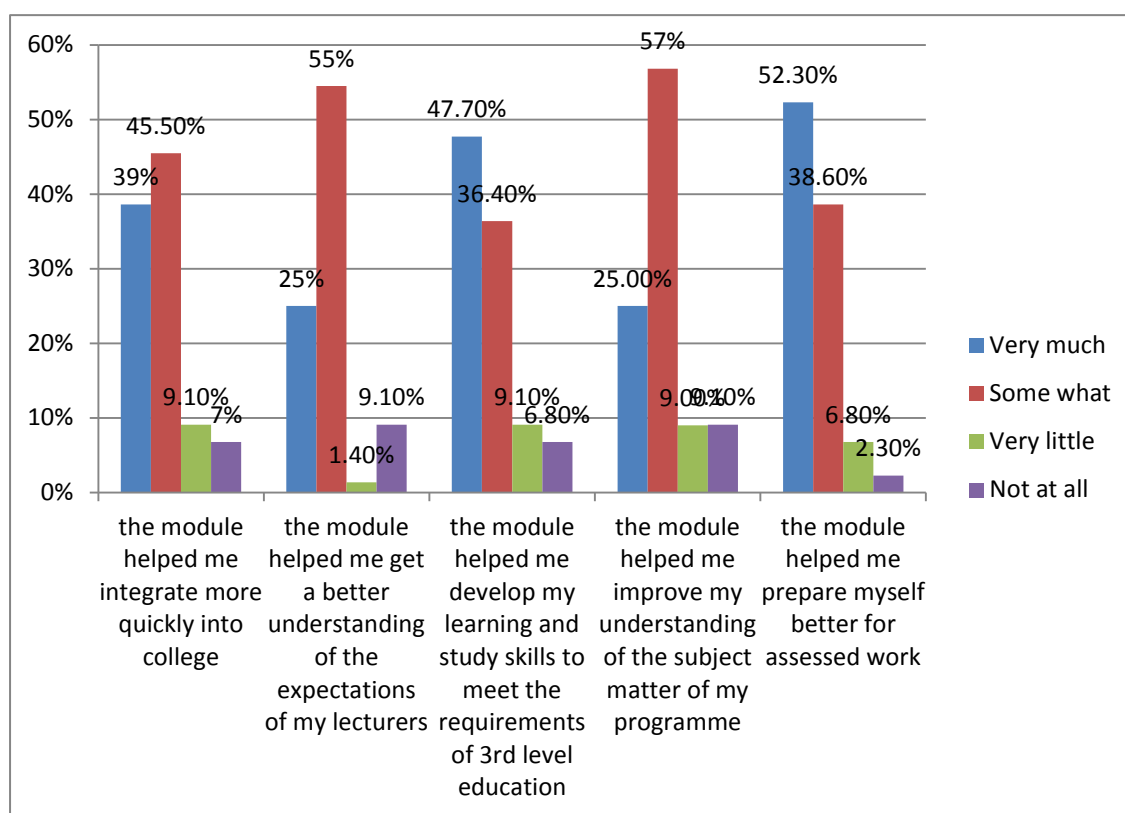Percentage (%) of respondents who agreed with the following statements:
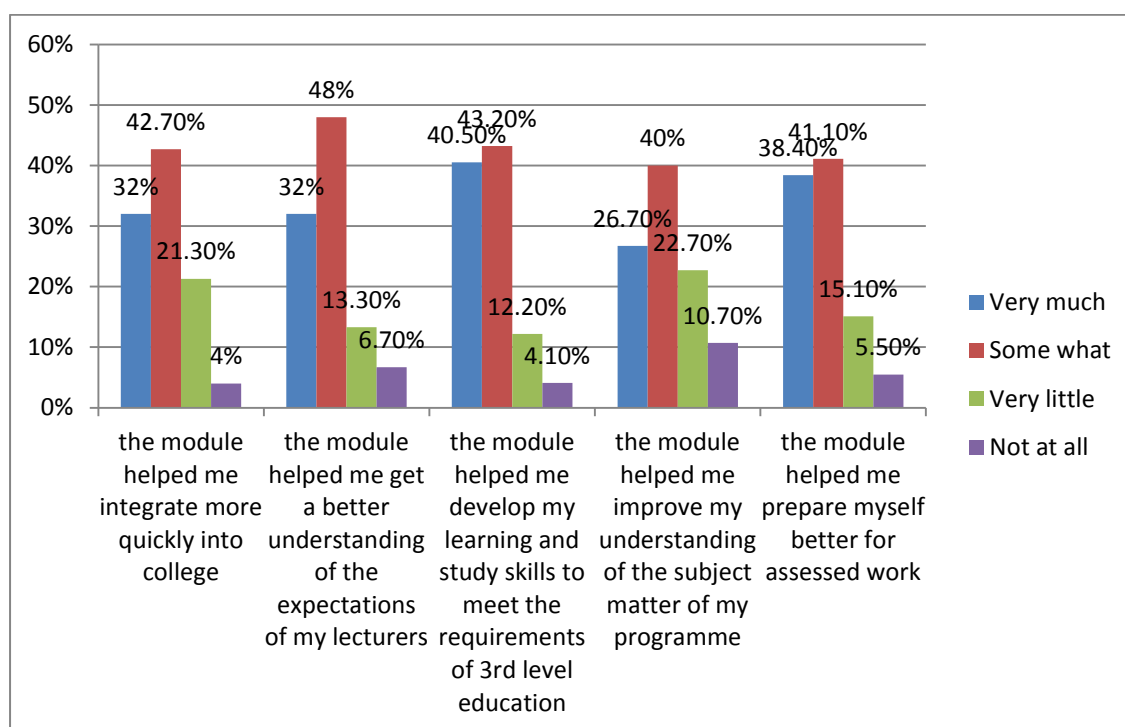
Figure 8: University Business Student Experience of the SDM

Percentage (%) of respondents who agreed with the following statements

Student Experience of LWP and SDM Overall

Students reported on how all of the first year experience initiatives (i.e. LWP and SDM) helped them develop as a student and contributed to their knowledge, skills, and personal development. In the IoT, students rated working with others and developing confidence as the main gains from 'both' FYE initiatives. They particularly felt that the SDM helped them learn on their own (62%), think critically and analytically (63%), write clearly and effectively (55%) and speak clearly and effectively (54%). In contrast the University students recognised common experiences in both the LWP sessions and the SDM on more levels than the IoT and this included: learning with other students/peers (61%); developing confidence (60%); working out problems (53%); working with others (58%); and learning on your own (50%). The high satisfaction responses from the University could be attributed to the fact that both initiatives in the University were linked in relation to assessment and participation and the students recognised the benefits of both and what they were trying to achieve. A finding from both institutions indicated that students in the University and in the IoT (45%) felt they did not develop skills in computing or IT from either FYE initiatives. This is an area that could be examined on review of the SDM learning outcomes.

