Supporting the first year experience in higher education: impact on student engagement, teaching practice and institutional policy

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis, which I submit to NUI Galway for examination in consideration of the award of a M.Litt. in Education is my own personal effort. I have not already obtained a degree in NUI Galway or elsewhere on the basis of this work. Furthermore, I took reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and, to the best of my knowledge, does not breach copyright law, and has not been taken from other sources except where such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text.

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Date _____

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I 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.

The main aim of this study is to explore the first year experience over two higher education institution sites. It investigates how two initiatives (i.e. the LWP and the SDM) impact student engagement, teaching practice and institutional policy. The major themes discussed in the literature review include: the first year experience; student engagement; teaching, learning and assessment strategies; and change management.

The paradigm chosen for this study is mixed methods. The research strategy is a case study, exploring and explaining the first year experience initiatives across two sites including an Institute of Technology and a University. The data collection tools include a first year student survey and semi structured interviews with lecturers and senior managers. Challenges encountered during the research process included survey design, data collection approach, doing insider research and conducting interviews.

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' in what is the 'ideal operational resource team' that would support first years effectively and ultimately meet an institution's financial and strategic objectives.

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V LIST OF ACRONYMS

ECTS	European Credit Transfer System
FYE	First Year Experience
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
HEI	Higher Education Institute
IPA	Institute of Public Administration
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAL	Peer Assisted Learning
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SCEQ	Student Course Experience Questionnaire
SDM	Skills Development Module
SIF	Strategic Innovation Fund

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Study Aim

The main aim of this study is to explore the first year experience over two higher education institutions in Ireland (an Institute of Technology and a University). This study 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). It also explores how these initiatives have informed changes in teaching practice and institutional policy.

1.1.1 Research Questions

The research questions are divided into three key areas. Each question relates to a different stakeholder and explores the impact of first year experience initiatives on students, lecturers and institutional managers responsible for instigating change and developing policies. The questions include:

1. How is engagement with the first year experience initiatives (i.e. LWP and SDM) impacting on the students' experience with higher education?
2. How is the lecturers' involvement with the first year experience initiatives influencing changes in their teaching practice?
3. What are the senior managers' perspectives and how are the first year experience initiatives informing institutional change?

1.2 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 addition, there are a number of private providers. The institutes of technology and universities offer recognised awards from level 6 to 10 on the National Qualifications Framework (NFQ)[1]. The Higher Education Authority (HEA)[2], established on a statutory basis in 1971, administers and co-ordinates support, planning and state funding for higher level

[1] www.nfq.ie
[2] www.hea.ie

institutions, in addition to promoting equality of access to, and excellence within, higher education (IPA, 2009). Ireland's growth in higher education participation has been remarkable by OECD standards; 'participation rates in state-funded higher education institutions increased from 20% in 1980 to 55% in 2004' (IPA, 2009, p. 242). Entry to higher education in Ireland is usually linked to the operation of a points system based on performance in the Leaving Certificate examination, taken in the final year of secondary school. Alternative entry modes exist for mature students/adult learners and for students from under-represented socio-economic backgrounds. Higher education participation and enrolment has expanded considerably since 1970. The number of students enrolled in higher education worldwide by 2030 is forecast to rise from 99.4 million in 2000 to 414.2 million in 2030 – an increase of 314%[3]. As a result, HEIs are under significant pressure to deliver a quality student experience to diverse learning groups.

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; 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[4] 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[5] which serves as the second site in this research study, to support their plans in developing a first year experience

[3] University World News, 2nd September 2012, Issue No:237.
[4] See profile in Appendix 4
[5] See profile in Appendix 5

programme. An important factor I needed to take into consideration was the fact that I was conducting 'insider research' and just over 50% of my sample participants in this study was based in the site of my professional practice. While this is beneficial in identifying candidates to interview, knowledge of the systems and practice in place, communications with colleagues and students and negotiating access, I was very conscious that I needed to be alert to the possibility that this could colour my judgement in any way or impact on the data analysis process.

The undergraduate student population of the Institute of Technology is approx. 6000 and the University is approx. 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 2012, the completion rates in the Institute of Technology was 80% and in the University 85.7% (Sunday Times, 2013).

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.

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, Learning With Peers 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.

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[6]. 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 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.

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

1.3 Thesis Structure

This thesis consists of six chapters. Following on from this chapter, Chapter 2 provides a literature review. The review addresses the main elements that relate to the research questions and is divided into four key themes including: Student Engagement; the First Year Experience; Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategies; and Change Management.

Chapter 3 describes and justifies the methodology deployed in this study and the research methods literature which informed my choice of methods, including qualitative and quantitative research techniques. The chapter will also describe the research process and identify the challenges I encountered in the process of design, data collection and analysis and ethical issues.

Chapter 4 presents the findings from the data analysis which offers insights into the first year experience in higher education from different perspectives from a range of stakeholders (i.e. the students, the lecturers, the managers), in an Institute of Technology and a University in Ireland. The major findings are discussed under three key sections including: the student experience; the teacher experience; and the manager experience.

Chapter 5 discusses the main findings with reference to the relevant theoretical perspectives, research and scholarship within the literature.

Chapter 6 concludes this study by highlighting the significance of this research, acknowledges limitations of the study, outlines recommendations and identifies possible areas of future research.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter explores the main themes that relate to the research questions. As the literature on the first year experience is quite extensive, I have chosen to focus on four key themes: *Student Engagement; the First Year Experience; Teaching and Learning Strategies*; and *Managing Change in Higher Education.*

The first section will examine the concept of student engagement and how it has evolved in the past two decades from simply participation in class, to a concept that examines emotional, cognitive and behavioural components, and motivation for learning. The second section discusses the challenges associated with the first year experience, peer assisted learning and learning communities. The third section will examine innovations in curriculum development and examples in the literature of academic practice that support the transition of first year students to higher education and impact student engagement. Finally, the fourth section will discuss managing change in higher education.

2.1 Student Engagement in Higher Education

2.1.1 Engaging the Learner

Various definitions of student engagement are presented in the literature. Kuh (2009, p 684) 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'. 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) argues 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. student clubs, 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.

Studies have been conducted in the US and Australia concerning student perceptions, levels of satisfaction and engagement with a degree programme (Kuh, 2001). Most of these studies of the student experience are driven by the need to improve student learning in the face of declining levels of student involvement with higher education (McInnis 2004). The decline is indicated by a range of factors, from the number of days students spend on campus to the amount of time they spend talking with fellow students, and indeed, the contact they have with academic staff. There are a number of approaches to improve the quality of the student learning experience. These include, for example, the amount of time students actually spend on learning tasks, the extent to which they have meaningful contact with academic staff, and the supportive nature of the campus environment (McInnis 2004). Further studies emphasised the importance of the out of classroom experiences. This emerged from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) which reports on the levels of engagement of large numbers of universities and colleges across the US (Kuh 2001). The study provides a rich source of data on what students do with their time. For example, first-year students on average reported only occasional contact (once or twice a month) with their teachers and this frequency of student-faculty interaction was much less than what research studies suggest is optimal (Kuh, 2001). These findings suggest a pattern of declining engagement on many fronts.

More recently, Exeter *et al.* (2010) reported that the rapid growth in the student population observed in higher education over the past 10–15 years has coincided with an increased recognition of student engagement and its value in developing knowledge. Active learning approaches have the potential to promote student engagement with lectures, but this becomes more challenging as class sizes increase. A study from the University of Auckland investigated student engagement from the teachers' perspective. This study identified current practices in teaching, learning and assessment designed to promote student engagement in degree programmes with more than 1000 students. The study concluded that by using an array of teaching approaches including individual or small-group based activities, in-class discussions and a well-structured course book, teachers optimised opportunities for student engagement.

Handelsman *et al.* (2005) explains that student engagement is considered an important predictor of student achievement. Few researchers, however, have attempted to derive a valid and reliable measure of student engagement in particular courses. In a study Handelsman *et al.* (2005) developed and explored the validity of a measure of student engagement titled the Student Course Engagement Questionnaire (SCEQ). Exploratory factor analysis revealed four dimensions of third level student engagement that were distinct and reliable: academic skills engagement, participation/interaction engagement, performance and emotional engagement.

2.1.2 Sense of Belonging

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)

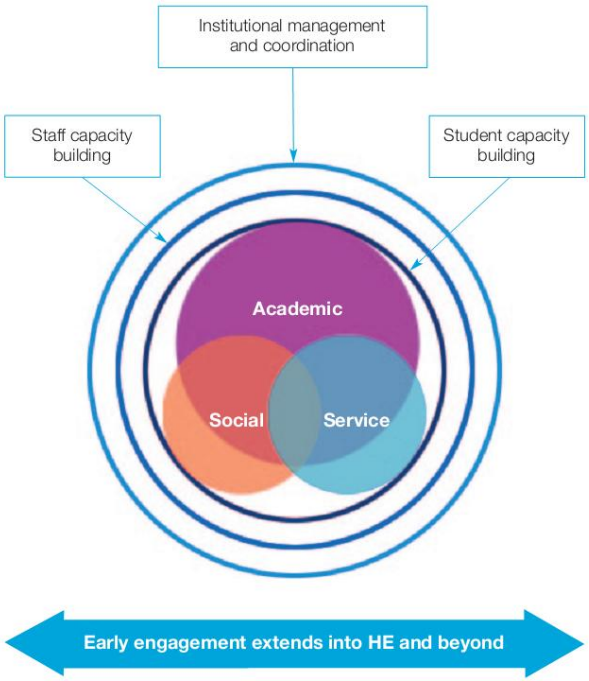
At the individual level, 'belonging' recognises students' subjective feelings of relatedness or connectedness to the higher education institute. Vallerand (1997) describes this as feeling connected or feeling that one belongs in 'a social milieu' (p.300). Similarly, Goodenow (1993a) explains this as the extent to which students feel personally accepted, included, supported and respected by peers in the college social environment. Furthermore, belonging may be characterised by regular contact and the perception that interpersonal relationships have stability, affective concern, and are ongoing (Baumeister 1995).

Osterman (2000) argues that the need for belonging in educational environments is significantly associated with students' academic engagement. This is supported by Chickering and Gamson (1987, p.2) who summarised the evidence into seven effective practices in undergraduate teaching and learning:

- student-staff contact;
- active learning;
- prompt feedback;
- time on task;
- high expectations;
- respect for diverse learning styles;
- co-operation among students.

Therefore, it can be concluded that interpersonal relations are essential for satisfying the need to belong as well as the educational environments, which play a significant role in students' academic engagement (see Figure 2.1). This links with the student integration model by Tinto (1993), which identified academic and social integration and institutional and goal commitment as key variables contributing to students' decisions about withdrawing.

Figure 2.1: Model of Student Retention and Success



Thomas (2012, p.16)

- **Early engagement:** engagement to promote belonging must begin early and continue across the student life cycle. (This is represented by the arrow underneath the diagram.)
- **Engagement in the academic sphere:** engagement and belonging can be nurtured throughout the institution (academic, social and professional services), but the academic sphere is of primary importance to ensure all students benefit. (This is represented by the overlapping coloured circles, the academic sphere being the largest.)
- **Developing the capacity of staff and students to engage:** the capacity of students to engage and staff to offer an engaging experience must be developed, thus a partnership approach in which everyone is responsible for improving student belonging, retention and success is required. (The capacity of students and staff are represented by the two blue rings, labelled respectively.)
- **Institutional management and co-ordination:** at the senior level the institution must take responsibility for nurturing a culture of belonging and creating the necessary infrastructure to promote student engagement, retention and success. This includes the use of data to underpin student retention and success. (This is represented by the largest blue ring, labelled institutional management and co-ordination.)

Thomas (2012, p.16), Model of Student Retention and Success

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. These forces are titled '*Foundational Dimensions*' and state that institutions with effective first years:

> (1) Have organisational structures and policies that provide a comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated approach to the first year.
>
> (2) Facilitate appropriate recruitment, admissions and student transitions through policies and practices that are intentional and aligned with institutional mission.

(3) Assign the first college year a high priority for the faculty.

(4) Serve all first-year students according to their varied needs.

(5) Engage students, both in and out of the classroom, in order to develop attitudes, behaviours, and skills consistent with the desired outcomes of higher education and the institution's philosophy and mission.

(6) Ensure that all first-year students encounter diverse ideas, worldviews and people as a means of enhancing their learning and preparing them to become members of pluralistic communities.

(7) Conduct assessment and maintain associations with other institutions and relevant professional organisations in order to achieve ongoing first-year improvement.

(Pascarella and Terenzini 2005 p.602)

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005, p.602) concluded that:

> . . . 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.

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.

2.2 The First Year Experience

2.2.1 Transition to Higher Education

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.

In an Australian national survey of first year students McInnis *et al.* (2000) found that almost 29 per cent of students said they had difficulty adjusting to the style of teaching at third level. Around 45 per cent of students say they found the standard of work required at university much higher than they expected, and 57 per cent thought university study was more demanding than school. 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.

2.2.2 Student Retention

Braxton (2000) argues that retention may be defined as the ability of a higher education institution to retain students so that they can progress through the different stages of their programme of study and ultimately graduate with an award. Retention is a recurring theme in the first year experience literature. Indeed, Braxton (2000) describes it as the student departure puzzle and claims that consideration must be given to the reasons why students withdraw from a programme in the first year. 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). Schrader and Brown (2008) reported that, in the US, one in four colleges' first year students at 4-year universities did not return for their sophomore year and nearly half of the students in community colleges did not return to complete their degree in 2004. The Higher Education Authority (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.

In the UK two measures of student retention are commonly used in respect of full-time undergraduates:

> The first is the 'completion rate' – the proportion of starters in a year who continue their studies until they obtain their qualification, with no more than one consecutive year out of higher education. As higher education courses take years to complete, an expected completion rate is calculated by the Higher Education Statistics Agency. A more immediate measure of retention is the proportion of an institution's intake which is enrolled in higher education in the year following their first entry to higher education. This is the 'continuation rate'.
>
> (NAO, National Audit Office, 2007, p. 5)

Since 2012, some major changes have been applied to the higher education funding arrangements in the UK, which will have an impact on retention and student engagement overall in the future. The policy changes have shifted the responsibility for funding higher education away from the taxpayer towards students directly: student fees in the UK have now increased to a maximum of £9,000 per year from 2012-13 (Cable 2010). A White Paper titled 'Students at the Heart of the System' (Department of Business 2011) aims to use student choice (informed by price and quality of the student experience) as a major driver in shaping higher education provision, and puts the quality of the student experience at the centre. This will enable students to have greater information about universities, including data on retention, completion and employment outcomes (Trust 2010). The average non-continuation rate was 8.4% for entrants to English higher education institutions in 2009-10 and non-continuation rates varied between English institutions between 1.2% and 21.4% in 2009-10 (HESA, 2010 in Thomas 2012). The total loss of income to an institute when one student drops out equates to £24,300 - this is in line with the Irish HEI's which ranges from €24,000-28,000 depending on the discipline area (Ginty and Harding 2013). With regard to the completion rate for students entering institutions in the Ireland, the HEA (2010) reported that the proportion of new entrants in 2007/08 who are not present one year later was 15% on average across all sectors and NFQ levels. Furthermore, the rates of non-presence vary strongly according to the NFQ level, ranging from 25%/26% at levels

6/7 to between 4% and 16% at level 8. They also differ according to the sector, ranging from 22% in an institute of technology to 9% in the university sector and 4% in teacher training colleges. Looking forward, Thomas (2012) identified the profile of students choosing to study at third level will be shaped by a range of factors including the student experience on offer, the institutions' history, programmes offered, mission, geographical location, demand, reputation and potentially the fees charged in the future.

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.

2.2.3 Peer Assisted Learning

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 (University of

Missouri Kansas City, 1995). It ranges in perspectives from facilitation techniques, information processing, knowledge sharing among peers to academic socialisation to critical thinking and reflection. Taking the academic social environment alone, Couchman (2008) explains that students learn by being socialised into the particular ways of thinking, speaking and writing valued in the institutions and disciplines they study, or, as Becher (in Couchman 2008 p.83) described them, as "academic tribes". Similar to leaders, SI leaders, therefore work with students to acculturate them into the various cultures and discourses of the disciplines they are studying.

Peer assisted learning is also referred to as peer tutoring and has been applied in different ways in different institutions. Peer tutoring is a system whereby learners help each other and learn by teaching. One perspective to peer tutoring is referred to in the literature by Hogan and Tudge (1999) as the Vygotskian perspective. This approach assumes that learners gain mastery and develop cognitive skills through interaction with others and their environment. Furthermore, the Vygotskian approach involves more competent learners supporting weaker students and this helps their progression through the zone of proximal development i.e. the difference between a learner's performance unaided and that when assisted by an adult or more competent peer. Research has shown that when the peer tutor is more advanced the collaboration between the student groups can impact improved learning capabilities (Tudge and Winterhoff 1983; Tudge 1992; Kalkowski 1995; Beasley 1997). In addition to improving the subject area and developing intellectual abilities, peer tutoring programmes assist students with making the adjustment to third level education and in developing more autonomous learning skills (Beasley 1997).

Peer learning is essentially about developing a learning community. Tosey (1999) argues that by definition, any group of people on a course could be said to constitute a 'learning community'. Therefore the 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 members. While much attention is given to group process, principles of power sharing and variation in modes of facilitation differentiate it from an analytical group.

Topping and Ehly (1998) have suggested that the benefits of peer assisted learning arise from its discursive, active approach to learning. Beven and Sambell (2008) confirmed this when they introduced a peer mentoring scheme in Northumbia University and found that learners show a particular interest in the assistance they get from experienced learners (i.e. from a senior year) affording credibility to their 'insider knowledge' and valuing the way the contact resonates with their own experience. Further studies and reports (Topping and Ehly 1998; Holton 2001; Nestel and Kidd 2005; Ritter *et al.* 2008; Morosanu *et al.* 2010; Tuckman and Monetti 2010) confirm that peer learning programmes usually address diverse problems, such as academic failure, cognitive and metacognitive strategies deficit, and difficulties in social integration.

Peer assisted learning is intended to represent a particular manifestation of cooperative learning; a "truly cooperative initiative" (Donelan and Wallace 1998). Cooperative learning may be defined broadly as working together to accomplish shared goals (Johnson and Johnson 1989). In peer assisted learning, the intention is for students to collaborate to supply missing information or attempt solutions to problems as they help each other (Congos and Schoeps 1998). Thinking skills, knowledge and understanding of course subject matter may also develop within the co-operative environment of the peer learning session (Capstick and Fleming 2001). Therefore peer assisted learning provides a learning environment where students are supported to construct knowledge from past experiences and is based on the principles of constructivism in a social context (Capstick and Fleming 2001). This approach recognises that knowledge has both individual and social aspects which cannot be meaningfully separated and peer assisted learning provides a setting where the micro and macro contextualisation of the subject area can occur (Tobin and Tippins 1993).

A number of challenges can be identified. One is the potential for personality clashes within PAL leaders in study sessions (Beasley 1997), which means that the programme

needs to be carefully coordinated by staff members in the institution in order to troubleshoot problems that arise. Another challenge cited is attendance problems on the part of the students attending peer learning sessions (Kalkowski 1995; Carpenter 1996; Beasley 1997) and reasons for this vary from timetabling, promotion or academic staff support. Beasley (1997) also reports on differing expectations on the part of the senior leaders and the first year students. Academics have also been reported to express opposition to peer learning programmes. Some lecturers fear that it is a substitution for teaching and student leaders may give the wrong information, or are concerned that students will not be able to adequately diagnose students' weaknesses (Beasley 1997). In contrast, Colvin and Ashman (2010) reported on peer mentoring programmes and highlighted the risks and challenges that existed in maintaining a student-mentor relationship. The biggest risk identified in being a mentor is 'people who are trying to do too much and who are trying to be perfect in everything and sometimes they can suffer from anxiety'. Several mentors in the Colvin and Ashman (2010) study also expressed the idea that in becoming a mentor, they had to make themselves vulnerable, put themselves "out there" and risk rejection if students didn't accept them. This also involved getting very emotionally attached to students and then having to "let go" at the end of the semester. These findings highlight the need to carefully plan peer learning and mentoring programmes. A training programme for the student mentors needs to highlight: boundaries; their responsibilities to the first year students; their role as a facilitator of learning and not a teacher; and how to manage relationships with a range of stakeholders.

A variety of studies of peer assisted learning have demonstrated the positive effect such schemes can have as a result of the relationship which develops between leaders and tutees. As cited by Beven and Sambell (2008, p. 15) these include: "behavioural – in terms of academic performance (Fox and Stevenson, 2006; Heirdsfield *et al.*, 2008); self-esteem (Fowler *et al.*, 2004); motivational (Allen and Eby, 2007) and relational (Rhodes, 2005)". In addition, this concurs with (Bosley 2004) findings that learners show a particular interest in the assistance they get from experienced learners affording credibility to their "insider knowledge" and valuing how this connects with their own experiences.

In addition to peer assisted learning, there are other types of first year experience programmes that impact on student engagement. Bradley (2011), for example, reports that US community colleges are devising FYE programmes to welcome students to campus. It is part of a growing effort to create a culture of academic success during that critical first year in college, and there is some evidence of increasing academic performance and student retention. The Glendale FYE programme, for example, forms semester-long cohorts to smooth the transition to college for new students who otherwise might get lost. Throughout the fall semester, students take classes as a cohort, sharing the same three classes taught by a team of three instructors. The goal is to provide students in their first year of college with maximum guidance and feedback on assignments, increase opportunities to interact with academic staff explore student success strategies and possible careers.

Other programs cited by Bradley (2011) include an orientation scheme at Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA), which grew from student and faculty focus groups and showed that many incoming students lacked understanding of college expectations and had poor time management and study skills. The first year experience programme at NOVA is part of 'Achieving the Dream', the national non-profit organisation that works with colleges and foundations to help more community college students succeed. It consists of a new student orientation programme, early academic advising, peer mentoring and social networking. The approach is based on the three C's: connection, critical thinking and community building. All of these initiatives demonstrate connections with the concepts and ideas of peer assisted learning and supporting the student experience. What is clear from the literature, to support the first year students effectively and help retain them on programmes - multiple stakeholder involvement is necessary with an academic and social development focus.

2.3 Teaching, Learning & Assessment Strategies

2.3.1 Teaching in Higher Education

As outlined in the earlier sections of this Chapter, the transition to third level education can place great demands both academically and socially on the learner, which has been

found to be the most critical in the first-year student experience (Gourlay 2009). The difficulties in meeting the academic and social demands of university life owing to a lack of preparedness are key contributors to underachievement and drop-out (Coughlan and Swift 2011). Previous work has highlighted undergraduates' misconceptions of higher education: believing university teaching to be equivalent to that in school; underestimating the level of commitment in independent study; maladjustment to workloads and time management; and a lack of study skills (Lowe and Cook 2003; Byrne and Flood 2005).

Tobin *et al*. (1994 in Pliner and Johnson 2004) argues that instructors teach as they were taught. In some cases teaching styles can appear to focus on instructor-centered teaching as opposed to student-centered teaching. So what distinguishes effective pedagogy from ineffective pedagogy in higher education in general? In a review of the past three decades of research literature in higher education, a zoologist at Rutgers University (Gardiner, 1998) summarised some areas which inhibit student learning in lectures and critical thinking. In many traditional colleges, for example in lectures, it is claimed that students' attention begins drifting after 10-15 minutes and they are asked and respond to questions for less than 10% of the class time (Pilner and Johnson 2004). This paucity of time for interaction with and among students is especially noteworthy given that there is an inverse relationship between lecture listening time and critical thinking (Alters and Nelson 2002). In relation to critical thinkers, most academics want their students to be just that. Many students, however view the academic world in terms of true or false and instead of analysing evidence that contradicts their inaccurate conceptions, students often just passively receive knowledge from their teachers. To become active learners, students need teachers to use methods that involve them in grasping important concepts, but only 10-30% of teachers use methods other than traditional lectures as their primary pedagogy (Alters and Nelson 2002). This is further aggravated by the very way teachers evaluate students work. Therefore it can be argued that the teachers' pedagogy and how the students approach education are far more important in student learning than the actual syllabus.

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 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.

Furthermore, 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 schools, 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.

2.3.2 Curriculum Innovations in Higher Education

Coates and Tooher (2010) argue that there are fundamental changes occurring in the ways in which academics are designing academic programmes and assessing their learners. Teaching has remained fairly traditional in Ireland as the higher education system expanded. In most universities students who experience a large lecture environment are typically assessed by end of semester examinations. As a result, a number of student behaviour problems have emerged, which have resulted in changes to support lecturers:

> Non-attendance at lectures and intensive cramming before the exams are common complaints about student behaviour. Yet we have seen in the past decade or so a new emphasis on teaching, innovation and consideration of the student experience. Teaching support centres... have been springing up in various forms in the Universities and Institutes of Technology, along with modules and certificated programmes for academic staff on teaching and learning.
>
> (Coates and Tooher, 2010, p.349)

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.

Few studies exist that have evaluated the learning experience on 'first year skills development modules' from both a student and staff perspective. One particular study conducted by Coughlan and Swift (2011) surveyed 121 first year students and seven tutors on an undergraduate first year computing support module. They found positive ratings in relation to the overall structure of the module which was based on splitting students up into separate tutor groups. Some differences between students and tutors did emerge relating to giving feedback on assignments and the timing of this. This study demonstrates the value of starting a dialogue between teachers and establishing the requirements and expectations of skills development modules from the student perspective. This can help generate principles of best practice for the design of skills development modules that support the first year experience effectively.

In relation to techniques when designing modules or courses, constructive alignment is used in higher education, Biggs (2003) defines it as coherence between assessment,

teaching strategies and intended learning outcomes in an educational programme. It is an approach which begins with the end in mind - what should students know and be able to demonstrate at the end of the course (Biggs and Tang 2007). It is claimed that when learning outcomes, assessment methods, and teaching and learning activities are intentionally aligned, the outcomes of learning are improved substantially (Blumberg, 2009). The process of constructive alignment emphasises that students are central to the creation of meaning and must be provided with opportunities to actively select, and cumulatively construct their own knowledge (Biggs, 1996). Meyers and Nulty (2009) provide five recommendations for designing a course based upon Biggs' approach to constructive alignment. To maximise the quality of learning outcomes, academics need to develop programmes and modules in ways that provide students with teaching and learning materials, tasks and experiences which:

(1) are authentic, real-world and relevant;

(2) are constructive, sequential and interlinked;

(3) require students to use and engage with progressively higher order cognitive processes;

(4) are aligned with each other and the desired learning outcomes; and

(5) provide challenge, interest and motivation to learn.

(Meyers and Nulty, 2009, p.567)

The effect of applying these principles is to create a learning system in ways that require students to adopt a deep learning approach in order to meet the course's assessment requirements, which, in turn, meets the desired learning outcomes. All of this links to the design elements lecturers need to consider when planning first year skills development modules that will support student engagement.

Another example of course design is Universal Instructional Design (UID). This concept draws from many different fields, but the term itself is borrowed directly from the architectural concept of Universal Instructional Design (Pliner and Johnson 2004). The concept is concerned with about designing physical spaces that are accessible and usable by all people. The principles of Universal Design have been applied to instruction, materials, and technology and a new paradigm for teaching, learning, and assessment that draws on new brain research and new media technologies to respond to individual learner differences (Pilner and Johnson 2004). This new paradigm

requires a shift in thinking about how institutions design courses to include alternatives to make it accessible and appropriate for individuals with different backgrounds, learning styles, abilities, and disabilities in widely varied learning contexts. Universal Design requires an awareness of the unique nature of each learner and the need to accommodate differences, creating learning experiences that suit the learner and maximize his or her ability to progress (CAST, 2001 in Pilner and Johnson 2004). It emphasizes the need for flexibility and encourages academics to consider designing courses that provide for flexible means of representation, expression, and engagement. Scott *et al.* (2003) recommend nine primary principles for implementing UID which includes: equitable use; simple and intuitive; developing a community of learners; size and space and use of classroom environment; and creating an instructional climate. These principles highlight the need for flexible and mixed approaches to teaching because no single method supports or challenges all students.

2.3.3 Assessment & Evaluation

Assessment is changing in higher education and is driven by increased class size, changing curricula, and the need to support students more effectively (Bryan and Clegg 2006). Assessment provokes anxiety among students, particularly first years, and more pressure among the teaching team than any other feature of higher education. Gates *et al.* (2002) list four of the major types of assessment used in higher education including: guided self-assessment; intermediary conducted assessment; independent self-assessment; and intermediary conducted student competencies-based assessment. Koslowski (2006) examined this work further and found the terms 'quality', 'accountability' and 'assessment' are used interchangeably and assessment in higher education shares a similar history with both the quality in business and quality in higher education movements. Most important, Koslowski (2006, p.278) notes

> . . .the lessons higher education can learn from the quality and assessment movement in industry: inspiring more responsible leadership, student centeredness and continuous improvement.

It can therefore be argued that industry business cases may provide some valuable insights to academics into best practices or approaches in designing engaging assessment tools.

According to Biggs (2007), learning outcomes are used to express what it is expected that students should be able to do at the end of the learning period. HETAC (2009), however, discriminates between two types of learning outcomes, the minimum learning outcomes that are linked to the credits, but also additional learning outcomes that describe a higher level of achievement. Collins (2009), for example, recommends when writing learning outcomes, different verbs can express learning in different domains and at different levels. Bingham (1999 in O'Farrell 2009), recommends educators list different skills and competencies they would like their students to achieve based on the learning outcomes and this should inform the assessment plan. Bloxham & Boyd (2007) argue that the programme learning outcomes (PLO's) should be the first step of the process and that the final module descriptor should be the result of many drafts. Furthermore, Biggs (2007) describes the importance of both formative and summative assessment to support student engagement. Formative assessment takes place during the course of teaching and is used to provide feedback to the student and supports the teaching and learning process. This quote describes this process simply *"when the chef tastes the sauce it is formative assessment: when the customer tastes it is summative"* (Anon). Dunn (2002) argues the goal of summative assessment is to evaluate student learning at the end of a module by comparing it against some standard or benchmark. Summative assessments can often have a high point value. Some examples of summative assessments include a midterm or end of term exam, a final project, a journal, a paper and many other tools. Therefore, formative and summative assessment are interactive and they seldom stand alone in construction or effect are what is important is the student experiences that lead to the learning outcomes (Gipps, McCallum & Hargreaves, 2000, in WEI, 2011). Black and William (1998) explains that improving learning through assessment depends on many factors:

> . . . the active involvement of students in their own learning; the provision of effective feedback to the students; adjusting teaching to take account of the results of assessment; a recognition of the profound influence assessment has on

> the motivation and self-esteem of the students; the need for students to be able to assess themselves and understand how to improve (p.18).

Therefore the strength of an assessment method for a module lies in its collaborative, practical and creative approach. However, negotiation between teachers and the students on the assignment deliverables is an important element so that the students gain the full benefits from engaging in the learning experience.

The evidence outlined in the teaching, learning and assessment approaches discussed 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.

2.4 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 discussed in Chapter 1. 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.

Managing change in higher education, according to Pennington (2003), also has to take account of other cultural features such as: the sector's general commitment to collegiality; fuzzy lines of accountability, particularly for academic staff; a general lack of extrinsic rewards to shape behaviour; well-developed subject sub-cultures; and rotating management/leadership responsibilities. In summary this suggests the importance of listening leadership, where strategic and institutional change is less planned from the top and more crafted in action and learning throughout the organisation around the development of a shared sense of institutional direction.

Conclusion

The main aim of this study is to explore the first year experience over two higher education institutions in Ireland (an Institute of Technology and a University). This study 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). It also explores how these initiatives have informed changes in teaching practice and institutional policy.

The research questions are divided into three key areas. Each question relates to a different stakeholder and explores the impact of first year experience initiatives on students, teachers and institutional managers responsible for instigating change and developing policies. The questions include:

1. How is engagement with the first year experience initiatives (i.e. LWP and SDM) impacting on the students' experience with higher education?
2. How is the lecturers' involvement with the first year experience initiatives influencing changes in their teaching practice?
3. What are the senior managers' perspectives and how are the first year experience initiatives informing institutional change?

Themes emerging from the literature review process connect well with the research questions and include: the range of challenges associated with the first year experience; creating connections; teaching approaches; innovations in curriculum development, assessment techniques and evaluation; and, finally, managing change and the impact gained from 'listening leadership' in higher education.

The research methodology will be outlined in Chapter 3 which discusses the methods chosen to collect and analyse the data.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The literature review explored: student engagement; the first year experience; teaching, learning and assessment strategies; and change management. These themes link appropriately with the research questions being explored including: how engagement with the first year experience initiatives impacts on the student experience with higher education; how involvement in the first year experience initiatives influences changes in teaching practice; and how the first year experience initiatives informs institutional change. This Chapter now describes and justifies the methodology I have chosen for this study.

The research methodology chosen was informed by the research questions. 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. This Chapter explains the research process and the challenges encountered such as survey design, data collection, doing insider research, data analysis and ethical issues.

3.1 Purpose of the Research

3.1.1 Research Aims

The main aim of this study is to explore the first year experience over two higher education institutions in Ireland (an Institute of Technology and a University). This study explores first year students and staff engagement with two first year experience initiatives: a Learning With Peers (LWP) programme and a Skills Development Module (SDM). It also explores how these initiatives have informed changes in teaching practice and institutional policy.

3.1.2 Research Questions

The research questions are divided into three key areas. Each question relates to a different stakeholder and explores the impact of first year experience initiatives on students, lecturers and institutional managers responsible for instigating change and developing policies. The questions include:

1. How is engagement with the first year experience initiatives (i.e. LWP and SDM) impacting on the students' experience with higher education?
2. How is the lecturers' involvement with the first year experience initiatives influencing changes in their teaching practice?
3. What are the senior managers' perspectives and how are the first year experience initiatives informing institutional change?

3.2 Research Paradigm and Strategy

3.2.1 Paradigm

The paradigm chosen for this study is mixed methods. The research strategy I selected is a case study, to explore the first year experience initiatives in two higher education sites; an Institute of Technology and a University in Ireland.

A paradigm is a view of the world, and reflects assumptions about the nature of knowledge and about how we can make valid claims. It allows some questions to be asked and some research methods to be applied to these questions. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) offer the following useful explanation of how a paradigm shapes a researchers thinking process:

> A paradigm encompasses four concepts: ethics, epistemology, ontology and methodology. Ethics asks, how will I be as a moral person in the world? Epistemology asks, how do I know the world? What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known? Ontology raises basic questions about the nature of reality and the nature of the human being in the world. Methodology focuses on the best means for gaining knowledge about the world.
>
> (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008 p.157)

Social science research is divided into two main paradigms, quantitative and qualitative, also broadly referred to as positivism and interpretative, although not quite

synonymous (Bassey, 1999 and Denzin and Lincoln 2008). The paradigm categories proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide a useful model within which to position this study.

I have chosen a mixed methods approach for this study because it is more powerful and suggestive of a reflective researcher. Mixed methods enables me to employ a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches as there is more insight to be gained and an expanded understanding of the research problems. Different terms can be used to describe this approach such as integrating, multi-method, synthesis, mixed methodology, however more recent writings use the term ''mixed methods'' (Conrad and Serlin 2006; Creswell 2009; Yin 2011).