The Lecturer Experience

The findings presented in this section relate to the lecturers' experience of teaching the Skills Development Module (SDM) to first year students in both institutions and this includes a range of perspectives on the issues and challenges in teaching SDM to first year students. The SDM lecturers in the IoT include a mix of business lecturers who teach communications, management, strategy, hospitality and languages. In the University the lecturers teach business, strategy and information technology and they are supported by post graduate students in delivering tutorials and workshops.

Common themes that emerged from the lecturers interviewed in both institutions include: *collaboration; disconnections; teaching skills; role and responsibilities; issues with the module name, learning outcomes and assessments; active learning teaching skills.*

Lecturers' Perspectives on the Issues and Challenges

A predominant theme that emerged from the interviews with the academics was the range of issues and challenges encountered while teaching the SDM. This covers two areas which relate to first year students making the transition and the challenges in teaching the module.

First Year Students Making the Transition

There is evidence of a consensus amongst the lecturers in both institutions in relation to first year students entering higher education, in terms of what they need and the impact the transition has on students, personally and academically. To begin, Martha offers her explanation, which describes the type of learner coming in to higher education, how this is a national problem we need to address, and suggests we need to manage learners effectively during their first year in college.

> It is evident that the traditional passive learning in our secondary schools is perhaps contributing to students' lack of ability to make that transfer, to transform themselves and I think it's not perhaps recognised nationally how serious this is... I think we might have a number of students who drop out at a particular point October or November because they haven't been able to make that transition... to take that step. They're not able to become self-directed learners and we would see this as well in a form of disaffection, a lack of involvement that they still expected to be force-fed information as opposed to going and seeking it out themselves.
>
> Martha, Lecturer, IoT AB- 1:9

Mary in the IoT explains how getting the right lecturers in first year is crucial:

> I think for first year students, if they do not engage in first year they are lost and I think it is really important that they get the right teachers for all their subjects not just for the SDM... and they have to be teachers that are trying to engage, motivate and whatever.
>
> Mary, Lecturer, IoT TB- 7:310

In contrast, Susan, from the IoT traditional business programme, highlights that mature students know what help they need entering higher education and value the academic development support.

> I think going back 4 years ago, it was exciting to have a module like the SDM coming in because most of the mature students and say on the likes of XXX programme, during the year they would ask for something like the study skills to be given to them because they were returning to education and they needed something to get them organised or to get themselves organised and you know into the study routine.
>
> Susan, Lecturer, IoT TB- 1:8

The role of prior professional experience is evident. Martha describes her past experience of teaching first years in the US, comparing it with her experience of learners in Ireland and how this motivated her to get involved in teaching the module. She notes that first year students, after the Leaving Certificate, lack the ability to express themselves.

> To contrast it with a totally different example would be the American system of education. I taught there years ago and young Americans are extraordinarily capable of verbalising information but the depth was not there. And in fact our Irish students were quite the contrary, they have quite a serious accumulation of knowledge and so it was a shame that they just weren't able to express it. And looking at that, you'd have them coming in and they'd still be passive learners but they just weren't able to express themselves and so one of the aspect that I remember being particularly conscious of when we were designing this module was that there should be an emphasis on oral.
>
> Martha, Lecturer, IoT AB- 1:27

From the University experience, Andrew notes the biggest issue facing first year students is loneliness and making friends.

> I think one of the biggest issues that most of these students face is loneliness. And if you permit that loneliness to start in first year, and it can often pervade their entire education. So, I have had students come to me and find that they're lost… when I've asked them to form groups and they said to me they don't know anybody.
>
> Andrew, Lecturer, University TB- 2:93

The diversity of learners in the classroom today – and their needs – is broadly recognised. In particular, the attitudes of first year students entering higher education for the first time who have just completed the Leaving Certificate.

> Irish students ... when they come straight out of second level education...they have a very utilitarian attitude in my opinion to education and it's a means to an end.
>
> <div align="right">Mary, Lecturer, IoT TB-2:90</div>

Rory also comments on the post Leaving Certificate student attitude, their behaviour and their expectations entering third level education. However, he notes how, in the University, they can come full circle and by year three they are a very different student to when they first started and perhaps it is 'the trauma' they go through transitioning to higher education that impacts their attitude in year one.

Ryan teaches an applied business programme in the IOT and talked more about the challenges relating to the *level of maturity; social needs and the impact this has had on attendance.*

> Maturity plus the fact that semester one is made up for first years and socializing to put it mildly and this has implications for attendance and attitude.... often it will be another semester....before they realise why they're here and what they're supposed to be doing.
>
> <div align="right">Ryan, Lecturer, IoT,   AB-3:103</div>

Furthermore Rory in the University describes first year students as 'burnt out from the Leaving Certificate experience' and this can have a negative effect on attendance. He explains how they have tried to tackle this with the advice of teaching and learning experts in the University who have advised the school to set up 'learning groups'.

> Some of them were saying they're so burnt out after their leaving certificate that this first year is just, you know, get used to University. Enjoy yourself. Take it easy. It doesn't actually count towards your overall degree, the computation to your overall degree. So that was a huge factor was burnout.... but the single biggest factor we found in our study was behaviour. That if your friends tended to go to class, you went to class. If you didn't go, they didn't go. Now this finding has led us this year in the School of Business to do something which indeed was recommended by our Centre for Learning and Teaching, was to set up this concept of learning groups.
>
> <div align="right">Rory, Lecturer, University, TB-3:102</div>

Challenges Teaching the Module

Overall there are similar challenges experienced by lecturers in both higher education institutions, however where the institutions differ is in relation to the actions and ideas that have been activated to help tackle the issues arising. To begin, Mary explains how the module is available college wide in the IoT. She feels it has too many learning outcomes and, as a result, it is difficult for her to get the balance right in just 13 weeks. Mary also talks about the problem with teaching this module to large groups, and her comments may

demonstrate tensions between theory and practice. She does however recognise that she has learned through trial and error and has changed her approaches along the way.

> You are starting off with the syllabus which is college wide... with multiple learning outcomes and I think there are too many learning outcomes for a 13 week period in my opinion to teach it well and in the depth that you like to teach it.... The class initially was probably a little too large to do the group work and maybe the way I approached it in the first year there was quite a lot of theory. There was practical work as well but I would feel that I definitely didn't get the balance right initially but I suppose to that extent like any subject you learn your way through it and you try things, they work or they don't work and you change and you evolve I suppose as you go on.