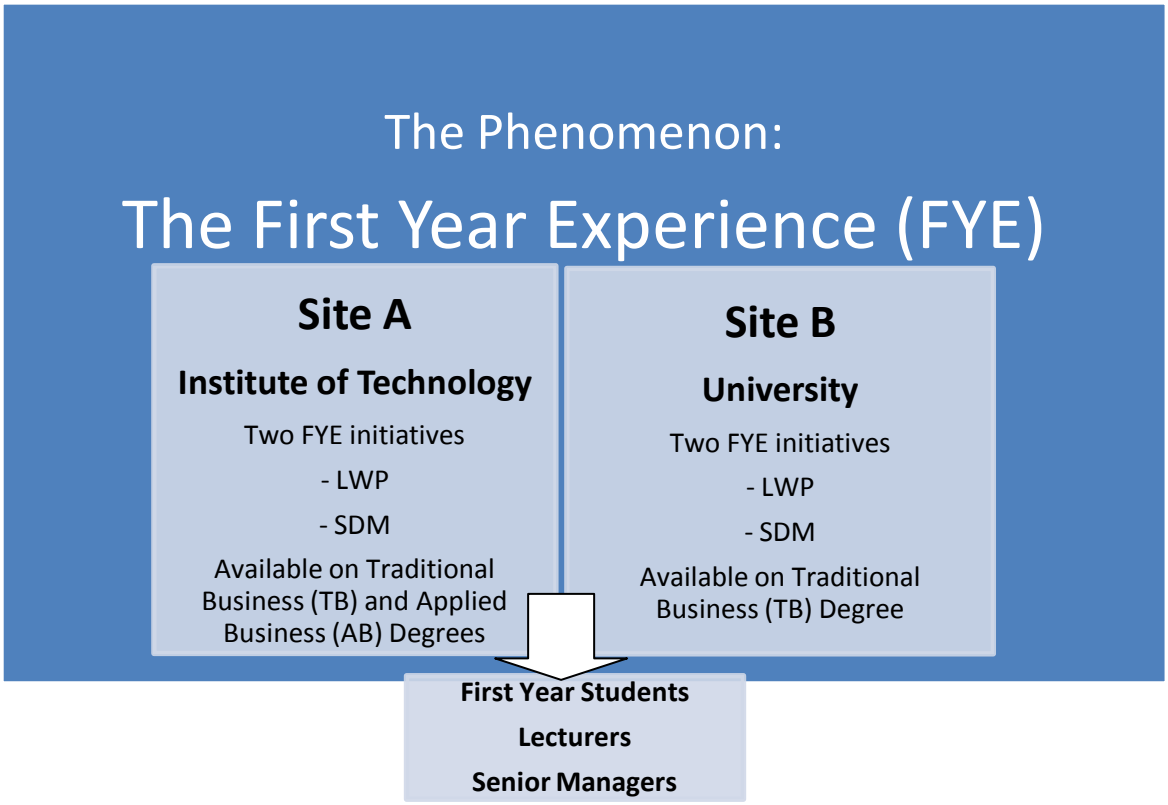
In summary, this research study involves systematic exploration, guided by well constructed questions, producing new information or reassessing old information. When referring to educational research Bassey (1999) puts it simply - "educational research is critical enquiry aimed at informing educational judgements and decisions in order to improve educational action" (p39). Therefore my education research study should have relevance to lecturers, higher education managers and policy makers and is itself educational because of its stated intention to inform.

3.2.2 Strategy

The research strategy chosen for this study is a case study that will explore first year experience initiatives deployed in two higher education sites: the student led initiative is Learning With Peers (LWP)[7]; and the teacher led initiative is and academic Skills Development Module (SDM)[8] to support the transition into higher education. This study examines perspectives of students, lecturers and senior managers involved with these initiatives (see Figure 3.1).

[7] See Appendix 6
[8] See Appendix 7

Figure 3.1 An Educational Case Study Approach



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.

In evaluative case studies a collection or a single case is examined with the purpose of providing teachers, parents, pupils or managers with information which will help them judge the worthiness of a programme or policy or an institution. An educational case study is where the researcher is not making an evaluative judgment but rather seeking understanding of educational action. It is all about gaining new knowledge, reflecting and developing educational theory. In the case of action research, this is concerned with contributing to the development of a case and can inform revisions and refinement of a

specific programme or action. I have chosen an educational case study approach as it is a good fit with the aim of my study and my research questions. This approach enables me to gain new knowledge and enrich my thinking on the first year experience.

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 enables 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.

3.3. Research Methods

The data collection tools for this study include a student survey and semi-structured interviews with lecturers and with members of senior managers. After reviewing research strategies I made a decision to build a holistic picture, analyse words, report detailed views of informants, and conduct the study over two sites, where the first year experience initiatives were deployed.

An education case study can report on qualitative and quantitative data. Therefore, when collecting qualitative data, I considered including formal or informal and in-depth interviews, group interviews of focus groups which involve small or larger groups of individuals to obtain large amounts of information (Creswell, 2009).

For this study both qualitative and quantitative methods come into play with the use of a questionnaire aimed at first year students and semi structured interviews with

lecturers and members of seniors management. The questionnaire based survey is a commonly used technique in education research. This is partly because the basic mechanics are relatively easily understood and mastered, but also because surveys are used when quantified information is required concerning a specific population and when individuals' own accounts of their behaviour and/or attitudes are acceptable as a source of information (Creswell 2009). In this study the quantitative data I needed to know included for example - *how many LWP programme sessions did first year students attend and how many students were male or female*. I also included some open ended questions so that I could obtain student views on how the LWP sessions impacted on their engagement with higher education.

The use of a survey and of interviews was the most appropriate tools for this type of study in order to meet the overall aim and objectives. It was necessary to target students initially with a survey tool so I could capture detailed information on their student experience of the first year initiatives. The survey tool enabled me to target a large group of students (i.e. 300 on each site) and gain quantitative and qualitative insights into the student learning experience. This method enabled students on both sites to provide information on their experience of first year experience initiatives and their engagement with higher education through an individual process. The next step involved collecting qualitative data through interviews with lecturers and senior managers. Interviews are recommended when exploring a topic (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2008). Interviews were a natural choice for me as I felt it is was the best approach to gain a deep insight into experiences and ideas with lecturers and senior managers. As I was targeting a small group of individuals, interviews provided the best platform to engage with a discussion on the phenomenon being explored. Denscombe (1996) supports this view and states that qualitative interviews facilitate the collection of more detailed information from a smaller cohort of individuals. The semi structured interviews with teaching staff and senior managers provided a good discussion forum for lecturers to speak openly about their teaching practice and institutional policy.

> Interviews enable participants – be they interviewers or interviewees - to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view.
>
> (Cohen, Manion & Morrrison, 2008, p.349)

A survey with the lecturers would have been restrictive and may not have uncovered the descriptive detail required to build a case study. The student survey data combined with the teacher and senior manager interviews has enabled perspectives to be gathered from a range of stakeholders.

3.4 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 in Chapter two, which focused on four major themes: *Student Engagement; the First Year Experience; Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategies; and Change Management* combined with the research study questions, informed the data collection tool design (see Figure 3.1).

3.4.1 Research Process Phase One

Phase one of the research process involved the review of relevant literature with particular emphasis on:

- Student Engagement
- The First Year Experience
- Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategies
- Change Management

In addition, higher education strategy documents, academic texts, publications, conference papers and a range of relevant international journals in multi-disciplinary areas have been reviewed.

3.4.2 Research Process Phase Two

The research process phase two consisted of five stages (see Figure 3.3, p.40).

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[9] and a University[10] that had experienced the First Year Experience initiatives, that originated from the SIF II programme discussed in Chapter 1. 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 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.

[9] See Appendix 4
[10] See Appendix 5

Stage 2: Selecting Participants

Three sample groups were identified in both HEI sites including: business degree students; lecturers; and senior managers. A description of the sample and participation numbers is outlined below and in Figure 3.2.

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.

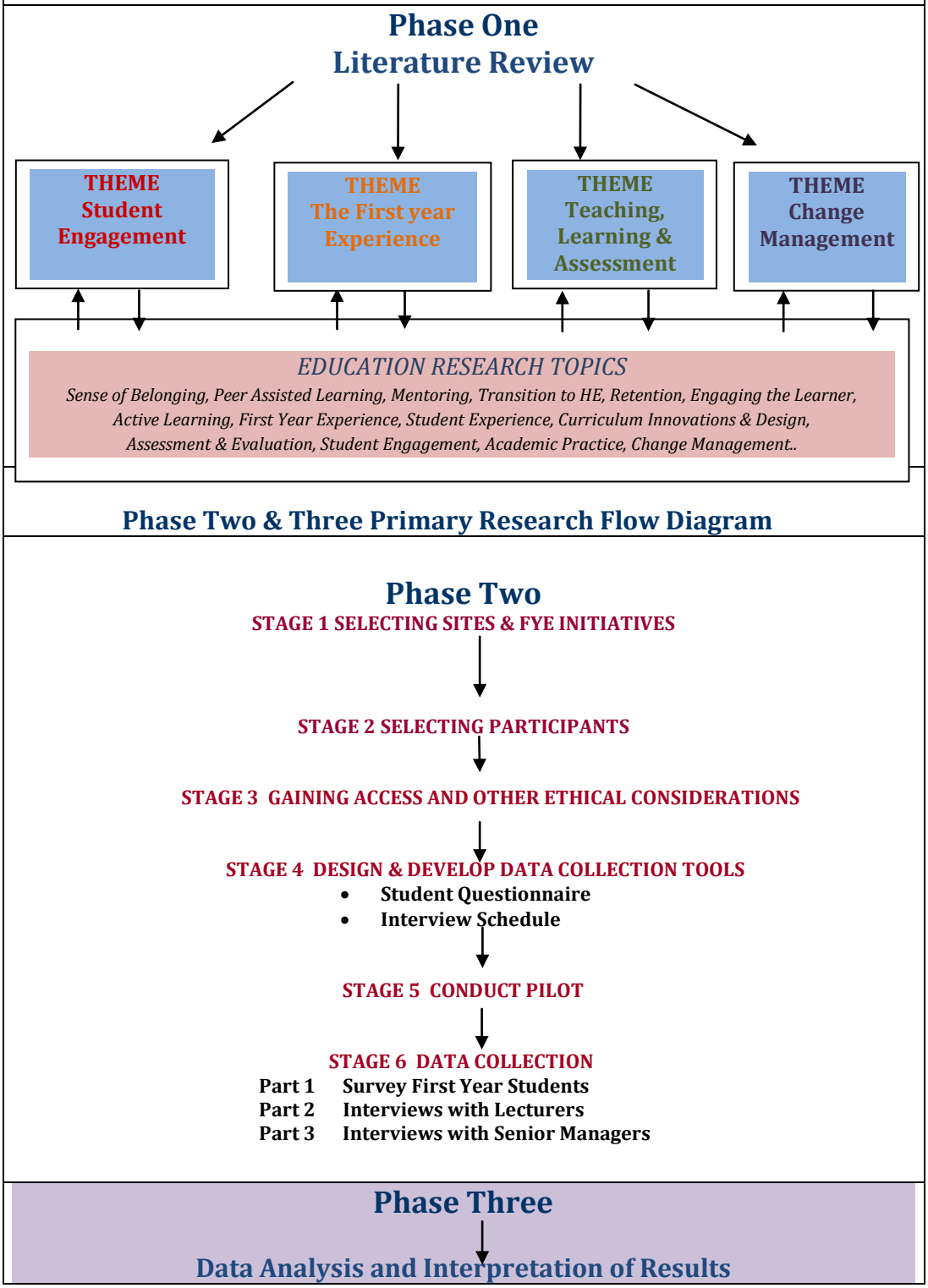
Figure 3.2 Number of Participants in the Study

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.

I made all staff who participated in the study in the IoT and the University aware of my involvement as a programme manager of the initiatives from 2008-2011, and I made it very clear to the participants they were free to decline in taking part in the study.

Figure 3.3 Phase One-Three Research Process Diagram



Stage 3: Gaining Access and Ethical Considerations

The principles underlying 'research ethics, concern qualities like honesty and respect for the rights of individuals. Every research study involving human respondents raises a

unique set of ethical issues (Creswell, 2009). According to Brink *et al.* (2005), ethics refers to the quality of the research procedures with respect to their adherence to professional, legal and social obligations to the research subject. Codes of research ethics have intrinsic value in protecting the rights of the individuals who may become involved in the research study, but they also serve a professional and organisational function.

An additional factor I needed to take into consideration was the fact that I work in one of the institution sites, the IoT. In addition, I was the person responsible for designing and developing the LWP, first year experience programme from 2009 to 2011 and this meant that needed to make participants aware of my role and they were free to decline from the taking part in the study. Prior to the interview process I made every effort to make participants feel free to make comments and this was evident in the findings presented in Chapter 4.

Insider research that is done by members of the organisation under study is, and feels different from, research that is conducted by and provided to organisations by outsiders (Smyth and Holian, 2008). On the one hand, taking up the research role as an 'insider' confronted me with many questions and decisions to make, in addition to undertaking my usual professional role in the IoT. On the other hand, these dual roles open up opportunities to do work that can have valuable and significant impact on the educational institutions and people involved, as well as contributing to sharing knowledge among peers and developing the student experience long term.

While working in one of the sites of this study is beneficial in identifying candidates to interview, knowledge of the systems and practice in place, communications with colleagues and students and negotiating access; I was very conscious of the fact I was conducting 'insider research' and that I needed to be alert to the possibility that this could colour my judgement in any way or impact on the data analysis process. Smyth and Holian (2008) believe:

> . . . that research conducted from within is worthwhile and special because it can help solve practical problems. It forces us to ground our work in everyday issues as those involved experience them, it confronts us and others with our assumptions, perceptions and their consequences, it enables us to learn, reflect

> and act and it insists that we engage with what and who we are curious about. Above all, it is about learning and making a difference.
>
> Smyth and Holihan (2008, p.34)

In order to carry out this research study, it was necessary for me to be open and clear to all participants about the research process and my initial involvement as programme manager in 2009-2011. This meant undertaking a number of active steps, so that there was no deception and all steps in my research process were open and transparent. The active steps included: negotiating access; data collection; and analysis of the data. This involved preparing a number of documents to gain access and to explain the aims and objectives of this research study (see Appendix 1). The registrar's office in the Institute of Technology and a Head of School in the University was contacted to seek their approval to undertake the study in advance of engaging staff and students in the research process. A letter explaining the purpose of the research and seeking formal permission to carry it out was drafted and sent to the lecturers in each business school. The issue of consent was carefully considered and this is in line with what Punch (2009) recommends, stating an interviewee should not be asked to participate until they have been wholly informed about the research study.

Each business student invited to participate in the survey was provided with details in class and this was followed up by an email from me with a link to the online survey and the consent form plus supporting documentation. Similarly, the lecturers and senior managers identified for this study were contacted by email by me and invited to participate in an interview. All participants received copies of the documents outlined in Appendix 1 and 2 and were guaranteed total confidentiality. In order to guarantee anonymity in writing up the thesis it was agreed with the participants that a fictitious name would be selected for them.

Stage 4: Design and Develop Data Collection Tools

Research is described as a systematic investigation to establish facts or collect information on a subject. Brotherton (1999) puts it simply, that research is about looking and searching in order to answer a question, or a series of questions. As

outlined in section 3.3 the methods or measurement tools chosen to answer the questions in this study are a student survey and semi structured interviews.

The questionnaire and interview question design were developed in parallel following a pilot. When considering the design of the questionnaire and the questions to be included, extreme care was paid to the construction, pre-testing and piloting of the tool. During the design and piloting stage of the questionnaire, particular attention was paid to;

a. The information required needed to link to the overall research aim and questions and the themes that emerged from the literature review.
b. The target respondents and the time it would take to complete the questionnaire.
c. The content and phrasing of each question in the questionnaire.
d. The sequence and format of each question in the questionnaire.
e. Piloting and adjusting the tools to suit the target groups.

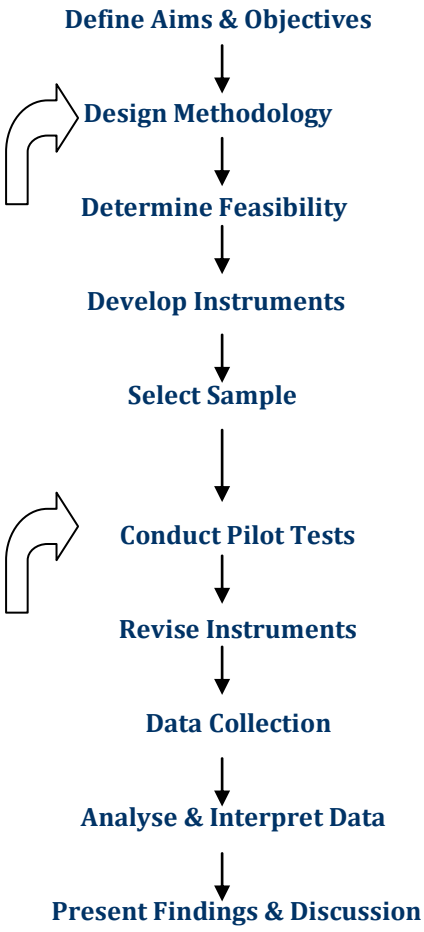
When considering the design of the interview schedule, the questions to be discussed during the interviews needed careful review in order to direct the conversation effectively. I referred to Patton (1990) who recommends categorising questions into six different types including: behaviours, opinion, feeling, knowledge, sensory and background/demographic questions. The key is to focus on some factual questions to start then followed by personal opinion questions relating to feelings (Patton 1990). In addition the interviewer needs to look at past, present and future situation. Each item in the flow chart (see Figure 3.4) depends upon the successful completion of all the previous items. Figure 3.4 has been modified to include all stages encountered in this study and to incorporate two feedback loops in the flow chart, which allowed for revisions to the methodology and instruments. Key consideration included: the layout and the section headings in the interview schedule; pre-testing and revising the questionnaire and interview schedule; piloting and adjusting the tools to suit the target groups.

Interviewing is a popular method of data collection in education research and has been described as specific type of conversation (Creswell 2009; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison,

2011). It is the most common means by which we can gain insight into the minds of people (Patton 1990).

Creswell (2009) recommends it is good practice to pilot the data collection tools. The pilot stage allowed me to test the feasibility of the research and the usefulness of the instrument and to revise the tools to fit the research questions more effectively. The final data collection tools are presented in Appendix 2.

Figure 3.4 Data Collection Tools Design Flow Chart



Source: Adapted and modified from Creswell (2009) and (Conrad and Serlin 2006) Research Design Tools.

Stage 5: Conducting the Pilot

Questionnaire

In November 2012, I conducted a pilot with two business students, a male and female. I asked them to complete the questionnaire and following this I asked them to discuss their feedback on the design. This discussion was 45 minutes long and explored their feedback on the questionnaire design and we also discussed their experiences in first year and how the institute supported them. During the discussion I made some notes.

My review of the pilot prompted a number of adjustments to my questionnaire design, for example removing questions that were not relevant to this study. It also prompted the editing of questions, for example the inclusion of an open ended question that asked participants to describe how the initiatives have impacted on their learning and engagement with their programme. In addition, the scaling of questions was adjusted so that it would give a better picture of the student experience. There was a mix of Likert and semantic differential scales built into the questionnaire design. With regard the Likert scale, participants were asked to agree or disagree with a statement. In contrast, to the semantic differential scale - where ends of the scale were labelled with contrasting statements (see Appendix 2).

Interview

In March 2013, I invited four academics to take part in a pilot interview and only one accepted, so I ran a pilot interview with one lecturer. The outcomes indicated a need for some adjustments to the timing of the session, the order of the questions and the key areas to be covered in the discussion. The pilot also revealed there was a tendency for the participant to sway away from the topic and as a result the discussion led to other areas not relevant to this research study. I also learned that I needed to keep the discussion on track relevant to the study and to watch the time and order of question delivery. Following the pilot I decided the best approach was to run small semi-structured interviews[11] with a lecturer focusing specifically on their views relating to the student experience in first year; how they support students and how the institute supports the lecturer; how they engage the students in the classroom; how involvement

[11] See Appendix 3

in teaching the first year experience skills development module has influenced changes in their teaching practice; and suggestions for future developments.

Stage 6: Data Collection

The data collection plan took place from January–April 2013 in both HEIs. The data collection plan and experiences are outlined below.

- **Part 1 January 2013 An Electronic Survey**

  Participants: First Year Students in an Institute of Technology and a University

  The questionnaire was aimed at first year students in the business degree programmes to determine the impact of first year experience initiatives on student engagement.

  First year lecturers in both institutions supported circulation of the questionnaire to students and encouraged them to respond. Despite this, however, there was a slow uptake and three email invitations were needed to encourage participation. Upon further investigation I learned students were being inundated with email surveys from a range of organisations and research groups and as a result students had disengaged from online surveys. An incentive to participate helps, however I learnt that printing out the surveys and asking the lecturer to invite students to complete in class helped increase the responses in both institutions. All data obtained from the survey was stored in Excel for analysis.

- **Part 2 March –April 2013 Semi-Structured Interviews**

  Participants: Lecturers

  Semi structured interviews with lecturers took place to explore the impact first year initiatives have had on their own teaching approaches and whether it is influencing how they engage with their students.

  The interviews took place in a meeting room or in the participant's office at a set time agreed in advance. The interviews were semi-structured and allowed the interviewee to relax and talk freely on the topic and their experiences. All interviews were recorded with an iPad audio application tool. Interview times were

approximately 40 minutes in duration. A copy of the interview schedule is available in Appendix 3.

- **Part 3 April 2013 Semi Structured Interviews**

  Participants: Member of Senior Management

  Interviews were conducted with senior managers in each institution to explore if and how the first year experience initiatives are informing institutional change.

  The interviews took place in the participant's office at a set time agreed in advance. All interviews were recorded with an iPad audio application tool. Interview times with each participant were less than one hour in duration.

3.4.3 Research Process Phase Three

The research process phase three consisted of two major parts: survey set-up for data analysis; transcribing, coding and data analysis. One of the biggest challenges involved examining all the data obtained by the survey and the interviews and attempting to break it down to produce a meaning and establish key themes. Once the interview transcripts were printed and the student survey data was stored on Excel, informal analysis commenced and I was able to see some key concepts emerging. I then commenced the formal process of coding the data and identifying major themes that would 'tell the story' that emerged from my findings.

3.4.3.2 Survey Set-up for Data Analysis

In keeping with the ethical considerations discussed earlier, clear procedures were set up for data entry and analysis which are discussed below.

a. Checking each survey completed for accuracy

A procedure was developed for logging the information from each student and keeping track of it on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Each student entry was assigned a number from 1-122. The data was stored in Excel until the time became available to complete a comprehensive data analysis. It was important to design the database that enabled me to look up and assess it at any time in order to extract information for analysis. It was also critical that the original data

records were available online through my private *'online survey tool professional account'* file with each online student survey record corresponding to the student number assigned on the Excel database. This enabled me to trace a result from a data analysis back to the original online form on which the data was collected. The final Excel database for logging the incoming data was a critical component of this education research study.

b. Entering the survey data into the computer

In some cases I needed to enter the survey data onto the online collection tool where students choose to complete the form manually in class. In this instance I checked the survey form data for accuracy. There were several questions considered as part of this initial data screening:

- Are the responses legible/readable?
- Are all-important questions answered?
- Are the responses complete?
- Is all relevant contextual information included (e.g., gender, course)?

The quality of measurement is a major issue in most social research. Assuring that the data collection process does not contribute inaccuracies helps assure the overall quality of subsequent analyses (Trochim 2001). Therefore, I carefully inputted each manual survey received onto the online survey tool and cross checked each question and answer for accuracy.

c. Developing and documenting a database structure that integrates the various measures and enables a comprehensive data analysis.

The survey data was stored and analysed in Excel, and has been assessed at different points during the research process. Once the data had been stored it was necessary to transform the raw data into variables that were usable in the analyses. The data analysis of the student survey involved categorising findings under key headings. Quantitative data was presented in bar charts or tables where appropriate. Qualitative data was coded with key words and from this key themes were identified and highlighted.

3.4.3.2 Transcribing, Coding and Data Analysis

All interviews for the eleven participants were transcribed verbatim with only minor changes made to ensure anonymity of each participant. The transcription process was a very time consuming and a tedious task. All participants were satisfied with the interview and trusted the transcribing process, so it was not necessary for me to look for feedback on each transcript. Following transcription all transcripts were saved as separate files and were assigned a pseudonym.

Following the transcribing of the data, an important part of the research journey commenced which involved coding the data. This involved breaking down the data into smaller units of meaning. Creswell (2009) outlines a step by step process beginning with basic coding in order to distinguish overall themes, followed by a more in depth, interpretive code in which more specific trends and patterns can be interpreted. I completed this process manually, which involved identifying different concepts and naming the data. I then grouped words/sentences into key themes. During the coding process, particular attention was paid to reviewing all my initial codes by asking the following questions: How adequate are they? Do they adequately summarise and represent what was being expressed? What are the most frequent and/or significant codes? Once I was happy with the code set, this assisted in the development of themes emerging from the students, the lecturers and the managers including: first year student challenges; teaching challenges; creating connections; roles and responsibilities; learning communities; approaches to learning and assessment; and managing change in higher education.

Chapter 4 presents the findings from the data analysis. In order to identify participants and the data collection tool (e.g. survey or interview) being referred to, the following procedures were used. All survey participants were allocated a site identifier including: the Institute of Technology (IOT) or the University. They were also identified as a Student or a Lecturer or a Senior Manager. An end code indicated whether they were studying an applied business (AB) or traditional business (TB) degree programme and a number linking back to the student survey record/line number (e.g. Student Institute of Technology AB 15 or Student University TB 33 etc.). In the case of interview participants, a fictional name was assigned to each and also the type of business degree programme they teach on (e.g. Applied or Traditional). Finally, each line of all

transcripts was numbered. For example Martha, Lecturer, Institute of Technology A-8:351 signifies: Martha, a lecturer in the Institute of Technology applied business programme, page 8, line 351. Or Cillian, Manager, University, 1:34 signifies: Cillian, a Manager in the University, page 1, line 34.

3.5 Validity, Reliability & Limitations

Limitations for any particular research study are inevitable and can influence the extent to which useful meaning can be derived in relation to the phenomenon being studied (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). I encountered a number of challenges during the implementation of this study and these include theoretical and practical limitations. Firstly, taking the ethical considerations and data analysis procedures into account, any research study faces difficulties in the area of validity, especially in the measurement of perspectives, attitudes and behaviour, as there are always doubts about the true meaning of responses made in surveys, interviews and self-reported accounts of behaviour. The data collection activities undertaken in this study are reliant on students and staff own reports in the form of responses to a survey or interview. These instruments are subject to a number of limitations.

With regards to reliability, as this is an education research study it deals with students, lecturers and managers in differing and ever-changing social and economic situations. While an individual person's report of his or her experience may be accurate, when it is aggregated with information from other people, it presents a snap-shot picture of a group of people, which is subject to change over time, as the composition of the group changes, or as some members of the group change their patterns of behaviour.

Ethical considerations also limit the choice of the research method used. A survey and interviews were the most appropriate tools for this type of study in order to meet the overall aim and objectives. It was necessary to target students by a survey tool so that I could capture detailed information on their student experience of the first year initiatives. Qualitative interviews are recommended when exploring a subjective topic (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2008). Interviews were a natural choice for me as I felt it was the best approach to gain a deep insight into experiences and ideas with the lecturers and managers. Denscombe (1996) supports this view and states that

qualitative interviews facilitate the collection of more detailed information from a smaller cohort of individuals.

Other limitations included the decision to use students and a small group of lecturers from business schools in both institutes. The reason for this was the fact that first year experience programme had only been introduced in the University business school so a similar school/discipline area in an Institute of Technology needed to be explored in parallel. I also made a decision to eliminate LWP student leaders from the study, as I felt the leader experience covers a broad set of impacts, which could be explored in an evaluation study, investigating the development of transferable skills. The main focus in this study was the first year student experience of LWP and SDM, the lecturers' experience of teaching SDM and supporting first years, and senior managers' views on managing change and supporting the first year experience in their institution.

Finally, the research findings in this study are specific to the higher education institutions studied and there is scope for naturalistic generalisation. The research findings in this study relate to the Institute of Technology and the University involved, at the time and place the research was carried out. Despite such limitations, a high percentage of students (20% overall including both Higher Education Institutions), nine lecturers and two senior manager interviews took place.

Conclusion

In this Chapter I have explained and offered a justification for the paradigm, the mixed methods strategy and data collection approach and analysis adopted for this study. The principle research methods chosen for this research study involved developing a questionnaire aimed at first year students and preparing an interview schedule aimed at lecturers and senior managers over two sites. Overall this Chapter explored the research process and the challenges encountered such as survey design, data collection, doing insider research, data analysis, ethical issues and validity and reliability. Chapter Four will explore the findings obtained as a result of the data analysis methods undertaken.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

Introduction

This Chapter presents the findings from the data analysis, which 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. The findings are discussed under three key sections: the first year student experience; the lecturer experience; and the senior manager experience. Themes emerged from each of the sections and are presented in Figure 4.6 at the end of the Chapter. In order to associate data with the relevant participant category (i.e. student, lecturer, manager), type of programme (applied or traditional) and the data tool (i.e. survey or interview), the procedures outlined in Chapter 3 are followed.

Figure 4.1 First Year Experience Initiatives - 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.*

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

- Section 4.1 – *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;
- Section 4.2 - *The Lecturers' Experience* explores the lecturers' involvement with the first year experience initiatives and how this influenced changes in their teaching practice;
- Section 4.3 - *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.

4.1 The First Year Student Experience

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

4.1.1 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

> The most thing I found difficult was writing essays at third level. I wasn't sure was I 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.

4.1.3 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 4.2 Institute of Technology Business Student Experiences of LWP Sessions

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

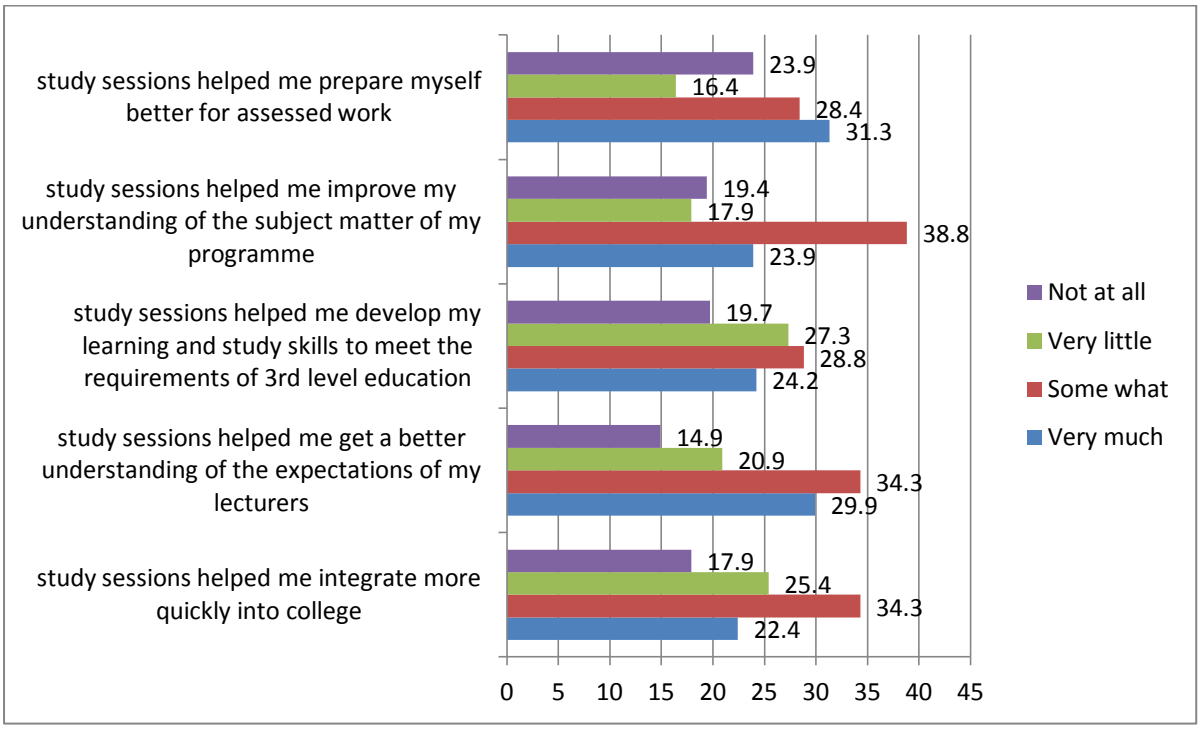
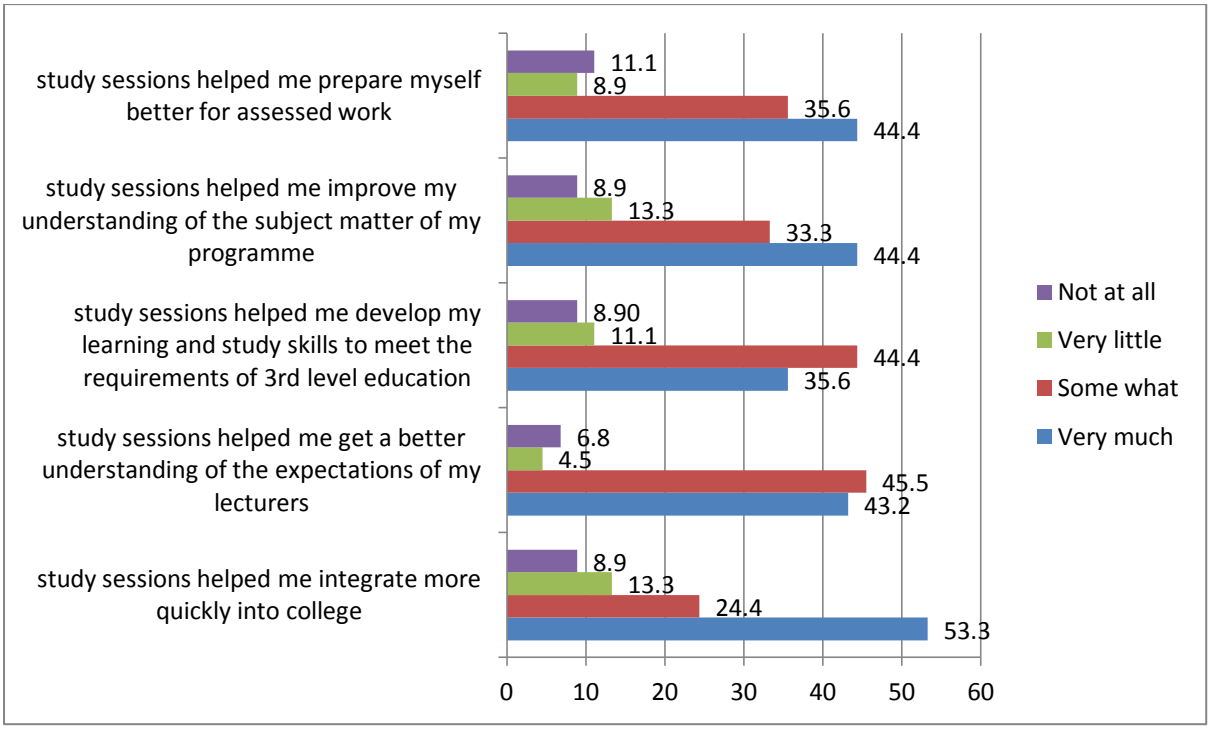


Figure 4.3 University Business Student Experiences of LWP Sessions

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

> The LWP sessions are very educative and highly recommended for any new student as it makes learning easy.
>
> Student, TB, Institute of Technology – 17:39

> LWP has been very helpful because as a first year student it's easier, for the most part, to interact with other students and people our own age when conversing about college life and advice on making the most of the time an individual spends here during their degree. Also, LWP gave me a chance to gain a firmer grasp of material I'd covered in each lecture I'd attended during the week. The method of reviewing covered topics which stand to benefit me now as I progress through the second semester.
>
> Student, TB, University – 16:34

All of 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:

> It had very little impact on my learning skills and development.
>
> Student, AB, Institute of Technology – 16:16

> 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.

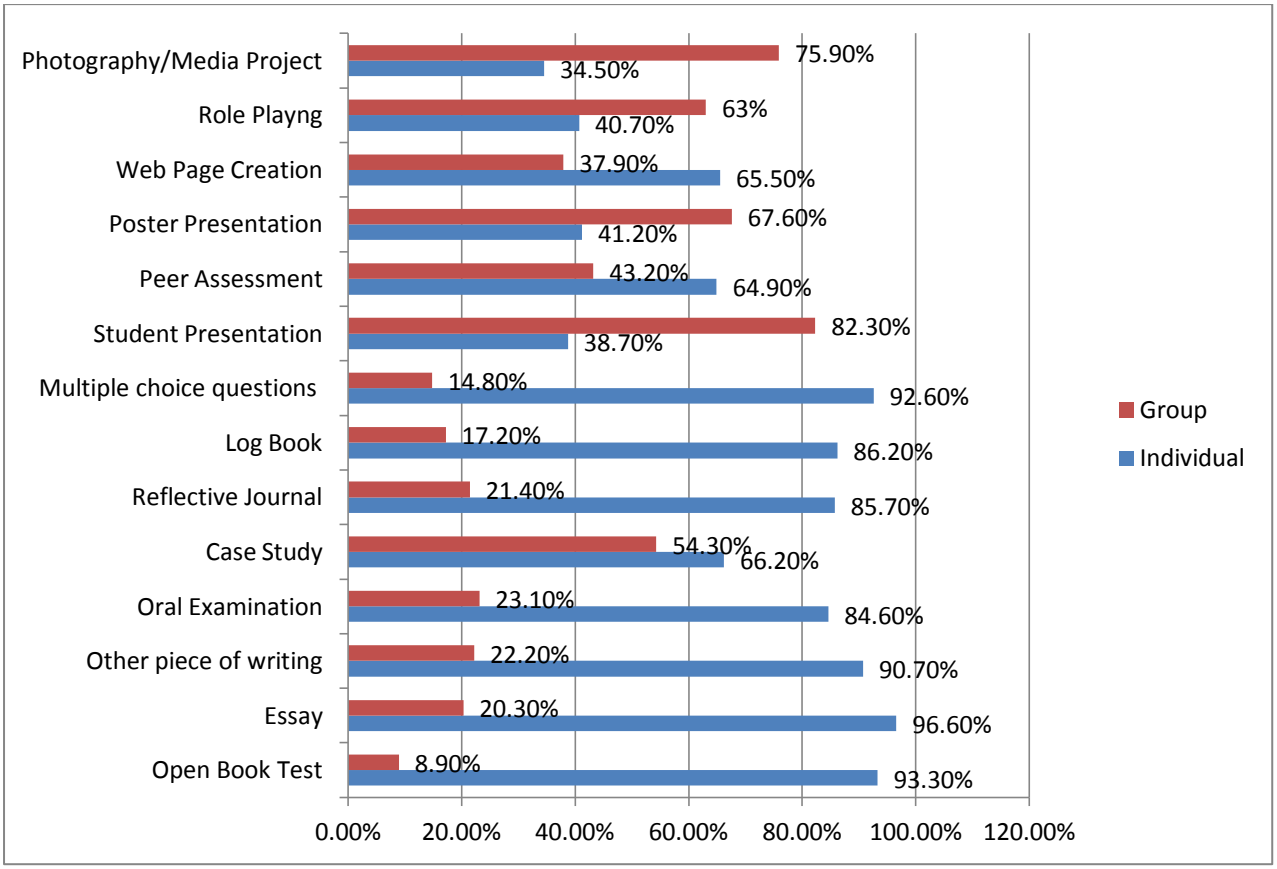
4.1.4 Student Experience of the Skills Development Module (SDM)

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 the Croke Park/Haddington Road agreements and other environmental factors discussed in Chapter one.