Mary, Lecturer, IOT, TB -1:20

Joe shares a similar experience of fragmentation with the module in the IoT and talks about the difficulties of teaching the module over 13 weeks and the impact this has had on the teacher and the student experience, and their overall perceptions of the module. He also identifies a disconnect from other modules on the programme and this could indicate that the module may not be delivering the original intended goals outlined (See Appendix 7).

> When I reflected back after year one, it was quite fragmented, you know, we're trying to do quite a lot in a 13-week period and they're all sort of quite distinct little things. So you spend two weeks on something, two weeks on something else, two weeks on something else and it's hard for the student... and from a teaching point of view. From organising it that's great because we're going to do 2 weeks of this, and 2 weeks of that and you can test each one in turn. But I think for the students, the fragmented nature of it, the fact that it's not as connected as maybe other modules are. They are not quite sure why we're spending time with this no matter how much we tell them. It also can be disconnected on occasion from the other modules that are taking place.
> Joe, Lecturer, IoT TB -1:28

From the University lecturers' perspective there seems to be no reported time challenges on the delivery of the module or even reference to the learning outcomes. However, one of the biggest challenges cited by Andrew related to teaching the module to large groups. This involves managing 300 first year business students in a theatre environment in addition to the organisation of break out groups of 25 students in workshop sessions which are facilitated by post graduate students. Given the size of the first year group it is a challenge for Andrew to keep the students engaged in a lecture theatre.

> Trying to engage 300 plus students in a room with some of these materials is a significant challenge. And particularly with students, in some respects, who want to be entertained and get bored very easily. So therefore when you're introducing academic content to them and trying to retain the retention can be a huge challenge.

Andrew, Lecturer, University TB- 4:164

A number of lecturers reported that some students have told them that they believe the module to be a waste of time and they have covered elements of this module in second level school in their transition year or a first year in another Institute of Technology. Other students however, expressed value in the module particularly mature students as it helps them adjust to the demands of third level education and get them on the right track from the start. Sarah explains:

> I suppose the challenge would be the students who feel it's a waste of time noting that they've done it before. Particularly students who may have covered elements of this in transition year....they might see it as they don't want to participate as much. A lot of the mature students like it because particularly with them being out of education for a while and it helps them in terms of you know, what's what and where things are and helps them to get them on track. So I think that would be the biggest challenge to try and bring the people who feel it's not for them with you.
>
> Sarah, Lecturer, IOT, AB-4:169

In response to tackling some of the challenges relating to students understanding the value of the module, Andrew has devised some approaches in the University to connect the skills module with other first year experience initiatives such as LWP in the form of assessment and this has helped tackle attendance levels and impacted students engagement with the module and their programme overall.

> So 10% of the credit for the module goes for attendance at peer-assisted learning sessions over the course of 10 weeks. So it's an incentive for them to attend. And many of them see the benefit in becoming a LWP leader because they're the students in many respects that grow the most as part of the LWP experience. So we would have 20 rooms scheduled for LWP sessions with… anything up to 40 LWP leaders working through those rooms.
>
> Andrew, Lecturer, University, TB- 2:28

In the IoT, on the other hand, there seems to be evidence of a disconnect between the LWP programme and the Skills Development Module in the applied business programme, where students reported that attendance is not required at both. Rebecca explains:

> People think they can choose SDM with LWP/PASS and say "Oh you don't have to attend" but you do have to attend. Sometimes with first years we have, in particular they kept saying "Oh you can't fail The SDM" but you can fail The SDM. I think they are confusing it with LWP/PASS. But sometimes with them being packaged together I think makes it difficult for students to differentiate, they kind of lump them together in their mind.
>
> Rebecca, Lecturer, IoT AB- 4:162

From the IoT findings presented in this Chapter there seems to be no tangible link between the two FYE initiatives and this stems from the fact there is no connected assessment in place between the SDM and LWP or evidence that an incentive exists for participation in LWP weekly sessions which could count towards the SDM. A change in

approach and development of connections between them may assist with promoting attendance and motivating the learners to engage better with their degree programme of study similar to the structure outlined earlier by Andrew in the University.

Teaching and Learning Strategies

To a large extent, the teaching and learning strategies deployed in both higher education institutions address the difficulties and challenges encountered by incoming first year students. Some differences exist however, depending on the individual teacher and their own teaching philosophy and approach. Some of the more creative examples of engaging students in the classroom came from the applied business programme in the IoT. Ryan explains his teaching approach for the SDM and how he linked this to the learning outcomes:

> Thankfully we were able to operate within small groups and if I went in without PowerPoint and without any notes and had some practical activities linked towards the learning outcome. Often we would climb on tables or walking doing all sorts of strange and bizarre and wonderful things that weren't directly associated to the academic work but at the end I could reveal the fact that it was. And I felt that that was a way of getting people engaged and getting them to come and if you stood there frostily telling them about how to structure an essay, then I find that they would quickly disengage. Attendance would suffer and marks would suffer and the module suffered as a result.
>
> Ryan, Lecturer, IoT AB- 1:26

Andrew comments on his teaching approach in the University, from day one, and the journey he takes the students on over a semester.

> So from day one, we start to take them through all the various skills that they potentially need, like academic writing, research skills, team-up skills, presentations, and engaging with the University in different ways. We actually get them to attend arts events, which is quite an interesting experience for business students, and one that they, perhaps initially, are reluctant to participate in. But over time, they do actually see the benefit of doing other things with their University experience. They also do peer-assisted learning as part of the SDM.
>
> Andrew, Lecturer, University TB- 1:42

Susan and Joe explain how they tried a new teaching approach in IoT traditional business programme and 'front-loaded' a lot of the module material over two days during the First Year Induction in September. They followed this up with a weekly workshop during the term. They found this worked effectively and students engaged well and it set a good tone for attendance and participation in other lectures in the first few weeks.

> The institute sort of gives us the day in which students register... so what we did last year was we front loaded a couple of the topics and we did two intensive days. Our own view was as it worked really well, on both days we had like high numbers. It was very, very active and got them to do the stuff overnight and so on and so forth. And we also... we felt that we set a kind of a work ethic type tone so that when our colleagues came back on stream in week two we know that attendance is really good the first couple of days. And we are... I have no problem patting ourselves in the back on the basis of having had a good week one but the wheels came off after that.
>
> Joe and Susan, Lecturers, IoT TB- 5:193

However, this positive start quickly diminished and students began to disengage, this poses many questions and whether there should be some continuity with the intensive active learning approach such as once a month in order to re-energise the students and keep them on the right track. Other approaches to keep the momentum going involve creating 'first year learning groups/communities', as Rory from University explained earlier, so that students can connect and collaborate on a more regular basis. LWP student leader session environments and Skills Development Modules can enable this but perhaps the secret to its success lies in the techniques lecturers choose that will engage students in learning activities and will keep them focused on their programme.

Ryan shares his experience of how he enjoys teaching and contextualising the module to the business discipline area.

> Yeah, whereas with other modules we teach and we have, you know, there's recommended reading or certain other authors or websites that are of liking to it. With The SDM the beauty of it is it can be randomized and we relate it to their studies. The resources that we use can come from any walk of life really.
>
> Ryan, Lecturer, IOT, AB- 4:163

Understanding different learning styles and designing teaching and assessment strategies is an ongoing challenge for lecturers. Mary from the IoT comments on this and questions whether engaging students in different types of assignments is worth while? She feels the module is not being consistently delivered across the institute, as lecturers have their own delivery styles and approaches and therefore the student experience differs.

> I think people engage with tasks in different ways. And there is probably different tasks for every learning style ...but to some extent I think that learning styles is less important even though I know it's core to the module but it is less important to the extent that they are going to meet lecturers that are going to have all sorts of delivery methods that aren't going to be tailored to their particular needs.
>
> Mary, Lecturer, IoT TB- 3:99

For the lecturers from the IoT applied business programme it is evident that practical and active learning approaches worked best with the class. Similar to Sarah's experience, Ryan explains how the non-academic approach and novel props and ideas worked well with his students.

> Well, like I said, the approach in which you try and teach it in the same way as any other form of academic module that we teach on. If you did it that way it wouldn't work. So you can't stand up with long PowerPoint's or great big handouts. It worked best when it was demonstrated in a non-academic fashion. So using all sorts of strange things... like in time management ... the jam jar idea.... that works fantastically well. Whereas if you... try to teach the same thing on a PowerPoint, you get a load of yawns, it would disengage students and they wouldn't come back. So I've got lots of ideas and I try to find enlighten them with puzzles, the MTA kits etc.... and there's a lot online and they've got MP3s ..
>
> Ryan, Lecturer, IoT AB- 2:60

Rebecca echoes these comments and promotes the active learning approach as the only way this module works effectively.

> I always thought I was right in doing games and role plays and different activities based on research and sometimes that may seem a little bit flaky. But now I feel confirmed in my belief because I can see it that it is really more active learning that works otherwise the students are sitting there just listening and writing stuff down. So this is the way to go.
>
> Rebecca, Lecturer, IoT AB- 3:93

From the University experience, it was noted that it is difficult to engage large groups in a theatre environment for this type of module. Therefore, the approach adapted in the University involved a lecture session led by the lecturer which introduced the topic, then a training session took place with the post graduate students, and then the postgraduate students ran the weekly skills development workshops with the first years. What has worked well with this approach is the set up of the learning communities which has provided continuity to the teaching and learning environment and enabled students to get to know each other and engage in a range of group activities. In addition, first year students get to practice study skills in the peer assisted learning environment which is led by the second year business students.

A positive teaching experience in the IoT, Martha shared, that engaged students well, involved a group photo project and Edward De Bono Thinking Hats.

> Ice breakers were very effective and then the next one was the group project which was the photo project. And again ... a certain amount of interaction involved and they learned the dynamics of group work.... they do that quite a bit in secondary, I know, but by the same token, it's again the reality of... we don't all work in isolation, we work as part of teams or we work as part of groups and this is the first step and this was the dynamic of a team, so you give them like Belbin's analysis of teams and get them to do a peer review. Another one that I found very effective … again it was a group discussion, on the use of lateral thinking ...*Edward de Bono*.... Another thing I found very good was our library support system.
>
> Martha, Lecturer, IoT AB- 4:69 & 5:214

An important aspect to the SDM identified by all lecturers in the IoT was the 'information skills' section of the module, which covered important aspects such as plagiarism and finding information from a range of academic journals and online sources. Martha in particular noted:

> In the beginning they really didn't understand the value of this but it is something that will stick with them.
>
> Martha, Lecturer, IoT AB- 5:214

In summary, from the University experience, the LWP programme was put in place first, and then the SDM followed a year later. This later adaption of the skills module in the University enabled the School of Business to form connections with the established LWP programme. As a result students in the University created a connection with both FYE initiatives and this has impacted on high attendance and participation. From the IoT

perspective the LWP programme and the SDM were introduced at the same time and titled the First Year Experience. However, no assessment connections were formed from the start so therefore students perceived them to be 'separate things' - one where you get credits and one where you don't, creating a disconnect and this can impact on attendance an participation overall.

Impact on the Lecturers

For both institutions there is evidence of reflection and learning for the lecturers involved in teaching SDM. The findings cover a broad range of ideas discussed - in particular *personal development, lessons learned and the impact on their teaching practice.* Lecturers also expressed the need for change and made recommendations in relation to: *the module descriptor; the module name; delivery modes; and institute resources.*

One recommendation made, from the IoT traditional business programme, is to rotate the teaching of the skills module so that every lecturer experiences teaching this module. From a staff development aspect this may help lecturers form assessment connections while also understanding first years better and enabling teaching teams to develop new skills in student engagement.

> Actually it might be no harm if everyone in the school delivered the SDM because it might actually get them in terms of helping to integrate with other assessments or other modules or the assessments in the SDM.
>
> Joe, Lecturer, IoT TB- 6:244

Furthermore, Andrew from the University commented on the ongoing professional training and development also needed by the post graduates where they need to get much better at the actual skill components being provided to first year students.

> And so a better program of academic writing and.... academic research might be two things I'd be certainly looking at. So for example, I would have tried to get the postgraduate students that I hire to run this programme trained in effective academic writing. But at an early stage, it became fairly evident that they needed to train in academic writing before they could even train other people.
>
> Andrew, Lecturer, University TB- 3:115

On a personal level, academics were asked to describe how involvement with SDM has impacted on changes in their teaching practice and perceptions of first year students. Susan from the IoT explains her experience with first years and what she has learned from the experience about engaging them from the start and getting them to think for them self.

> Maybe to me, it was great to see the likes of The SDM coming in and coming on board to help students to get a good start. You're trying to get them to think for themselves because they are so much into rote type learning. You know, you said "Well pick this topic and what do you think of it?" "Well I don't know, can I not take it off the internet or take from a book", and that kind of stuff. "Do you have an opinion on it?" "Not really". And that's all you get from them. They can't, they don't... they're not able to think for themselves. So for me I suppose it's a module that you're

trying to get them to open up and to think and to be able to analyse and evaluate ideas and to come up with something they have formed for them self.