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 4.4 below).

Figure 4.4 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.

The comments below demonstrate the range of experiences and the impact SDM had on the learner and their development as a student.

> There were different types of learning techniques for different types of people.
> Student, AB, Institute of Technology – 24:23

> I learned more from the bibliography report as it taught me how to reference and not just website but books, journals, articles etc.
>
> Student, AB, Institute of Technology – 10:24

> I had to give a presentation on a topic of my choice. I learnt a lot from this because it was practical, involved choosing a subject of interest to me and then working on it in my own time and my own pace. I also find presentations helpful for general personal development and confidence and not just to convey knowledge of a specific subject.
>
> Student, TB, Institute of Technology – 24:2

> There were two activities I feel I learnt greatly from. One was the first group assignment where we had to do a photo challenge as a group. For example jumping in the air together…This helped me massively in getting to know my classmates....The second was finding out what type of learner you are. It really helped to discover how you learn the best. It really was beneficial when studying for exams and making learning more fun.
>
> Student, AB, Institute of Technology – 25:40

> The career goals assignment was the most effective for me as it helped me realise exactly where I want to go in life after college and helped me to clarify what I need to achieve in my time here in University.
>
> Student, TB, University – 23:16

These comments provide evidence of different kinds of positive outcomes gained from the SDM. In particular, group learning comes through strongly as an enjoyable learning activity. The group learning took many forms and required a range of challenges for the students to engage with.

> The group presentation, it was the most 'real-world' assignment. It helped with communication skills, project management skills as well as presentation skills. It was the only assignment on the course that I found of value.
>
> Student, TB, University - 24:40

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. I know my learning style and if we ever have a

group assignment again, I know the techniques and which one would be best suited.

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. The presentation we had to make was the most interesting experience in first year and the teacher went through all steps needed to do good presentation.

Student, AB, Institute of Technology -25:32

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 4.4 and figure 4.5 which presents the experience from each higher education institution.

Figure 4.5 Institute of Technology Business Student Experience of the SDM

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

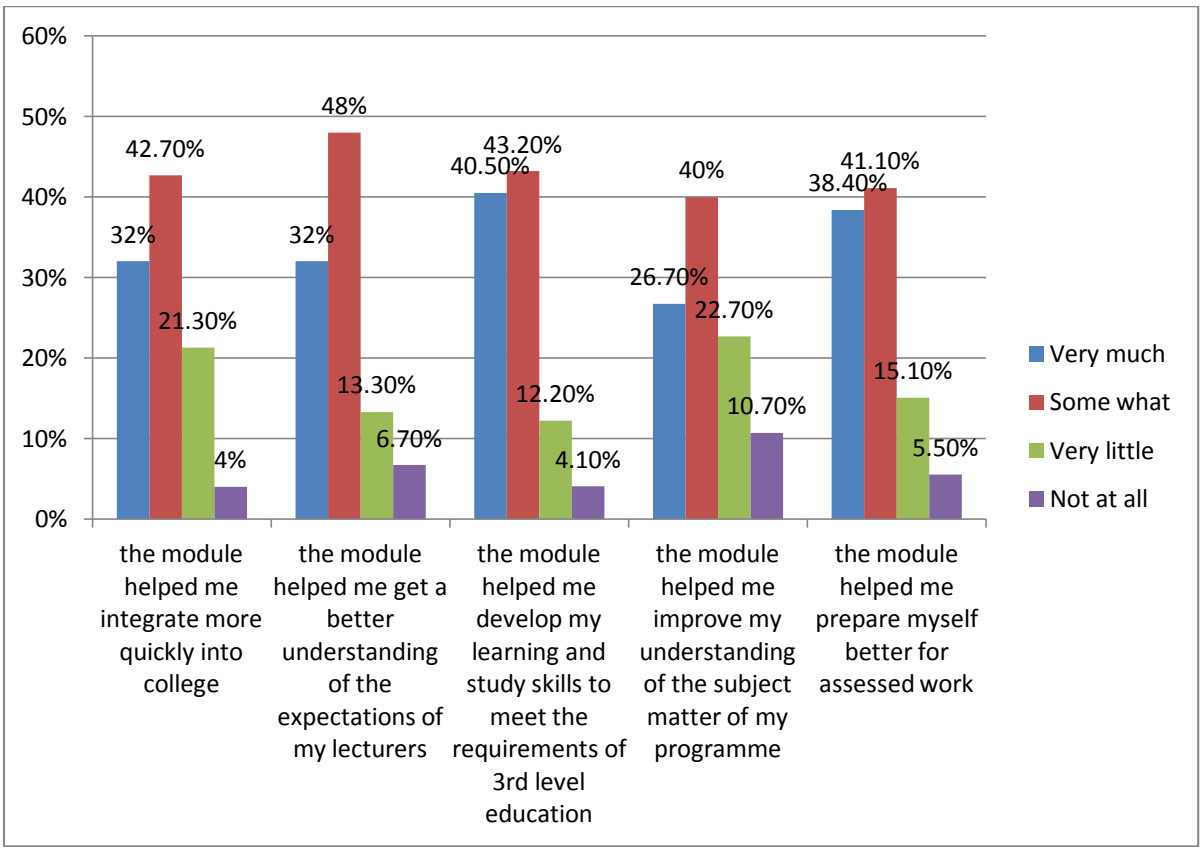
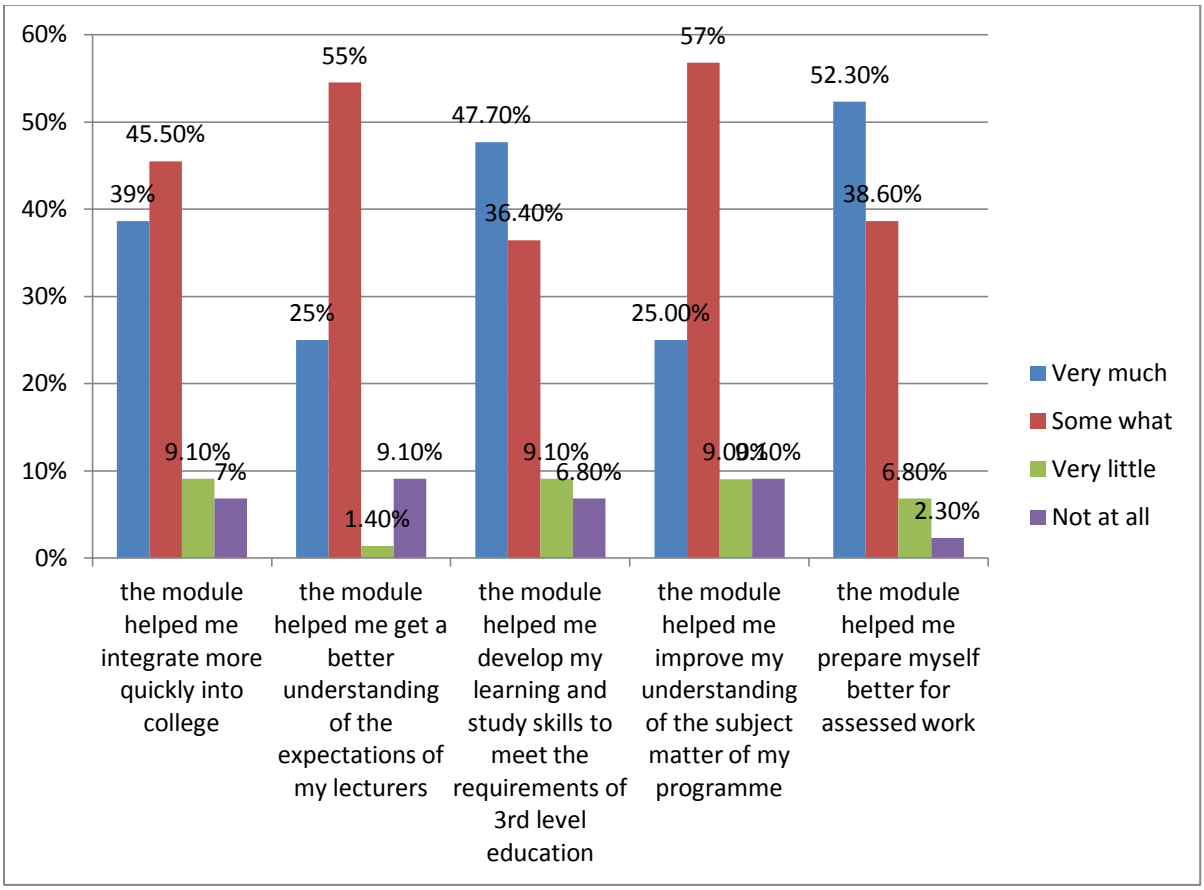


Figure 4.6 University Business Student Experience of the SDM

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



4.1.4 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.

4.2 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.*

4.2.1 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.

4.2.1.1 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.
>
> Mary, Lecturer, IoT TB-2:90

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.

> There are expectations on the lecturer.... How dare you not answer emails! You're a public servant. There is this attitude that was never there before.... So I've said that now painting a bleak picture of first years. They're great students by the time they go to second year and third year.... they are different kettles of fish altogether. Students who go and struggle in first year could be first class honour students in third year... I recall a superb master's student, however when I looked at first year results ... struggling. So I think even the very best of students can go through motivational issues, adjustment issues. The trauma of first year, well it's a big change for them.
>
> Rory, Lecturer, University, TB- 16:746

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.
>
> Ryan, Lecturer, IoT, AB-3:103

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.
>
> Rory, Lecturer, University, TB-3:102

This concept of learning groups established in the University will be discussed later in this Chapter under Teaching Approaches in section 4.2.2.

4.2.1.2 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.

4.2.2 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

A perspective is shared by Martha, a teacher on the applied business programme, where her initial expertise lies in teaching a foreign language:

> I'm very used to creating different tempos during the hour, to the listening, writing and speaking skills. We have to address all those in language teaching. So that's part of our training for 30 years...or however long I've been teaching... it wouldn't have changed perhaps as dramatically as somebody who would normally teach or lecture economics. We tend to teach language with active learners in mind, it has to be, it's a communication skill. Whereas if you're lecturing in economics, you're teaching to a much more passive audience.... and it wouldn't be as huge an impact as maybe somebody in that case.
>
> Martha, Lecturer, IoT AB- 7:299

Sarah talked of sharing her practical teaching approach and use of toolkits available through the library to support the module student experience.

> I had to make it as interesting as possible and get them involved. So I would really use a lot of toolkits that was in the library I found that quite good and we take a small idea, we could use it as a basis to illustrate a lot of the points we wanted to make in team building and conflict resolution you could do quite a lot. So a lot of the elements of the programme were put across in kind of a practical, well-developed way. That's the way I would have done this anyway.
>
> Sarah, Lecturer, IoT AB- 1:37

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, as noted by Andrew and Rory above, 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 that 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 (5:214).

On the traditional business programme, an interesting approach adapted by the lecturers involved 'peer teaching' an idea gained from the staff experience with the LWP programme in the IoT. Susan tried this with her mature student group on the part-time business programme.

> Well it's different, it's not the 18 year olds, they're all mature so you can't be asking them to do some of this, maybe you know the activities in the learning outcomes but you have to give them something meatier to do. So I set up a kind of peer learning session with them and then I gave them a question and they were to teach each other.... I think it did work quite well in a sense .... But I think that's what we were talking about with integration that the more you can integrate with other people it makes it more meaningful.
>
> Susan, Lecturer, IOT TB, 4:78

This approach was only tested with mature students and there is an underlying perception that the first years would not be able for this approach when in fact the students are engaging in weekly LWP sessions to work on developing these skills Susan describes. Again it is evident there is a disconnect and misunderstanding in relation to the two FYE initiatives available in the IoT and how they could potentially work together.

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. This is discussed further in Chapter 5, Discussion.

4.2.3 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.
>
> Susan, Lecturer, IoT TB- 6:252

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.
>
> Ryan, Lecturer, IoT AB- 7:294

Andrew believes the teacher who will succeed in engaging students with the SDM needs to be able to command an audience and have passion and interesting ideas. Some may lack the ability to engage students and this can be a real challenge for people who are academically or research focused, because it may not be in their nature to be creative in teaching practice or it may not be in their personality.

> It's working with first years and making that transition, an effective transition into University life requires an individual, in some respects who is going to have to display a little bit of passion with them and show real interest in them and an interest in the fact that they're not just there to absorb a body of knowledge that you're going to present to them over the course of 12 weeks. And that's significantly challenging for a lot of people who are in academic institutions because they may not necessarily have joined that academic institution with that type of skill set.
>
> Andrew, Lecturer, University TB- 8:367

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.
>
> Mary, Lecturer, IoT TB- 5:230

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.
>
> Rory, Lecturer, University TB- 5:217

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.
>
> Sarah, Lecturer, IoT AB- 6:261

4.2.4 Skills Development Module (SDM) Recommendations

The module name was cited frequently during the IoT interviews where there was a general consensus that the name did not fit well and this was having an impact on student engagement. Susan provides her feedback on this:

> My feeling was with the students that ... the name didn't suit them and they didn't really like it and they didn't really engage with it. And in fact, I think from each year, the quality of the student that we're getting, they seem to be more and more moving away from it that they don't want to really engage with it and that's my impression.
>
> Susan, Lecturer, IoT TB- 1:15

Susan commented on a survey that was undertaken with students to seek their feedback on a new name.

> Well we did.... survey them and it came up with ... few options... researching study skills .. or academic development skills.
>
> Susan, Lecturer, IoT TB- 8:372

Martha provides a different view, where she believes it is not the name that is the problem but the particular first student group that just doesn't want to engage with learning.

> Actually it turned out they had a problem with learning, everything. They were actually ... not being very cooperative in any class, I just happen to have them in The SDM also.
>
> Martha, Lecturer, IoT AB- 7:326

One suggestion from Joe is to have different names for the module depending on the school discipline area:

> If in principle the academic council are happy for it to remain on programmes, perhaps the solution is for locally schools or even programmes to decide what they want to call it. For administrative purposes it can continue to be called The SDM for example, but there's no reason why the same module could have a totally different name in two different schools or on two different programmes.
>
> Joe, Lecturer, IoT TB- 9:386

For the staff and students in the University, the name seems to be of no real concern and has had no reported impact on the lecturer or student experience. Andrew and Rory explained the University name fits well with students and connects with applied learning modules offered in year 2 and 3, so students see a connection and a purpose to the module from the first term in the University.

In relation to the module delivery, Ryan and Sarah commented on the potential for the module to be partly delivered online:

> Probably an element of it online... Reusable learning objects left in cyberspace…or Moodle.
>
> Ryan & Sarah, Lecturers AB- 6:272

Moving on to resources and institutional support, Rebecca commented on the investment by the IoT which has supported teaching and student engagement with the module.

> Really good new classrooms, they have really good smart boards and…this came from a SIF funding programme following requests for SDM facilities. And now we work hours into them too so that's helpful, you know, so I'm always timetabled into those classrooms.
>
> Rebecca, Lecturer, IoT AB- 4:175

In the University, Rory and Andrew spoke about management's aspirations to support the student experience. There are many obstacles however, holding this back due to limited resources as a result of the current economic conditions in Ireland and education budget cuts, as discussed in Chapter 1. The question they 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

> 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

> I would like to see much more smaller group teaching but for that to work requires substantial resource allocation.
>
> Rory, Lecturer, University TB- 19:875

Martha shared her experience in relation to lecturers supporting each other and how this has had a positive impact on learning to deliver the module effectively.

> I think as I moved along, was, one thing... that was very supportive was discussion with other SDM lecturers. I think that was really helpful because everybody was experimenting and finding out what worked and so we would share that, I think that was a very good strength to it, because we were all learning.
>
> Martha, Lecturer, Institute of Technology AB- 8:351

4.2.5 Lecturer Demands and Expectations

Some lecturers have expressed feeling 'stressed' teaching the module to first years. Joe from the IoT traditional business programme explains how he struggles with teaching to large groups which he believes should never have been allowed.

> We have to teach stress management... clearly walking in.... the students are not 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

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. This will be discussed further in section 4.3 where the managers share their experiences of managing first years and development plans for the future.

4.3 The Senior Manager Experience

The findings in this section cover the senior managers' perspectives of the first year experience initiatives and the impact on resources, policy formulation and strategic plans. 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 talked 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 (see Appendix 4 and Chapter 1).

> 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[12]. 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 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?
>
> Dylan, Manager, Institute of Technology, 3:141

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,

[12] 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.

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.
>
> Cillian, Manager, University, 13:566

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.
>
> Dylan, Manager, Institute of Technology, 2:70

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 xyz 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 about to be 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.
>
> Dylan, Manager, Institute of Technology, 5:201

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.
>
> Cillian, Manager, University 14:632

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.
>
> Dylan, Manager, Institute of Technology, 6:250

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.