<div align="right">Susan, Lecturer, IoT TB- 6:252</div>

Ryan adds to this about the impact on lecturers and the students:

The module has had value from the teaching perspective and the learning perspective. There are ways in which it has changed me as a teacher and there's ways in which the learners should've been developed if they'd been paying attention and playing the game.

<div align="right">Ryan, Lecturer, IoT AB- 7:294</div>

Some examples of the lessons learned involve assessment practice and engaging learners effectively. For example, there is a sense the lecturer has missed an earlier opportunity in designing a main assessment that meets multiple learning outcomes. Mary from the IoT explains:

There are eight learning outcomes and if you are doing it correctly and hitting each of the eight learning outcomes. When you take the reflective journal ... this is where you can hit a lot of them ... if you take that out of the equation and they're all very different. You can't hit some of them with the same assessment tools, you hit them differently. So I have tried building more assessments in class so that it is not quite as onerous for the students. So do I think that I have got it right? No, but I think it is a lot better and I was told previously like you should look for good enough not perfection, I am probably at the good enough stage.

<div align="right">Mary, Lecturer, IoT TB- 5:230</div>

Rory from the University describes how he has learned to make it clear to students from Year One what it takes to achieve a 2.1 degree. He firmly believes setting the goals to be achieved from day one can have an impact on students.

I give very clear messages in class... I mean, I always kick off the class with "here are the learning outcomes we expect you to achieve today from this module and from reading the additional material". You stress then that they have to go off and do the external reading. You make it very clear to them what a first class honours entails, and a 2.1 or a 2.2 and the University has actually got a document which outlines what's required at each of these levels.

<div align="right">Rory, Lecturer, University TB- 5:217</div>

In relation to the module descriptor, a number of recommendations came from the IoT and link to improving student engagement with the module in the future.

The module needs to be looked at and picked out what would be most relevant for the first year of entry. What's most relevant for them and then look at maybe aspects of it that could be embedded into and taught later on in later modules because it has more significance at that point in time. You know that it could be led as a set or the whole thing in citation. You can spend loads of time on that. To first years, who are not going to apply it all in first year, it just goes over their heads.

<div align="right">Sarah, Lecturer, IoT AB- 6:261</div>

Overall there were strong arguments made by the lecturers in both institutions for introducing some changes to SDM including: creating connections; changing the module name; combining learning outcomes; changing the assessment strategy; changing delivery modes such as front loading some material during induction and considering a blended learning approach; and a critical element cited was the group size and what could be achieved by reducing groups to a manageable size. Many talked about working with limited resources and the institutions management aspirations and expectations to deliver a first year student experience that meets all their needs. However, the reality that academics and institutions are faced with is a limited budget, a depletion of resources and perhaps an inability to truly meet the strategic goals set down.

The Senior Managers' Experience

The senior managers in each HEI clearly recognise the challenges first year students face and the impact the Leaving Certificate exam has on their transition to higher education. Dylan explains how daunting the new environment can be for first years in an IoT:

> Getting used to the scale of the organisation and ... being responsible for their own learning, compared to the type of environment that they leave in secondary. It's the adjustment from the philosophy of the leaving cert ... which is completely focused on exams and points and rote learning, as we know, in most cases.
>
> Dylan, Manager, Institute of Technology, 1:6

Cillian talks about the role of the University Academic Council and their efforts to drive support for the first year experience:

> The Academic Council has been discussing first years for a little while now ... they've been trying to encourage different colleges to focus a lot more on the first year experience because they've realised it's crucial for retention and getting students into good habits in terms of learning and study.
>
> Cillian, Manager, University, 1:34

In addition, Cillian comments on how the University has invested in an academic writing centre, a maths centre and a computing and IT support centre which act as additional supports for students struggling in these areas. In particular there has been quite a lot of emphasis placed on monitoring attendance of first years and a range of policies have been put in place to tackle this. For example following up with students when they don't attend class can be quite effective.

> Sometimes a small recognition can make a big difference... or example... if students get a text message or email ... saying 'we've noticed that you've not been attending, if there are any issues please come and see us'. That can sometimes have an incredibly powerful impact on an individual student and help get them back.
>
> Cillian, Manager, University, 2:73

The measures put in place in the University seem to focus on encouraging the school to monitor attendance so that they can identify the students who might need a little bit more help and support.

> Because sometimes the students feel very isolated individually or they don't want to talk about their problems ... and sometimes their problems are academic... or they might be personal and there might be things that we can fix quite quickly.
>
> Cillian, Manager, University, 2:84

Dylan talks about the responsibility of higher education institutions to guide and support first years in their learning.

> So they're coming into third level but in general, they're coming in from a very structured, handheld environment and our challenge is to support them, inform them, assure them that they've made the right choice and assist them in the type of learning and the change to the learning environment.
>
> Dylan, Manager, Institute of Technology, 1: 41

Dylan claimed that the First Year Experience programme represented a significant and effective output of the SIFII programme.

> I think it's fantastic that we have the First Year Experience. We got that through the SIFII project and having been an advocate of that from the very inception of it, I'm absolutely supportive of it and that it must be maintained. I'm trying to maintain both legs of the First Year Experience because I promote the First Year Experience as being the LWP Programme and the Skills Development Module. They're two halves of the same coin.
>
> Dylan, Manager, Institute of Technology, 3: 112

Dylan also recognised there are some problems that need to be worked through to sustain the programme long term. For example, the decision to make the SDM mandatory for all programmes from the start - he believes this has resulted in some negative feedback internally.

> We have problems on both fronts. First of all, like the LWP programme is difficult to support with the current recession and with the constraints of the Employment Control Framework[4]. The SDM is under threat from ourselves which is hard to figure out because everybody external who looks at what we're doing thinks it's fantastic… so we're beating ourselves up because the idea came from management rather than from academics.
>
> Dylan, Manager, Institute of Technology, 3:118

Furthermore Dylan argues retention is one of the biggest factors for holding onto a first year skills module.

> It is 5 credits out of 240 of a programme, which is almost insignificant by way of a credit impact but it is usually significant from the connectiveness of the student to the organisation and the

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[4] Employment Control Framework (ECF): Under the National Recovery Plan 2011-2014, and in accordance with the Programme of Financial Support for Ireland agreed with the EU/IMF, the Government is committed to reducing the cost of the public sector paybill by, inter alia, reducing public sector numbers to 294,700 by the end of 2014, equating to an average annual reduction of approximately 3,300 in the number of serving public servants over the next 4 years.

impact that it could have on improving retention. Our biggest problem of first year is retention. If we have two elements that we feel are supporting retention, why would we dissolve and take it away when it is deemed to be working?

<div align="right">Dylan, Manager, Institute of Technology, 3:141</div>

Dylan believes the programme is working well for the students, the lecturers and staff who are actually teaching it. The people that may be criticising the programme he argues that 'they are the people who don't know anything about it, which makes a statement in its own right'.

By contrast, Cillian explains how the first year University experience is very different in all the colleges in the University. It seems the only commonality between the colleges is the University attendance policy for first years, with its core objective being to track students and to act as an early warning device to follow up on students at risk. However, a significant strategic development in supporting students at all levels consistently across the University was the appointment of a Vice President of the Student Experience. Cillian explains the new role came about as a result of a lot of restructuring which has taken place in the last 3 years:

Re-writing all modules and restructuring 53 departments to 16 schools.. also there were all these different support services for students, and now effectively they have all been brought together.. It made more sense to have everyone together as one team than to have all the fragmentation. But it's meant a kind of change in the environment. The vice president for the student experience has been overseeing that. The various units of all had quality review with recommendations about how these processes can be changed.

<div align="right">Cillian, Manager, University, 13:566</div>

Furthermore the VP of the Student Experience works closely with the University Director for Learning and Teaching on developing strategy and policies and chairs the University committee which oversees a range of first year experience initiatives.

Dylan and Cillian talked about strategic plans that have been agreed and policies in progress to support first years and learning and teaching developments in both HEIs. In addition, learning and teaching strategies outline goals and objectives in relation to the first year experience. Looking to the future, Dylan explains how the IoT is going through programmatic review in 2013-14 and plans are in place to create un-denominated programmes in a range of disciplines in order to provide a longer adjustment period for first years which will assist retention efforts.

We are looking at perhaps... creating a common first semester for first years per discipline area… so if somebody comes into Engineering, and they are not quite sure is it civil or mechanical… they deal with the generic fundamentals of Engineering, base engineering experience… they then decide where they're going to specialise in from the second semester. This means a fairly significant programme redesign to facilitate that. Within that first semester, you also have your SDM and LWP... So if we can get that through, first of all and it's where national policy is going.

<div align="right">Dylan, Manager, Institute of Technology, 2:70</div>

Similarly, Cillian comments on the programme changes taking place in the University. In particular there is a big focus on graduate attribute skills and the VP of the

Student Experience and the Director of Learning and Teaching have been working closely with the Careers Office and programme boards on redesigning programmes so that it is clear to students what they are actually gaining from the modules and degree they are undertaking.

> So we want to think "what should a typical University graduate be capable of doing?". So that's one of the policy or the strategy areas as well is to look at the graduate attributes and not to come up with... A lot of universities have graduate attributes statements which are very bland and general… We're much more interested in something we can actually stand over and measure. So that's going to be a challenge... we are selecting the kind of key employable, transferrable skills that can be woven into the degree programme right from the very beginning, right from first year.
>
> Cillian, Manager, University, 18:798

Cillian goes on to comment on the structure of the learning and teaching strategy. He explains that the responsibility lies with each college in the University to come up with ideas in managing retention and to deal with students at risk.

> The way the learning, teaching, and assessment strategy would phrase it was saying that basically schools and colleges have to come up with their own mechanism for monitoring and dealing with students and identifying students at risk. So it does give them freedom to do things and some things would work in certain subjects but not in others.
>
> Cillian, Manager, University, 5:191

In contrast Dylan talks about an institute wide strategy to tackle retention that is consistent across all schools and campuses.

> We have a retention report and a policy being developed where the First Year Experience is coming through very strong because evidence shows that if you can retain students, you're going to actually be able to enhance your budget. Students equal money and that equals class materials and other initiatives that you want to engage in. So we're putting a lot of effort into recruiting students and we're not putting quite the same effort into keeping them. I think there are lots of things we can do there.
>
> Dylan, Manager, Institute of Technology, 5:194

A committee has been established in the University with responsibility for learning and teaching and this is made up of members from all the colleges. They meet twice a semester and look at the learning and teaching assessment policy and the teaching reports of the different colleges and then try to monitor things. Cillian explained that the 'first year is one of the outstanding items on their agenda, the first year experience' and adds why it is working well. He believes it is down to the people who are the vice deans of teaching and learning who 'have a lot of work on their plates but they're very active'.

> So the committee is not just a committee of people who are just waffling.... they use the committee as a way of sharing ideas, sharing of what's going on in each colleges... And they are also making recommendations for policy to a University. So it's kind of a bottom up approach as well. So the committee technically is a group that writes the learning and teaching assessment strategy. So they draft it, send it to the academic management team, which is basically the deans and it's kind of endorsed from there.
>
> Cillian, Manager, University 5:212

Dylan describes an impact in the Institute of Technology where and Education Development Centre has been established to support the implementation of a learning and teaching strategy.

> One of the key things, I suppose, is the setting up of the Education Development Centre, to support staff to sort of engage in pedagogy better so that they can connect with the digital age student better and use the new technologies and so on and so forth. I meant that's the fundamental change in the organisation for the past couple of years. I think following on from the SIF project, this is the most fundamental change that's happened… I can really see it taking off because it's a bottom-up initiative, it's being owned by the staff, and that's the best possible way of launching any initiative.
>
> <div align="right">Dylan, Manager, Institute of Technology, 5:201</div>

Cillian explains that the University learning and teaching strategy is now in its second term of development. In particular he explains it is very broad ranging, but it was written, in a way, as a handbook. 'So rather than being one of these normal kind of policy formats we tried to make it a little bit different' (14:612). So the strategy focuses on outlining steps and processes to managing and empowering all learners effectively.

> Much of the research carried out on transition to first year has been driven by issues on student retention and withdrawal, so what we need to do now is to move away from that and think about the support and the engagement and the empowerment of all learners... It's trying to say to students that "it is frustrating if you don't actually manage to fulfil as much of your potential as you could... so we want to try and make sure that first year is a positive experience for you" it sets a good path on the behaviour.
>
> <div align="right">Cillian, Manager, University 14:632</div>

Cillian explains that the University Learning and Teaching Committee are interested in what students are involved in, such as clubs and societies, as they are part and parcel of the experience and there are much closer linkages to be formed for example 'if they get really involved in these societies then they can take that as part of the University volunteering experience'.