Conclusion

To conclude, the major themes that emerged from the data analysis are outlined in Figure 4.7. This Figure maps the themes to key categories that emerged from analysis of the data from the first year student questionnaire and the interviews with the lecturers

and senior managers. The major themes include; *creating connections; making friends; understanding expectations; creating learning communities; teaching challenges;* and *resourcing and supporting the first year experience.* These themes will be discussed with reference to the literature in Chapter 5 Discussion. Furthermore, in both institutions, the first year experience has been embedded into a range of strategies and policies and this will be discussed further in reference to the literature in Chapter 5 Discussion.

Figure 4.7 Summary of Findings

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

Introduction

This Chapter discusses some of the main findings presented in Chapter 4 with reference to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and relates directly to the research questions:

1. How is engagement with the first year experience initiatives (i.e. LWP and SDM) impacting on the students' experience with higher education?
2. How is the lecturers' involvement with the first year experience initiatives influencing changes in their teaching practice?
3. What are the senior managers' perspectives and how are the first year experience initiatives informing institutional change?

These questions and key themes that emerged from the data analysis will be discussed over three section headings (5.1-5.2). Each section discusses the findings from a mix of study participants with reference to the literature.

- Section 5.1 - Student Engagement with the First Year Experience Initiatives (i.e. LWP and the SDM).
- Section 5.2 - Teaching, Learning and Assessment Approaches.
- Section 5.3 - Managing Change.

5.1 Student Engagement with First Year Experience Initiatives

Student findings reported in this study include perspectives on the social, personal and academic challenges involved in moving from second to third level education and their experiences with the first year experience initiatives, LWP sessions and the SDM.

With regard to the challenges encountered by the first year business students in this study, they seem to be common to most students entering higher education regardless of discipline. There is evidence in the literature that supports this claim for example, Yorke and Longden (2004) found that two thirds of withdrawals happen during or at the end of the first year and there are a number of factors cited that make it difficult for students to adjust to third level education 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 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). Similar challenges were reported by first year students in this study, in particular the key themes that emerged included *creating connections, making friends, belonging,* and *understanding what is expected at third level.*

This study examined two first year experience initiatives which took place in a classroom environment (i.e. LWP and SDM). The findings from both initiatives presented in Chapter 4 demonstrate that they were effective environments for engaging students with their programme of study. This is supported by Krause (2007) who takes a broad view of student engagement and has identified three environments in which students may become engaged with their learning including: in the classroom or conducting study-related activities; participation in out-of-class activities located either on campus (e.g. student clubs, sports, mentoring programmes) or off campus (e.g. paid part-time employment); or in the workplace (i.e. skill-based employment training). Other processes and characteristics of student learning in higher education as cited by Crehan (2013) include development of critical thinking; motivational effects; self regulated learning; and the effects of student centred approaches and active learning (Felder & Brent, 1996; Barr & Tang, 1995; Lea, 2003; O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). In this study in the LWP classroom environment and through the SDM assignments student engagement emerged in many forms and examples included: *group work; discussions; networking; research; problem solving; and creating.*

Thomas (2012) described the importance of students having a strong sense of belonging in higher education and this is effectively nurtured through mainstream activities with a clear academic purpose in which all students participate. The skills development module and the LWP sessions explored in this research study demonstrated good examples of mainstreamed activities where students engaged well and to different degrees depending on: the teacher; the institute; and the type of business degree programme they were studying (i.e. applied and traditional). This is demonstrated in the recurring themes that emerged in the findings in Chapter 4 where students described their experiences in the LWP sessions with student leaders as: *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 student leaders. In contrast the student experience with the SDM which was led by the lecturer covered academic skills development topics such as: *time management; plagiarism; personal development plans; research skills; communication skills; note taking methods; stress management; and team work.*

It is clear from the findings in Chapter 4 that the LWP student-led learning initiative provided peer support which helped students settle into college life and make new friends while also helping students tackle exams and assignments on their course. All of this was achieved through building a support culture and connecting senior and first year students on the same programme. Findings from the University experience in Chapter 4 explained the benefits gained from 'building small learning communities' through the LWP programme has resulted in students learning how to help each other, creating connections and supporting each other and this is all having an impact on engaging students better with their degree programme of study. In contrast, the SDM led by the lecturer is developing the academic skills required in order to be a successful student in first year and beyond. This links appropriately to the concept of first years' need to belong, which emerged as a key idea from the literature and it is closely aligned with the concepts of academic and social engagement. Goodenow (1993b) explains a sense of belonging in educational environments as students' sense of being accepted and valued. All of this links to the connection theme that emerged in this study where students want to feel part of the classroom and college life and are being supported.

Looking at the LWP student led learning experience findings alone, Couchman (2008) explains that students learn by being socialised into the particular ways of thinking, speaking and writing valued in the institutions and disciplines they study. Overall, students indicated a positive experience with the LWP sessions, 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. In the University 75% agreed (*scale: somewhat to very much*) that LWP sessions helped develop learning and study skills to meet the requirements of third level education. This statement equated to 53% in the Institute of Technology. Topping (2005) argues that students that

attend more than five LWP sessions will gain greater appreciation of peer learning environments and they develop skills to support their progression. In this study a higher attendance rate was reported in the university, however this is partly attributed to the 'University Student Attendance Policy' in place and the fact that participation in LWP sessions is worth 10% of the SDM - therefore there was an incentive for students to attend. This finding poses the question of whether an attendance policy needs to be implemented in the IoT, which may result in engaging more students in LWP sessions. Several studies and reports (Topping and Ehly 1998; Holton 2001; Nestel and Kidd 2005; Ritter *et al.* 2008; Morosanu *et al.* 2010; Tuckman and Monetti 2010) show that peer assisted learning programmes usually address problems such as academic failure, cognitive and metacognitive strategies deficit, and difficulties in social integration. Studies also suggest that these types of benefits can only be achieved by students attending LWP sessions regularly throughout a term or an academic year.

Furthermore, the SDM findings reported on how it contributed to students' knowledge, skills, and personal development and this supports Pascarella (2005) argument that two-thirds of the gains students make in knowledge and cognitive skill development occur in the first two years of college. In this study, the IoT students rated working with others and developing confidence as the main gains from both FYE initiatives - however 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%). Furthermore, Pascarella (2005) reported that the first college year is critical not only for how much students learn but also for laying the foundation on which their subsequent academic success and persistence rest, as nearly two-thirds (63%) of the gains students make in critical thinking skills occur in the first two years of college (Reason *et al.* 2006). Therefore it is encouraging to note the positive student experiences reported in this study and how the SDM developed students' thinking abilities.

5.2 Teaching, Learning and Assessment Approaches

In a lecture environment, it is claimed that students' attention begins drifting after 10- 15 minutes and they are asked and respond to questions for less than 10% of the class time (Pilner and Johnson 2004). This paucity of time for interaction with and among students is especially noteworthy given that there is an inverse relationship between lecture listening time and critical thinking (Alters and Nelson 2002). Therefore, in order to become active learners, students need teachers to use methods that involve them in grasping important concepts. Only 10-30% of lecturers use methods other than traditional lectures as their primary pedagogy (Alters and Nelson 2002). The lecturers' reported on their approaches to teaching first years the SDM. This included a range of techniques such as: traditional lectures; note taking; games; presentations; role play; and class discussions. On review of the teaching and learning approaches deployed in the SDM, the lecturers in both HEI's reported similar difficulties and challenges dealing with first year students. Differences emerged however, depending on the individual teacher delivering the module and their own teaching philosophy and approach.

It is worth noting some of the more creative examples of lecturers engaging students in the classroom came from the applied business programme in the Institute of Technology. The teaching, learning and assessment approaches chosen for first year groups are critical to engaging students effectively with course content and this all helps in retaining students on programmes. One approach taken in this study was active learning and this plays an important role in teaching practice in higher education according to Bonwell & Eison (1991) in (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) describe active learning practice as focusing on a variety of tools that cognitively engage learners to explore ideas, accumulate knowledge and develop schema. They argue 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. In this study, in both HEI's, these examples were transferred through a variety of techniques in the LWP sessions and in the SDM in the form of: group

work; case studies; worked examples; field research; peer teaching; project work; debate and the use of games.

Bingham (1999) in O'Farrell (2009) recommends educators list different skills and competencies that they would like their students to achieve based on the module learning outcomes and that this should inform the assessment plan. Furthermore, Biggs (2007) describes the importance of both formative and summative assessment in all modules to support student engagement. Formative and summative assessment are interactive and they seldom stand alone in construction or effect - what is important is the student experiences that lead to the learning outcomes (Gipps, McCallum & Hargreaves, 2000, in WEI, 2011).

In this study, the most common assignment in the SDM reported in both HEI's was a group assignment which involved delivering an oral and poster presentation. Another popular group assignment was a photography/media project. Individual learning 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. From the findings presented it seems that 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 for IoT students undertaking an applied business programme in the Institute of Technology. Furthermore the first year students explained the learning activity in the SDM that they learned the most from and why. Feedback included: *referencing; learning styles; teamwork; essays; mind maps; presentations; creative problem solving; and research skills.* In particular the first year students noted how they enjoyed discovering how they learn and their surprise at how much fun it could be, with some students noting that it was the only assignment on the course that they found of value. These findings provide evidence of the positive impact the SDM assessments had on the learners and their development as a student. All of this is linked to the goals of active learning and assessment strategy as discussed in the literature and supports better student engagement. The findings, however did suggest problems from the lecturers' perspective in relation to the SDM learning outcomes and the assessment strategy and differences emerged between programmes and the lecturer delivering the module. Some students also reported negative experiences in relation to module

content and the assessments. Therefore, it can be argued that the strength of an assessment method lies in collaborating with colleagues in a school, deploying practical and creative approaches and negotiating with students on how the assessment will be delivered and marked.

Moving on to the development of teaching staff, for both institutions in this study there was evidence of reflection and learning as a result of the experience of teaching the SDM and engaging with first year students. This was evident in a broad range of ideas, in particular: *staff development; the impact on teaching practice; the module descriptor; the module name; delivery modes; and institute resources.* A key finding is the emergence of a collaborative culture where lecturers are supporting each other and sharing resources and experiences of teaching the SDM. This finding suggests that assigning time for lecturers to network and share resources with each other can prove very beneficial to the students and rewarding to the lecturers. Furthermore, learning from mistakes and trying new approaches such as team teaching in induction week and front loading material has had an impact on student engagement during the first few weeks of college in the IoT. This echoes themes in the literature on sharing teaching experiences where thoughtful writing and teaching depend heavily on tacit knowledge (Enakrire and Uloma 2012). Tiwana (2002) defines knowledge as a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, expert insight and grounded intuition that provides an environment and framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. Many researchers describe academic practice partnerships, both formal and informal, as key to sharing knowledge and working with colleagues effectively. However, the key to success in academic practice partnerships is a shared vision and philosophy, according to Erickson and Raines (2011). All of this indicates that teaching the SDM has had a positive experience on the lecturers and has resulted in sharing and increased collaboration as a result of shared goals and an understanding of first year student needs.

5.3 Managing Change

The key themes that emerged from the senior manager interviews included: *retaining students; managing change in higher education; and collaboration of academics, executives and partners in sustaining student engagement initiatives*. Williams (2001) for example 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. This echoes with the senior managers' perspectives that emerged from this study. In particular, the managers discussed first year challenges and retaining students on degree programmes and how this is impacted on institutional policy formulation, the allocation of resources and strategic plans.

Retention is a common theme in the first year experience literature, where Braxton (2000) describes it as the "student departure puzzle". Consideration must be given to the reasons why students withdraw from a programme in the first year. Yorke *et. al* (2004) argues 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 powers of an institution (Tinto, 1988). The Higher Education Authority (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. Furthermore, the total loss of income to an institution when one student drops out equates to £24,300, this figure is close to the Irish HEIs which ranges from €24,000-28,000 depending on the discipline area (Ginty and Harding, 2013). Overall the impact of non-progression is a principal concern for the managers in both institutions in this study. 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). Both managers in this study

shared their views on retention and how they have worked on creating the right environment for students to progress well in their studies.

Both senior managers' recognised the value of investing in the first year student experience to help retain students. There was no reference however, to the economic value of investing in teacher training and development and the value this may also bring to supporting student engagement and retention long term. In the literature, it is widely accepted that high quality teachers are the most important asset of schools 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. Policy proposals can range quite broadly and focus on closer regulation of quality. Hanushek (2011) continues that these policy deliberations seldom include even the most rudimentary economic analyses or evaluations. Findings from this US study do pose questions for Irish higher education policy and leadership and on whether there is a true value placed on the teachers' impact on the student experience. In the Irish higher education strategy 2030, there is no reference to the economic value placed on a third level lecturer and the impact they can have on the student experience and their engagement with their programme of study. In this study, there was reference made to the strategy on learning and teaching and developing staff through undertaking post graduate certificates and diplomas in teaching in both institutions. However, with all the cutbacks on staff recruitment and the increased workload, it is difficult for lecturers to find time to invest in their development. It can therefore be argued if lecturers were given more time to research and develop their teaching skills, this could be of great economic benefit to the institution and help retain students and support engagement in year one and beyond.

In this study, the senior managers both described the policies and strategies in place and outlined the objectives in relation to student engagement and the first year experience. It was evident that the institutions recognised the value of building policies to support and sustain student experience initiatives. However, there seems to be a disconnection between the lecturers' perspectives and the senior managers' understanding of what it takes to resource, fund and sustain these initiatives long term. The findings in Chapter 4 (see section 4.2) reported on the lecturers' time management challenges and resource

needs. Although senior managers are committed to supporting the FYE and indicated this in a range of strategy and policy documents, seems to be is a lack of understanding in relation to the 'ideal resource team' required to support the student experience effectively. Senior managers recognise there are many challenges in supporting and sustaining these types of FYE initiatives long term, but coming up with an ideal solution is difficult in the current economic environment. Carter and Halsall (2000) explains that the expansion of higher education raises questions about the nature and purpose of the sector because it challenges existing structures and cultures. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) state that multiple forces operate in multiple settings to influence student engagement, learning and persistence. In addition, the needs of students to learn at times and in places of their own convenience must be recognised. The responsibility for shaping the student experience lies with a range of stakeholders in the learning institution. However, leadership and an understanding of what resources are required to manage change effectively are in the hands of the leaders and managers. If change is managed effectively, it can impact on student and staff engagement in a positive way. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005 p.602) argues that:

> the impact 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.

In order to manage change effectively, the managers in both institutions explained their thinking on this subject and the approaches they have taken to implement new ideas across the institutions. Some examples include establishing new learning and teaching committees across the institution to work on ideas and policies to support the first year experience. In particular the Institute of Technology has established a Learning Development Centre which has a bottom up approach where colleagues across the institute are working on a range of strategic pillars from the institute learning and teaching strategy. In the University they have appointed a Vice President of the Student Experience and an academic lead in each college across the campus. In parallel to these new approaches that have taken place, the higher education sector has been subject to a plethora of change. Jones *et. al* (2012) explains that: an increase in managerial control; increased scrutiny alongside greater devolved responsibility; and a remodelling of

structures and operations on organisations. Furthermore, 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, both managers in this study recognise that the higher education sector requires a less hierarchical approach that takes account of its specialised and professional context and for these reasons learning and teaching policies and strategies have engaged a range of stakeholders from across the institutions in order to achieve goals. This is in line with Jones *et al* (2012) thinking where he explains that in order to build sustainable leadership a new, more participative and collaborative approach to leadership is needed that acknowledges the individual autonomy that underpins creative and innovative thinking. The actions described by both senior managers in this study make a statement to the stakeholders that the first year is of strategic importance. In particular, the University's appointment of a VP for the Student Experience demonstrates to the students and the staff that there is a dedicated resource committed to managing the students' learning experience throughout their journey with the institution.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

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 Chapter concludes with the major findings of the study noting the limitations and makes recommendations. It also identifies possible future research work relevant to the findings.

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.* Figure 4.7 (p.88) provides a summary of the findings and common themes that emerged from the participants in this study.

6.1 Study Limitations

I encountered a number of challenges during the implementation of this study and these include theoretical and practical limitations. Firstly, taking the ethical considerations and data analysis procedures into account, any research study faces difficulties in the area of validity, especially in the measurement of perspectives, attitudes and behaviour, as there are always doubts about the true meaning of responses made in surveys, interviews and self-reported accounts of behaviour. The data collection activities undertaken in this study are reliant on students and staff own reports in the form of responses to a survey or interview. These instruments are subject to a number of limitations as outlined in Chapter 3.

With regards to reliability, as this is an education research study it deals with students, lecturers and managers in differing and ever-changing social and economic situations. While an individual person's report of his or her experience may be accurate, when it is

aggregated with information from other people, it presents a snap-shot picture of a group of people, which is subject to change over time, as the composition of the group changes, or as some members of the group change their patterns of behaviour.

Other limitations included the decision to use students and a small group of lecturers from business schools in both institutions. The reason for this was the fact that first year experience programme had only been introduced in the University business school, so a similar school/discipline area in an Institute of Technology needed to be explored in parallel. I also made a decision to eliminate LWP student leaders from the study, as I felt the leader experience covers a broad set of impacts, which could be explored in an evaluation study, investigating the development of transferable skills. The main focus in this study was the first year student experience of LWP and SDM, the lecturers' experience of teaching SDM and supporting first years, and senior managers' views on managing change and supporting the first year experience in their institution.

Furthermore, I had a professional association with the study topic, as an educational programme manager (2008-2011) I was instrumental in establishing the LWP programme in both institutions. However, I believe I have been true to the data and the findings presented and remained impartial and unbiased in the reporting. The steps I undertook to ensure this included verification and checking the participants' agreement with interpretation. The research findings in this study relate to the Institute of Technology and the University involved, at the time and place the research was carried out. Despite such limitations, a high percentage of students (20% overall including both Higher Education Institutions), nine lecturers and two senior manager interviews took place. Finally, while the research findings in this study are specific to the higher education institutions studied there is scope for naturalistic generalisation and the findings could be transferable to other contexts.

6.2 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.

6.3 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 (see Appendix 7). 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.

6.4 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 the 'student experience' needs to be established that manages the academic and social development of the students in first year and beyond, supports teaching staff collaboration initiatives and drives this forward.

With regard to policies and procedures, a new retention policy is planned 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.

6.5 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.

6.6 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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Appendices

Appendix 1 Gaining Access – Communication Tools

Letter:

December 2012

Dear Institute of Technology/University,

I am currently undertaking a MLitt in Education with the School of Education in NUIG. My research study is titled '*Supporting the first year experience in higher education; impact on student engagement and on teaching practice'.* I am writing to invite you to take part in this study.