In relation to managing peoples' time more effectively to support first years, Dylan shares his experience of managing in the current economic climate. He talks about 'working smarter' by deploying new approaches to teacher-class contact time and diverting this time into areas such as mentoring roles to support first year students and work based learning.

> One way is the contact hours framework. The second way is by introducing a workplace element on all programmes in third or fourth year and by allocating the resource freed up as a consequence of doing that back into the school for its operation. So now the school has that bank of hours to actually support initiatives that are relevant to teaching and learning as in retention in first year.
>
> <div align="right">Dylan, Manager, Institute of Technology, 6:250</div>

In conclusion there seems to be a common consensus among the senior managers in both institutions that first years: are important; need to be managed effectively; are of great value; need to be kept focused and on the right track in order to retain them. Similarly both managers recognise the additional HEI supports that need to be provided to students to help

retain them on a programme through specialist centres in writing, maths and computing. On the other hand, I have actively looked for evidence from the senior managers' perspectives and they seem to have made no reference to creating the 'ideal resource team or cost model' which supports the first student experience effectively. For example the lecturers' in the University explained about managements' aspirations to support the student experience and yet there are many obstacles holding this back due to limited resources. The question the lecturers' struggle with is how do we overcome this? How can we deliver an adequate student experience with limited resources to support it?

> And in fairness to the University has an aspiration, to really drive on with the student experience in first year. But it's at the very time when like all other institutions are heavily resource-constrained. So therefore, how do you get blown out of a storm?

Andrew, Lecturer, University TB- 6:25

The managers' talk about the current economic climate and the pressures they are under in maintaining programmes, however the findings seem to indicate a need from the lecturers' perspective for management to agree an operational resource model in parallel to the policy and/or strategic plan. An example of this view point came through from the University experience:

> What tends to happen is ... there's some University policy then the schools are told to go do something about this with no resources.

Rory, Lecturer, University TB- 9:382

Furthermore, the challenges seem to be greater in the Institute of Technology in allocating adequate resources to support first year experience initiatives. An example of this indicated the stress lecturers' are under as a result of large class sizes.

> We have to teach stress management... clearly walking in.... the students are not the one with stress. So we are the ones that are being stressed with the hundred and fifty of them sitting in front of us and if it was the policy that it would be delivered in small groups and then having them for a number of hours having to reach a hundred and fifty students ... should never have been allowed.

Joe, Lecturer, IoT T- 11:483

In the University, resource allocation did not emerge as the main discussion from the senior managers' perspective. The formation of the first year experience and learning and teaching committees and the appointment of a VP of the Student Experience are all playing important roles in keeping the discussion on first year issues active in the University. However, the findings seem to indicate that there is just not enough administrative support on the ground to support the operational side of first year experience initiatives. Therefore in the absence of responses from the managers on how to resource FYE initiatives effectively, there seems to be a lack of understanding in what is the ideal operational FYE resource team that could ultimately meet an institution's financial and strategic objectives.

Conclusions

This study set out to investigate the impact of first year experience initiatives i.e. a Learning With Peers programme (LWP) and a Skills Development Module (SDM) in two higher education institutions in Ireland (an Institute of Technology and a University). This study explored student and staff engagement with these initiatives. It also explored whether these initiatives informed changes in teaching practice and institutional policy. This final section of the paper concludes with the major findings of the study. The conclusions are presented under three headings, which connect to the major themes that emerged in this study and include: *Creating Connections and Student Learning Communities; Teaching and Learning Collaborations; Managing and Resourcing the First Year Experience.*

Creating Connections and Student Learning Communities

This study found that there are a range of approaches that can impact first year student engagement in their learning and college life. Feedback from the first year students indicates that LWP and the SDM had a social and academic impact on their student experience. In particular first year students noted specific lecturers of the SDM and the LWP student leaders who made the first year experiences worthwhile. LWP impacted the students more on a personal and social level due perhaps to the informal setting and the fact it was led by senior students from the same degree programme. Students made a connection with senior years and gained an understanding on what comes next and how to tackle a range of issues that arise in adjusting to third level. With the SDM, students felt this provided a structured academic development learning environment where they were assessed and gained credits. They also acknowledged that the secondary school Leaving Certificate examination did not prepare them adequately on how to study and learn at third level. This echoes the national debate on issues surrounding the Leaving Certificate examination (Hunt, 2011).

Further connections were formed through participation in the SDM class challenges and through group assignments. The assignments in the SDM played an important role in developing academic skills and connecting this to their course of study. Consequently as first year students make connections early on in the first year, this can impact positively on their involvement and participation in the initiatives. If students fail to make connections with other aspects of their degree programme, this can have a negative impact on their engagement with the higher education institution.

This study found that students need to be incentivised to participate and engage in first year experience initiatives through either the institution attendance policy, credits and/or through assignments. An assessment for example, needs to be challenging and include many active learning tasks. Students appreciate when there is something interesting to do and when there are many outputs to be gained from tackling an assignment. Therefore, the assessment strategy for the SDM is critical and needs an annual review and evaluation among the teaching teams involved in order to maximise student engagement and support the objectives of the first year experience initiatives.

A further idea that emerged from this study is the impact of creating learning communities among first year student groups. This was particularly evident in the University where students made further connections between LWP and the SDM due to fact the learning group they were assigned for the year was the same for all tutorials, workshops, SDM classes and LWP study sessions. To conclude, lecturers and senior managers of first year experience initiatives need to consider - at the programmatic review and design stages - what connections can be made with other modules, assessments or programmes, as it can be a powerful approach to gain buy-in and commitment from first year students.

Teaching and Learning Collaborations

A wide range of experiences was shared by the lecturers as a result of their engagement with the first year initiatives. One of the main impacts on the lecturers teaching the SDM is the emergence of a collaborative culture and the sharing of resources - this was particularly strong in the Institute of Technology. Due to the active nature of the module, lecturers were keen to learn how their colleagues approached topics such as time management, plagiarism and discovering learning styles. In the University, staff agreed to form a connection between LWP and the SDM from the beginning through a credit participation incentive scheme and this resulted in a higher student attendance rate in the LWP sessions.

Most lecturers agreed that active learning teaching skills and placing the right teachers with first year groups were crucial to engaging students. In fact, many suggested that all lecturers should experience the challenge of teaching first years the SDM, as it would help lecturers understand first year students better and influence their own personal development as a higher education teacher.

Other considerations that emerged from the lecturers' experience of teaching the SDM included issues with the module descriptor. In particular, in the IoT the module name, assessments and learning outcomes came under scrutiny. In addition, lecturers felt there were inconsistencies in relation to the teaching approaches. In the University, it was more about the need to deploy a wider range of active learning techniques in the lecture theatre environment and designing a training programme for the post graduate students to support delivery of the SDM workshop classes.

To conclude, creating and sustaining 'first year experience teacher learning communities' presents obvious benefits to higher education institutions. Such communities can provide a regular forum for colleagues to share issues, challenges, resources and their teaching experiences. This approach can have a real impact on engaging first year students. However, there are a number of issues lecturers' face which can prevent this from happening due to the current economic pressures on higher education institutions and the changing landscape in higher education in Ireland.

Managing and Resourcing the First Year Experience

This study found that the first year experience features explicitly in a range of policies, committees, strategic plans and the learning and teaching strategies in both institutions. Since the implementation of the first year experience initiatives such as LWP and the SDM, strong statements form part of the strategic plans and there is greater emphasis now placed on the first year experience for discussion on learning and teaching committees. There seems to be a mismatch, however between what the senior managers say they are doing for the first year experience and what the lecturers say is actually happening on the ground. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that the higher education managers have great aspirations, ambitions and ideas for supporting and driving the first year experience agenda across the organisation. However, with not enough resources allocated to support the FYE effectively this could result in first year students disengaging from their programme.

Both lecturers and managers allude to the area of ownership and responsibility of the FYE. For example, in the University, the manager noted that each College in the University is responsible for managing the first year experience and they are supported by the University VP for the Student Experience. On the other hand, in the IoT there seems to be no defined role that directly manages the overall Student Experience for the Institute. Good structures were reported on that support the LWP programme across the IoT however, there seems to be no central management of the SDM. There is a view from management they are connected and they form the FYE for the IoT but they are not connected in the eyes of the students or the lecturers involved. For both initiatives to be successful and meet long term goals on retention they need to work in tandem. In order to achieve in a higher education institution, a dedicated resource/office for 'managing the student learning and teaching experience' needs to be established that supports the academic and social development of the students in first year and beyond, supports teaching staff collaboration initiatives and drives innovation in learning and teaching.

With regard to policies and procedures, a new retention policy is in progress in the IoT as a result of the first year experiences initiatives outlined in this study. This is a positive outcome. For staff to buy into a retention policy in any higher education institution they need to be assured that it is not a list of aspirational statements. A retention policy needs to set targets and key performance indicators and all of this needs to be backed up by an implementation and resourcing plan.

Taking a long term view of supporting the first year experience in higher education, institutions need to understand how to manage retention effectively. Designing and implementing attendance policies is one output that seems to be impacting the first year students' engagement with their programme in the University. Resourcing and supporting the first year experience however, seems to be an ongoing problem in the current economic climate. With forecasts estimating 300% growth in higher education participation globally by 2030, institutions need to plan for and build on the resources required to support and retain students at third level. Without adequate resource planning today, the problems will only multiply in the future and may reach a point where the FYE initiatives are abandoned to the

detriment of the student experience. Therefore, the key goals of higher education institution senior managers need to involve creating the right structures to support the FYE by:

- appointing institution leaders to manage and co-ordinate the entire first year student experience that connects LWP, SDM and other initiatives that emerge;
- assigning school ownership and responsibility for FYE initiatives;
- implementing an attendance policy and monitoring impacts;
- setting annual targets and regularly reviewing the institutions committees that support the FYE;
- establishing student learning communities that link to all modules on the students' degree programme;
- reviewing the SDM assessment strategy and creating connections with LWP and other student engagement incentives;
- establishing an institution marketing communications group to promote FYE initiatives to first year students;
- supporting 'a FYE teaching collaboration group' and a mid semester event that enables lecturers and LWP student leaders to share resources and showcase experiences.
- working with LWP student leaders and the Students' Union as partners in the development and review of first year experience academic and social initiatives.

Therefore in order to support the first year experience in higher education, the allocation of the right resources and an annual implementation and review plan are critical to sustaining initiatives such as LWP and the SDM and others long term.

Overall this study has contributed to the body of knowledge on supporting the first year experience in higher education. Firstly, first year students' value teachers that connect with them and they also need to be able to connect pieces of their learning and experiences together in order to drive engagement and participation in their degree programme. Secondly, this study has provided insight into the lecturers' experiences of teaching the SDM and how this has informed their perceptions of first year students and influenced changes to the module going forward to further enhance student engagement. Finally, this study has highlighted a lack of understanding that can exist at the senior management level in higher education institutions on what it really takes from an operational perspective to resource and support first year experience initiatives effectively. This seems to be a critical requirement from the lecturers' perspective, as without commitment from the managers' to resource first year experience initiatives effectively, staff and students will eventually lose interest and may disengage.

Future Research Work

There are a number of opportunities that could be explored further in future studies to build on the findings presented in this research study. The challenge for national higher education policy makers, leaders and policy researchers alike is to ensure that the first year experience is being evaluated on a local and national level and this informs best practice in learning, teaching and student support in Irish Higher Education Institutions.

To start a National Student Engagement Survey (www.studentsurvey.ie) was piloted in Ireland in 2013 and was released nationally in 2014. This national student engagement survey presents opportunities for researchers at a local level in higher education institutions to gain a deeper understanding of the first year student experience on an annual basis. To strengthen this work and connect with the teacher experience, an academic engagement survey and research study would produce valuable data on teaching challenges, issues, lessons learned, resource requirements and lots more. Other possible research studies that would contribute to the literature on the first year experience and inform best practice in teaching and learning include:

- Exploring the impact of LWP and the SDM on other discipline groups.
- Undertaking a longitudinal study and following a group of first years from a range of disciplines over a four year degree programme and examining how and where LWP or the SDM has contributed to their learning and development.
- Exploring the role and impact on student leaders from senior years who act as facilitators of learning and lead first year groups in peer assisted learning sessions.
- Undertaking an ethnographic study which explores best practice for higher education executives (national and international) responsible for managing the student experience.

Final Words

This study helps broaden our understanding of the first year student experience, teaching practice and supporting students effectively at third level. There are many stakeholders and environmental factors that help first years make a successful transition to higher education. To begin, students' need to be motivated to learn and are willing to engage. In parallel to this, lecturers need to work collaboratively with colleagues in creating engaging learning materials and tasks. Furthermore, a number of factors influence the students' first year experience including their peers, the learning environment, teaching techniques, incentives and the style of assessments. Overall, students want to connect and belong and this seems to be critical to making a successful first year transition and progressing. To achieve this, students need signposts to guide them in the process of 'settling in'. Many have high expectations and perhaps institutions need to provide 'a visual roadmap' at regular intervals during the first year which highlights all the connection points of their course to keep them on the right track.

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