The main aim of this research study is to investigate the impact of first year learning support initiatives available in higher education in Ireland. The study will investigate how the first year experience initiatives impact student engagement in an Irish institute of technology and university and explain if and how this informs change, particularly in relation to how academics teach, assess and support students during this critical first year.

The data collection plan is outlined below.

- **Part 1 January 2013 An Electronic Survey**
  Participants: First Year Students

  A questionnaire is aimed at first year students in Business degree programmes to explore if and how first year learning support initiatives have impacted student engagement.

- **Part 2 January - March 2013 Interviews**
  Participants: Lecturers

  Interviews with lecturers will take place to uncover the impact first year learning and support initiatives have had on their own teaching and learning approach and whether it is changing how lecturers engage with their students.

- **Part 3 April – May 2013 Interviews**
  Participants: Senior Manager

  A one to one interview with a Senior Manager in each HE institution will examine if and how the first year experience initiatives are informing institutional change.

I would anticipate the interviews will be conducted over one hour in a meeting room on campus. With regards to the online questionnaire, this will be circulated by email by an academic contact during in January 2013. This survey will be available for preview in advance of circulation at www.surveymonkey.com

I have enclosed a copy of the consent form/information sheet. All participants in the interview/focus group will sign the consent form and return it to me.

I hope that you find the attached project of interest and will be interested in working with me on it. Please feel free to contact me if you have any queries. Alternatively, you may wish to contact my supervisor, Dr. Josephine Boland, Senior Lecturer in Education, NUI Galway, email; josephine.boland@nuigalway.ie.

Yours sincerely,

_____

Carina Ginty

MLitt Education Student
School of Education, NUIG

Staff Consent Form / Information Sheet:

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Principal Investigator:

Dr. Carina Ginty, M.Litt. in Education Student, School of Education, NUI Galway.

Contact Address: Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, carina.ginty@gmit.ie, 091 742423/087 7469072.

Purpose of the Study:

The main aim of this research study is to investigate the impact of first year learning support initiatives available in higher education in Ireland. The study will investigate how the first year experience initiatives impact student engagement in an Irish Institute of Technology and University and explain if and how this informs change, particularly in relation to how academics teach, assess and support students during this critical first year.

What participating involves:

Interviews, March 2013

Participants: Lecturers' & a Senior Manager

Interviews with lecturers and a senior manager will take place to uncover the impact first year initiatives are having on their teaching practice and whether it is changing how academics engage with their students.

Voluntary Participation in and withdrawal from the study:

Both males and females are eligible to participate. The decision whether to participate in the study is entirely up to the individual. Participation is voluntary. A staff member can refuse to participate, or withdraw from the study at any time, and such a decision will not affect their relationship with their University or Institute either now or in the future. Nor will a refusal or withdrawal of participation result in the loss of any other benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Signing this form does not waive any of your legal rights

Data collection and confidentiality:

Please note the interview session will be recorded using an audio device. The transcript of the interview will only be available to the principal investigator of this study.

To ensure confidentiality of all of staff responses, you will be assigned a *Study ID* number.

Staff participation in this study involves no physical risk. There is the possibility of psychological risk if your answers were made public at any point. Because of that risk I am maintaining strict control over all data. The reason for assigning a *Study ID* and using that number to code all of staff answers is to reduce the risk that any answer given can be tracked

back to the staff member. The master list of *Study ID* numbers will be kept in a password-protected electronic file. Access to the protected file will be limited to the principal investigator and supervisor of this study, Dr. Josephine Boland, School of Education, NUIG.

All interview recordings and the transcripts will be stored electronically and access to the protected file will be limited to the principal investigator and supervisor of this study, Dr. Josephine Boland, School of Education, NUIG.

Study benefits:

There are a number of benefits to staff who participate.

Benefits to staff may include a better understanding of whether and how higher education study and mentoring support initiatives contributes to the development of first year students and enhanced awareness of their teaching practice and the importance of engaging students in the classroom.

The thesis will be available to read on completion of the M.Litt. in Education.

Costs to the participants:

There are no costs for participating in this evaluation.

Statement of consent:

I have reviewed the research design outlined above and have had any questions I have about the purpose of the study answered to my satisfaction. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice. Signing this form does not waive any of my legal rights.

By signing below, you are indicating that this form has been explained to you, that you understand it, and any questions you have about the study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing to participate in the study at this time only.

I ACKNOWLEDGE THAT I HAVE READ THE ABOVE EXPLANATION OF THIS STUDY AND THAT ALL OF MY QUESTIONS HAVE BEEN SATISFACTORILY ANSWERED, AND I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

_____ Signature of study volunteer
_____ Printed name of study volunteer

Date _____

I CERTIFY THAT I HAVE EXPLAINED FULLY TO THE ABOVE SUBJECT THE NATURE AND PURPOSE, PROCEDURES AND THE POSSIBLE RISK AND POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY.

_____ Signature of principal investigator/designate
Date _____

Appendix 2 First Year Student Engagement Survey

The main aim of this research study is to investigate the impact of first year experience initiatives available in higher education in Ireland.

This survey takes 10 minutes to complete. To ensure confidentiality of all student responses, you will be assigned a Study ID number.

For further information on this study please contact carina.ginty@gmit.ie

Note: All students who complete the survey will be entered into a draw for a digital camera and Barbarista lunch vouchers value 40 euro. Please enter your mobile no. at the end of the survey to enter the draw.

1. I ACKNOWLEDGE THAT I HAVE READ THE DOCUMENT ATTACHED THAT EXPLAINS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY AND THAT ALL OF MY QUESTIONS HAVE BEEN SATISFACTORILY ANSWERED, AND I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

- ◯ YES
- ◯ NO

***2. How would you characterize your enrollment this academic year?**

- ◯ Full-time
- ◯ Part-time
- ◯ Repeating a year full-time
- ◯ Repeating some modules by attending

***3. Your gender**

- ◯ Male
- ◯ Female

***4. Are you a mature student (adult learner, over 23 years of age when you began your studies)?**

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

***5. Are you an international student?**

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

***6. What is the name of the (BB) Degree Programme you are currently undertaking?**

***7. What did you find most difficult or challenging about your first year in college?**

***8. How did the college support your learning and development in first year?**

- [ ] [redacted]Sessions - led by senior student leaders
- [ ] [redacted]Module - led by a lecturer
- [ ] Other First Year support scheme (please specify)

9. How many [redacted]study sessions did you attend in first year?

10. What did you cover in your [redacted] Sessions?

- [ ] Getting to know the City & the College
- [ ] Student services
- [ ] Using the library/ Researching/ Finding information
- [ ] Lecture reviews
- [ ] Exam revision/Assignment preparation
- [ ] Essay writing practice/Report writing practice
- [ ] Work placements discussion
- [ ] Citing references/Plagiarism
- [ ] Working out problems together
- [ ] IT Group Work
- [ ] Making friends and networking activities
- [ ] Other (please specify)

11. To what extent do you agree with the following statements

	Very much	Some what	Very little	Not at all
[redacted] sessions helped me integrate more quickly into college life	○	○	○	○
sessions helped me get a better understanding of the expectations of my lecturers	○	○	○	○
sessions helped me develop my learning and study skills to meet the requirement of third-level education	○	○	○	○
sessions helped me improve my understanding of the subject matter of my programme	○	○	○	○
sessions helped me prepare myself better for assessed work for modules (e.g., essays, projects, presentations, etc.) and exams	○	○	○	○

12. How has the [redacted] programme impacted your learning and development as a student today, please describe in the box below

***13. How often did you do each of the following in your [redacted] classes?**

	Very often	Often	Some-times	Never
A. Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions	◯	◯	◯	◯
B. Made a class presentation	◯	◯	◯	◯
C. Worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources	◯	◯	◯	◯
D. Worked with other students on projects during class	◯	◯	◯	◯
E. Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments	◯	◯	◯	◯
F. Put together ideas or concepts from different modules when completing assignments or during class discussions	◯	◯	◯	◯
G. Used an electronic medium (Web 2.0 tools, chat group, Internet, instant messaging, etc.) to discuss or complete an assignment with other classmates	◯	◯	◯	◯
H. Used Moodle/Blackboard	◯	◯	◯	◯
I. Discussed grades or assignment feedback with your lecturer	◯	◯	◯	◯
J. Discussed ideas from your class readings or class projects with your lecturer outside of class	◯	◯	◯	◯
K. Worked harder than you thought you could on assignments	◯	◯	◯	◯
L. Discussed ideas from your classes with others outside of class (students, family members, co-workers, etc.)	◯	◯	◯	◯

14. What did you cover in your [redacted] module?

- [ ] a. Time Management
- [ ] b. Plagiarism
- [ ] c. Types of Learners - Student Learning Profiles
- [ ] d. Methods of Notetaking e.g. Mind Maps
- [ ] e. Personal Development Plans e.g A Learning Log, A Learning Portfolio, An Artistic Statement
- [ ] f. Group Work / Team Skills
- [ ] g. Learning with Moodle
- [ ] h. Study Skills
- [ ] i. Research Skills - Finding Information
- [ ] j. Problem Solving Skills
- [ ] k. Communication Skills
- [ ] l. Presentation SKills
- [ ] m. Stress Management

Other (please specify)

15. Please select the range of assessment assignments you worked on - on your own or in a group?

	Individual	Group
Open Book Test	☐	☐
Essay	☐	☐
Other submitted piece of writing e.g paper review, book review, website review etc.	☐	☐
Oral Examination	☐	☐
Case Study	☐	☐
Reflective Journal	☐	☐
Log Book	☐	☐
Multiple choice questions/tests	☐	☐
Student Presentation	☐	☐
Peer (student) assessment	☐	☐
Poster Presentation	☐	☐
Web Page Creation	☐	☐
Role Playing	☐	☐
Photography/Media Project	☐	☐

Other (please specify)

***16. What class activity or assignment did you learn the most from and explain why?**

17. To what extent do you agree with the following statements

	Very much	Some what	Very little	Not at all
The [redacted] module helped me integrate more quickly into college life	◯	◯	◯	◯
The [redacted] module helped me get a better understanding of the expectations of my lecturers	◯	◯	◯	◯
The [redacted] module helped me develop my learning and study skills to meet the requirements of third-level education	◯	◯	◯	◯
The [redacted] module helped me improve my understanding of the subject matter of my programme	◯	◯	◯	◯
The [redacted] module helped me prepare myself better for assessed work on all modules (e.g., essays, projects, presentations, etc.) and exams	◯	◯	◯	◯

18. How has the [redacted] module impacted your learning and development as a student today, please describe in the box below

***19. Overall, to what extent have all the first year experience initiatives (i.e [redacted] and [redacted] Skills module or other First Year support schemes) helped you develop as a student and contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas?**

	PAL/PASS	L2L	Both	Neither
a. Writing clearly and effectively	◯	◯	◯	◯
b. Speaking clearly and effectively	◯	◯	◯	◯
c. Thinking critically and analytically	◯	◯	◯	◯
d. Working out problems	◯	◯	◯	◯
e. Using computing and information technology	◯	◯	◯	◯
f. Working with others	◯	◯	◯	◯
g. Learning on your own	◯	◯	◯	◯
h. Learning with other students/peers	◯	◯	◯	◯
i. Understanding yourself	◯	◯	◯	◯
j. Understanding people of other international and ethnic backgrounds	◯	◯	◯	◯
k. Development of creative skills	◯	◯	◯	◯
l. Developing a personal code of values and ethics	◯	◯	◯	◯
M. Developing confidence	◯	◯	◯	◯

Other (please specify)

20. Enter a mobile no. for the competition

Appendix 3 Lecturer & Senior Manager Interview Schedule

Lecturer Interview Schedule:

The impact first year learning and support initiatives (SDM) have had on your own teaching and learning approach and whether it is changing how you engage with your students.

Interview Question Set

What kind of challenges do you think first years face?

How is the institution dealing with this and supporting first years?

Describe the FYE support initiatives in place?

What has worked well and not so well?

Lessons learned?

Teaching Approaches

What teaching approaches do you employ to ensure active participation by the students?

Has involvement in the first year experience initiatives influenced changes in your academic/teaching practice?

Describe the impact of your involvement in teaching the SDM?

How has it impacted your approach to teaching other modules?

What kind of approaches do you employ to measure effectiveness of your teaching?

Challenges & Support

What kinds of challenges do you find teaching SDM?

What challenges come from course content?

Do you enjoy the freedom of being able to customise module content to the discipline

Focus?

What challenges come from students? *(e.g. different learning styles/diversity and*

levels in the classroom)

What challenges come from the institution?

Are there any supports the institute can provide to assist in how to teach SDM and support first years?

Changes & Future Developments

Would you change anything with the skills development module in future?

When evaluating the SDM what type of feedback do you receive from students?

What do they say that is positive?

What do they say that is negative?

Do you consider the title of the module is appropriate? If not, would you suggest an

alternative?

Senior Manager Interview Schedule:

Supporting the first year experience in higher education; impact on student engagement, on academic practice and institutional policy'.

Tell me about how the university/business school/institute supports first years?

What kinds of challenges do you think first years face?

What has worked well in supporting first years?

What has not worked so well?

How do you think staff feel about these initiatives?

What do you think Students say?

Describe the impact on you (perceptions of FY's / and on your role/office) as a result these FY initiatives?

Lessons learned?

How are academic staff supported in delivering the FYE initiatives?

Investment in FYE initiatives to date - further investment?

How are the first year experience initiatives informing institutional change?

University/IoT Policy developments linked to FYE initiatives

Is there more to be done…

Upcoming policy or strategic plans – are they addressing the transition to HE and aiding retention… discuss

Appendix 4 Institute of Technology Profile

The Institute of Technology Sector in Ireland:

- There were nearly 79,000 students enrolled in the Institute of Technology sector in 2011/12.
- Overall enrolments increased by 18.2% between 2007/08 and 2011/12 with enrolment increasing by 0.7% between 2010/11 and 2011/12.
- The number of new entrants to the Institutes of Technology increased in 2011/12 by 2.4% compared to the previous year, with an increase in male new entrants of 2.3% and an increase in female new entrants of 2.4%.
- Graduate output increased by 5.8% between 2010/11 and 2011/12. This comprises increases in undergraduate output of 6.4% and postgraduate output of 0.9%.

(HEA, 2012 p.13)

The Institute of Technology in this study, was established in the 1970s. It is a third level higher education institution with several campuses in Ireland. The total student population is approximately 7,000 and this includes seventy five nationalities who are studying a range of disciplines including: business; science; engineering; art and design; tourism and hospitality; computing and IT; nursing; social care; agriculture; teacher education; furniture design and manufacture.

Institutes' Mission:

The institutes' mission is to develop life-long learning opportunities through their teaching and research, by supporting regional development consistent with national higher education policy.

Institutes' Vision:

- Learning is the core activity of the Institute, bringing students, staff and the region together to share, apply, test and create knowledge;

- The institute will continue to develop as a regional organisation with an international focus committed to the personal and professional enrichment of its students, the needs of its region, national priorities and global opportunities;

- The institute will both shape and respond to the perspectives and expectations of its stakeholders and will work in collaboration with them to meet their needs;

- The institute will be an organisation characterised by its flexibility, creativity, responsiveness and a capacity to adapt.

The Institute of Technology is a multi-campus Institute, with each of its five campuses having distinctive strengths and programme offerings. It has 350 core academic staff (57% of total staff) and 300 core support staff (43% of total staff). The institute draws 84% of its students from the region and offers a diverse range of applied programmes with a vocational and professional orientation, in line with its mission statement, from apprentice up to Level 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications (see www.nfq.ie). There is also an international dimension embedded into programmes with numerous links with institutions abroad.

There are a number of access routes into the Institute of Technology covering standard and non-standard entry, and there is progression on all programmes leading to Level 8 awards on the NFQ, with exit awards embedded where appropriate. The institute also has delegated authority to offer research degrees at Level 9 in a broad range of disciplines, and up to Level 10 for aquatic science and mechanical engineering.

There are two Innovation Centres on campus providing a range of incubation resources and facilities for high potential start-up enterprises, along with enterprise formation training and mentoring. In addition the institute has established an Education Centre to promote pedagogic and learning technology development, and operates a funding programme for higher education degrees, short courses and conference attendance, to assist staff to upgrade their qualifications, particularly in higher education and pedagogy.

The Institute of Technology states that the core of its business is teaching that is research-informed, practice-led, and community-engaged, with work placement forming an integral part of many programmes. There is a strong emphasis on preparing first-year students for their academic life and programme engagement by offering a First-Year Experience (FYE), consisting of inter alia: a Skills Development Module (SDM) and a Learning With Peers (LWP) programme. Additional supports provided to students include a range of student services such as counselling, financial assistance, careers advice, and learning support.

To conclude, the Institute of Technology's strategic plan is built around five pillars and is aligned with the National Higher Education Strategy[13]. The five pillars include: Learning and Teaching; Student Environment; Research and Innovation; Student-Community Engagement; Internationalisation and Collaboration.

[13] See http://www.hea.ie/sites/default/files/national_strategy_for_higher_education_2030.pdf

Appendix 5 University Profile

The University Sector in Ireland:

- There were over 117,000 students enrolled in the University sector in 2011/12
- Overall enrolment increased by 13.2% between 2007/08 and 2011/12 with enrolment increasing by 2.1% between 2010/11 and 2011/12.
- The number of new entrants decreased by 1.5% between 2010/11 and 2011/12 with a drop in male new entrants of 1.6% and in female new entrants of 1.4%.
- Overall graduate output increased by 10.7% since 2007, with an increase of 1.5% between 2010 and 2011.

(HEA, 2012 p.13)

The University in this study was established in the 19th century. There are over 15,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students from over 90 countries. The University is research led and offers a range of degree programmes in the fields of arts, social science, and education studies; business, public policy and law; engineering and informatics; medicine, nursing and health sciences; and science.

University Mission:

The University is committed to a set of values and a programme of research and scholarship, which foster learning and leadership, and the development of the professional skills our graduates will require throughout their lifetimes

University Vision:

The University offers holistic educational and cultural experience to its diverse student body. The University is recognised nationally and internationally for innovation, excellence and leadership in selective and distinctive programmes of teaching research and scholarship. The programmes reflect the strengths of the University, national priorities, and the strengths of the region. The University seeks to develop and sustain effective strategic partnerships with relevant regional, national and international stakeholders and organisations.

The University is recognised for research innovations in: Biomedical Science and Engineering; Web Science; Human Rights; Marine Science, Energy and Environmental Science; Applied Social Sciences; and Public Policy Humanities, in particular literature and Theatre. Some notable achievements in recent years include:

- the restructuring of academic units into five colleges and sixteen schools;
- research income has doubled in the space of four years from €26 million to €52 million;
- a Learning and Teaching Centre was established to support teaching development and enhance student engagement;
- a 40% increase in international student intake;
- significant capital project investment has resulted in the completion of state of the art new faculty homes.

To conclude, the University has identified a number of strategic priority themes on which to focus and this includes: Teaching, Learning and Research; Infrastructure and Environment; Organisation and Staff; Regional Development; and Communications.

University Student Attendance Policy

General Principles with regard to student attendance and engagement in programmes of study, with particular relevance to the induction experience in first year.

Students will be provided with a clear, unambiguous message about the University's expectations in terms of successful engagement with university-level learning. This will be communicated at induction/orientation, in handbooks and appropriately referred to throughout the course of study. In student guides and support materials they may be phrased in a positive and encouraging tone, but the underlying message should be clear. All staff teaching first-year students should also be familiar with these expectations, many of which are within the University's formal Regulations and the Learning, Teaching & Assessment Strategy.

(1) Enrolment on a full-time programme means a commitment to 40-50 hours of total **student effort** per week throughout all the weeks of each semester.

- The scheduled classes (lectures, tutorials, laboratories, etc) are only one component of the total effort that is required in order to succeed.

- Assessments and assigned coursework are designed on the basis that students are undertaking the full effort required and are not just based on material covered in scheduled class time alone.

- Students should make sure that they timetable in their own diaries adequate time for study, reading, coursework and revision across the semester. Success at university level is not possible through cramming at the last minute.

- Such levels of engagement and activity will make it more likely that students will acquire a high level of knowledge and understanding of their chosen subjects, feel confident in their abilities and experience less stress during assessments and be better prepared for subsequent years.

(2) Enrolment on a university module or programme means a commitment to active participation and engagement, which includes **attendance** at all scheduled classes.

- Attendance is not optional, but an obligatory requirement. Non-attendance may be considered *de facto* withdrawal from a course and students may be unable to proceed to examination or subsequent registration. It is essential that first-year students are made aware of this requirement.

- The student grant (Student Universal Support, Ireland) scheme requires that attendance is monitored and reported on.

- Similarly, fees are paid by the State on behalf of students on the implicit understanding that the students are fully participating in the programmes for which they are registered.

- Many Schools and programmes already register attendance at each class and this should be continued. It is necessary, at the very least, to take attendance at key (or random) stages in the semester which can be reported for each School to Colleges and then to Academic Council.

- Research has shown convincingly that poor attendance results in lower levels of achievement and a higher chance of failure and withdrawal from programmes.

- If students have any concerns regarding the quality of the teaching or learning experience in any of their scheduled classes (or other components of their modules) they should provide feedback using the various channels at their disposal (for example, module questionnaires, Class Reps, Liaison committees) so that any issues may be resolved or considered, as appropriate. Non-attendance is not a means of raising any such issues and may be interpreted, rather, as a reflection of student commitment levels.

- Clearly, there will be extenuating circumstances faced by students from time to time, such as illness and other personal difficulties. Students in these situations should notify the appropriate person responsible for their course (this may need to be clarified in handbooks, websites, etc) so that appropriate measures can be taken.

(3) There are a number of **learning supports** available across the University, many of which are of relevance to all students regardless of College or year of programme.

- All first-year students will be enrolled on to the "Learning Centre" in Blackboard. This provides self-study materials on academic writing, study skills and revision ('Skills4Study" by Palgrave Macmillan). Students should be strongly encouraged to make use of this and other linked resources.

Appendix 6 Learning With Peers (LWP) Programme Descriptor

LWP (Learning With Peers): Supporting First Year Students

For most new students, coming to third level college is both an exciting new venture and an anxious experience. There are new people to meet, new friends to make and the opportunity to study in depth a subject you enjoy. At the same time, you'll probably be wondering whether or not you'll be able to keep up with your studies, write assignments to an appropriate standard, organise your time effectively and have the confidence to present your ideas in front of other people.

Wouldn't it be good if there were students from the year above who had been trained to guide you through all this?

Now, with the help of LWP, there is.

What is Learning With Peers (LWP)?

LWP is a peer assisted learning scheme that offers **cross-year support** between students on the same course. **LWP is run by students for students.** It encourages you to support each other and learn co-operatively under the guidance of a trained senior year student from the same degree course.

LWP aims to help you adjust quickly to college life, improve your learning and study skills, enhance your understanding of the subject content of your course and prepare better for your assignments and exams.

LWP sessions are intended to be supportive and friendly but also purposeful. In LWP, the emphasis is on everyone in the group working co-operatively to share subject-related news items, and develop their understanding of course topics or work to be assessed.

LWP is therefore about exploratory discussion lead by the LWP Leaders. The more everyone joins in these discussions, the better the sessions will work.

How can LWP benefit first year students?

As current students who have just completed the first year of the course, LWP Leaders are uniquely placed to help first years. They are experts in surviving the first year.

LWP Leaders receive training in how to run LWP sessions effectively and how to manage group discussions. They are also provided with resources that will help you develop your study skills and better understand the more challenging topics on your course.

Research undertaken at several British, North American universities and Irish third level colleges has indicated that LWP can be of considerable benefit to students. **LWP also leads to greater involvement with student life.**

How does LWP take place?

The LWP session for your programme will appear on your timetable. There will be a one-hour LWP session timetabled each week where you can work together as a group on course material or on another topic to be agreed by the group.

What can first year students discuss in LWP?

*The most important point about LWP is that **you** can decide what is to be discussed in your weekly LWP sessions.* Ask your LWP Leader to help you:

- with accommodation issues, travel or to share information on the best places to go
- find your way around campus
- with making friends and team building
- locate resources in the Library
- review lectures you've found really difficult
- analyse assignment questions
- discuss how to get the most out of lectures
- analyse note taking techniques
- practise your referencing skills or how to avoid plagiarism

- explore guidelines for getting the best from group work
- practise presentations

Anything may be covered, but please remember that the LWP Leaders are not lecturers, so they're not allowed to teach you - please do not ask them to!

Remember that the School Management, Lecturers and Programme Chairs have timetabled weekly LWP sessions to support you in your programme of study therefore first year students are required to attend their weekly LWP sessions so that you get the most from your programme and 3rd level education.

Appendix 7 Skills Development Module (SDM) Descriptor

University SDM Module Descriptor:

Objective	The objective of this course is to assist students in developing skills that are necessary for success at university and subsequently in their working lives. Delivered using a blended learning approach, the course combines on-line activity, small group workshops and large group lectures to focus on areas such as academic writing, academic research, creative thinking, presentation skills and career planning.
	The Career Development Centre will be involved in supporting aspects of this module.
Times	Lectures: Tuesdays 1pm-2pm : Thursdays 5pm-6pm Skills Workshops: Each student will be required to attend a one hour workshop during each of the weeks starting from 16-Sep-13 through to 14-Nov-13. You have been assigned to a particular session during the week along with your learning community colleagues. Peer-Assisted Learning Workshops: Each student will be required to attend a one hour PAL workshop each Friday starting from Friday 13-Sep-13 through to 15-Nov-13. You have been assigned to a particular session each Friday along with your learning community colleagues.

Overall Learning Outcomes	Upon completion of this course you will be able to: • Write in a manner required for academic writing at third-level education, acknowledge sources of information and cite and reference works; • Appreciate many of the aspects required for effective self-management at third-level education; • Demonstrate improvement in computer skills; • Make an oral presentation of project work • Engage in creative problem solving in a group setting • Appreciate opportunities offered at third-level to widen your learning experiences; • Research an academic topic, retrieve information about it and document the research; • Begin development of career goals.
Format	The course comprises of lectures weekly across 12 weeks, plus one weekly 1-hour skills workshop & one weekly 1-hour PAL workshop. The PAL workshops commence in Week 1 and run until Week 10. The skills workshops commence in Week 2 and run until Week10.
Assessment	This course will be assessed by 100% continuous assessment, comprised of: 1. Academic Writing & Research Assignment 20% 3. Skills Workshops and Arts in Action event attendance 15% 4. Peer-Assisted Learning Workshops attendance 15% 5. MS-Excel Assignment 10% 6. Career Assignment 10% 7. Group Project Assignment 25% 8. Group Project Presentation 5% **Important note**: The Skills and Peer-Assisted Learning workshops component of assessment, as well as the Arts in Action event component are not repeatable in this academic year. Non-engagement with these components and any subsequent requirement to repeat the module will lead to assessment for the repeat in this academic year out of a maximum of 70%.

Workload	Credit weighting:	5 ECTS
	Lecture hours:	24
	Workshop hours:	17
	Group assignment work:	24
	Independent work:	60
	Total Student Effort:	125 hours

Core Texts:

Cottrell, S. (2013) *The Study Skills Handbook*.. Palgrave Macmillan. 4th Edition.

Pears, R. A and Shields, G. (2010) *Cite them right: the essential referencing guide*. Palgrave Macmillan. 8th Edition

As these textbooks will be used extensively through the module, students should purchase their personal copies from the University bookshop.

Secondary Texts:

Cameron, S.(2005) *The Business Student's Handbook*, London: Prentice Hall, 3rd edition.

There are also many skills-related textbooks in section 658 of the Library.

In addition, relevant reading material will be identified prior to class.

Agenda:

Topic	Readings
Week 1 (week starting Mon 09-Sep-13) • Course introduction, rationale, approach and assessment **Outcomes: You will be able to …** • Understand the rationale for this module and what is required of you for successful completion *PAL Workshop – No for those not scheduled for Library Training* *Skills Workshop – None this week*	Cottrell, Chapter 1 Cameron Chapter 2
Week 2 (week starting Mon 16-Sep-13) • Academic Writing • Conducting Research **Outcomes: You will be able to …** • Understand some of the details of effective academic writing • Make use of the library facilities in order to conduct research for your group project *PAL Workshop – Yes for those not scheduled for Library Training* *Skills Workshop – Yes*	Cottrell, Chapters 12, 13 Cameron Chapter 6 Pears & Shields
Week 3 (week starting Mon 23-Sep-13) • Creativity **Outcomes: You will be able to …** • Understand how you prefer to be creative & innovative *PAL Workshop – Yes* *Skills Workshops - Yes*	Cottrell, Chapter 4 Cameron Chapter 15

Week 4 (week starting Mon 30-Sep-13) • Creative Problem Solving • Teamwork **Outcomes: You will be able to …** • Evaluate how you prefer to solve problems • Appreciate alternative approaches to problem solving • Understand how to work effectively in a team environment • Understand how you prefer to contribute to a team *PAL Workshop – Yes* *Skills Workshop: Yes*	Cottrell Chapters 4, 10 Cameron Chapter 10
Week 5 (week starting Mon 07-Oct-13) • Career Goals • StudySmart **Outcomes: You will be able to …** • Understand your skills and preferences in the context of career management *PAL Workshop – Yes* *Skills Workshop – Yes*	Cottrell, Chapter 15 Cameron, Chapter 17
Week 6 (week starting Mon 14-Oct-13) • Managing at 3rd Level • Academic Research (2) **Outcomes: You will be able to …** • Review your progress at university and plan for the coming weeks & months • Continue to develop your academic research skills *PAL Workshop – Yes* *Skills Workshop – Yes*	Cottrell, Chapter 1 Cameron, Chapter 2 Pears & Shields

Week 7 (week starting Mon 21-Oct-13) • Academic Group Report Writing Note: There will be no lecture on Thursday Oct 24th **Outcomes: You will be able to …** • Prepare to develop your group's project report *PAL Workshop – Yes* *Skills Workshop – Yes*	Cottrell, Chapter 7 Cameron, Chapter 16 Pears & Shields
Week 8 (week starting Mon 28-Oct-13) • Presentation Skills **Outcomes: You will be able to …** • Plan for your group project presentation *PAL Workshop – Yes* *Skills Workshops – Yes*	Cottrell, Chapter 5 Cameron, Chapter 11
Week 9 (week starting Mon 04-Nov-13) • Personal Development Planning **Outcomes: You will be able to …** • Develop a personal development plan *PAL Workshop – Yes* *Skills Workshops – Yes*	To be advised

Week 10 (week starting Mon 11-Nov-13) • Emotional Intelligence • Being Entrepreneurial **Outcomes: You will be able to …** • Understand the important of emotional intelligence when working with people • The opportunities available at NUI Galway to develop your entrepreneurial capabilities *PAL Workshop – Yes but only for those who didn't attend Library Training in Week 1* *Skills Workshop: Group Presentations*	Cottrell Chapter 12 Cameron Chapter 12
Week 11 (week starting Mon 18-Nov-13) • Guest lectures *PAL Workshop – No* *Skills Workshop – Group Presentations*	To be advised
Week 12 (week starting Mon 25-Nov-13) • Course review *Note: No lecture this Thursday, last lecture session will be Tuesday 26-Nov 1-2pm.* *PAL Workshop – No* *Skills Workshop: No*	

Lecture [& Other] Schedule:

	Semester 1	
Week	Lecture	Workshop/Presentations
1	y	Y
2	y	Y
3	y	Y
4	y	Y
5	y	Y
6	y	Y
7	y	Y
8	y	Y
9	y	Y
10	y	Y
11	y	Y

Other Information:

Required reading for each week is indicated above and should be read in advance of lectures. Additional readings may be given during the semester.

Prior to workshops and sometimes prior to classes, students will be asked to complete self-assessment activities. It is important that these activities are carried out, particularly before workshops as students will be marked on the on-time completion of this pre-work.

This module requires you to engage with two of your colleagues in a group project. Further details will be provided in a separate communication.

General:

This course outline is available on blackboard in pdf format. Should you have a visual disability and require the document in another format, please contact me and I will oblige.

Institute of Technology SDM Module Descriptor:

Full Title:	**Skills Development Module**				
Short Title **(max. no. of characters 30)**	SDM				
Host Department:	Institute Wide				
Official Code:	Do not fill in.	**NFQ Level:**	Six	**ECTS Credits:**	Five
Module Leader:	Click here to enter text.				
Description: **(100 words max.)**	The aim of this module is to empower students with the skills for dealing with the transition to third level education.				
Learning Outcomes:					
On successful completion of this module the learner will be able to…..					
1. Demonstrate time management skills in all aspects of their learning. 2. Identify and develop different learning styles. 3. Apply effective techniques to ensure maximum benefit from lectures and tutorials. 4. Practise the process of becoming an effective group member. 5. Appraise the value of information, identify available and appropriate resources. 6. Identify and develop ways of dealing with the main sources of stress. 7. Demonstrate an enhanced capacity to communicate verbally, with relevance to their course. 8. Apply the basic principles of critical thinking/problem solving skills to improve the learning process.					

Module Dependencies:	
Module Pre-requisites:	None
Module Co-requisites:	None

Indicative Syllabus Guide

Each school has a choice of indicative syllabus to choose from that meets the learning outcomes of the 'Learning to Learn' module and their programme requirements. It is up to each programme board to assign a weighting to each piece of content agreed and contextualize the content to their discipline area.

It is agreed the 'Learning to Learn' module in each School should incorporate key core areas/headings plus special content specific to their school/programme**.**

Content Guide Headings:

1. **What is Learning at 3rd Level & Student Responsibilities** e.g. plagiarism, referencing etc.
2. **Learning Methodologies** e.g. Student Profiling (VARK Technique – investigate each students learning style).
3. **Understanding Learning Styles**
4. **Learning Skills Development** e.g. Methods of Note Taking for a specific discipline e.g. Mind Mapping
5. **Personal Development Plans (PDP's)** e.g. 'A Learning Log', 'A Learning Portfolio', 'An ePortfolio', 'An Artistic Statement' etc.
6. **Time Management**
7. **Group Work/Team Skills**
8. **Learning with Moodle**
9. **Study Skills** e.g. Finding Information Skills/ Research Skills
10. **Problem Solving Skills**

Course Breakdown	%
Continuous Assessment	100

Sample Indicative Assessment Breakdown

(Note: It is up to each programme board to assign a description and a weighting to the continuous assessment breakdown).

Sample Assessment	*Sample Description*	*Sample Outcome addressed*	*% of total*	*Assessment Week*
	Class Based Group Assignment	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8		
	Written Assignment	1,2,3, 5,6,8		
	Class Participation	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8		
	Oral Presentation Task	1,5,6,7		

Educational Activities Requirements

Full-time mode

Learning and Teaching Methods	*Preferred Location*	*Hours*	*Frequency*	*Average Weekly Learner Workload*
Lecture	Choose an item		Choose an item	Choose an item

Laboratory (e.g. Computer Room, Science Lab, Kitchen/Restaurant, Studio etc.)	Choose an item		Choose an item	Choose an item
Practical (e.g. Moodle, online simulation activity/ software, portfolio development etc.)	Choose an item		Choose an item	Choose an item
Total Workload: (e.g. 125 hrs. per 5 credit module)				

Sample Resources

Recommended Book Resources

Required Reading

Cottrell, Stella, *The Study Skills Handbook,* Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Recommended Reading

Burns, Tom and Sinfield, Sandra, *Essential Study Skills: the Complete Guide to Success,* Sage, London.

Burns, Tom and Sinfield, Sandra, *Teaching Learning and Study Skills: A Guide for Tutors*, Sage, London.

Gaskell, Philip, *Standard Written English: a Guide*, Open University, Edinburgh.

Jaques, David, *Learning in Groups,* Kogan Page, London.

Berger, John, *Ways of Seeing,* BBC and Penguin Books, London.

McConalogue, Tom, *Eat the Elephants and Fight the Ants: How to Take More Control of your Time,* Blackhall, Dublin.

Moran, Aidan, *Managing Your Own Learning at University*, UCD Press, Dublin.

Northedge, Andrew, *The Good Study Guide,* Open University, Milton Keyes.

Powell, Stuart, *Returning to Study: a Guide for the Professional,* Open University, Buckingham.

Van den Brink-Budgen, Roy, *Critical Thinking For Students: Learn the Skills of Critical Assessment*

and Effective Argument, How To Books, Oxford. **(For all required and recommended reading the most recently published textbook will apply)**
Electronic Resources
www.mindtools.com www.vark-learn.com (Student Profiling Tools in the Classroom) www.howardgardner.com/MI/mi.html www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/
Other Resources
Course URL (if applicable)