

**(Submitted to DIT Academic Council Spring 2015)**

## **Transition into Higher Education -**

### **Extending and Enhancing Best Practices**

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#### **Summary**

The purpose of this paper is to inform a discussion of how we build on existing best practice and the STEER (Student Transition, Expectations, Engagement, Retention) initiative for the clear and present purpose of extending and enhancing transition of students into third level education in DIT.

The paper outlines the background and context, makes observations and provides a list of recommendations.

#### **Background and Context**

The Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy Committee established a working group on “The First Year Experience with Focus on Transition into Higher Education” chaired by Eoghan O’Grady.

The group comprised:

- Alison Malkin (Biological Sciences)
- Allison Kavanagh (Library)
- Brian Gillespie (Library)
- Claire McDonnell (LTTC)
- Eoghan O Grady (Marketing) Chair
- Grainne Burke (Access and Civic Engagement)
- Greg Byrne (Biological Sciences)
- Mark Russell (Admissions)
- Rachel O Connor (Campus Life)

Contextual issues were quickly identified. These included:

- Budgeting and staffing constraints
- CAO system ... entry criteria additional to attainment of points entry level
- Continuous Assessment schedule
- DIT’s Mission in respect of being “an innovative, responsive and caring learning environment”
- DIT’s Widening Participation Strategy Targets
- Examination and Assessment schedules
- Financial Pressures
- Lecturer and support staff sensitivity to challenge of first year transition
- Programme Content and Structure

- Range of CAO points entry requirements across programmes (in context of “performance in Leaving Certificate ... [continuing] to be a reliable predictor of student performance in higher education” (Hyland, 2011, p.16)
- Retention and Progression Figures
- Roll out of Common or Generic Entry and Inter course transfer facility
- Semesterisation
- Student commute and accommodation
- Student Intake and Profile - c. 3900 1<sup>st</sup> Year Students of whom 25% are direct entry students (Non Standard - mature, access, DARE and Fetac) across 110 programmes
- Student part time working
- Teaching and assessment methods at secondary level
- Teaching Delivery (method and quality) including assessment methods
- Timetables
- Vulnerable and “Crisis” Students

It became immediately very clear therefore that the improving of First Year transition cannot be and should not be separated from a whole range of other related factors which have been and continue to be investigated in their own right including and in particular “Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategies” and the “Student Transition, Expectations, Engagement, Retention Strategy”. (STEER 10 STEPS). This working group utilised the “STEER 10 Steps” as a preliminary framework and lens and relatively quickly resolved to focus on Steps 4 to 7 inclusive. Focussing primarily on Steps 4 – 7: **1. Initial Induction, 2. Effective Lines of Communication and Interaction 3. Monitoring Transition and 4. Managing Academic Transition.**

## Observations

- There are already a wide and diverse set of actions / supports in place and being delivered already at support levels e.g. Access and Civic Engagement Office, Campus Life, Careers Service, Chaplaincy Service, Counselling Service, Learning Teaching and Technology Centre, Disability Support Service and Library Services. In addition much helpful information is hosted on the DIT website
- These supports vary somewhat across DIT Colleges, Schools and Programmes
- DIT initiatives appear similar and in some respects perhaps indeed superior to those in place in other third level education providers
- **Induction** should be seen a process not as an event and should be about motivating (energising and enthusing students) and not merely (just) informing them and should therefore be less student passive and should actively engage students
- Cohort / Class size impacts on transition initiatives /enablers e.g. ice-breakers and treasure hunts (**induction**), lecturer – student familiarity including via extent of close contact with lecturers (**communication and interaction**), the measurement and management of attendance (**monitoring the transition**) and the degree of continuous / formative assessment and the extent and timing of feedback on assignments (**academic transition**).
- Withdrawal and referral (exit) may not be a failure of the system nor of the individual student – it is entirely conceivable that students through a journey of discovery reach the correct conclusion that “this programme is not for me”

## Exemplars

- Make College Work For You – Dr. Kate Ui Ghallachoir

- Get Smart – Mary O’Rawe (<http://arrow.dit.ie/fellow/9/> )
- FYT supports provided by Access, Admissions, Library, LTC and Colleges of Business and Science and Health respectively - structured around Steps 4 through 7
- B.Sc. Business and Management (DT365) Induction Schedule
- FYT Initiatives and Practices Elsewhere
  - UL – “First Seven Weeks Initiative”
  - DCU – “BEST Programme”
  - TCD – “Student2Student (S2S)”
  - CIT – “A Good Start”
  - UCC including “Student Experience Fair”

## Recommendations

### General

- Appoint a dedicated “First Year Transition Leader / Champion in all Schools and ideally on all programmes (likely a member of the 1<sup>st</sup> Year Teaching Team) – the 2 hour addition on all lecturers contracts should be utilised / leveraged to facilitate this. There may be merit in rolling out the above initiative on a phased basis i.e. pilot on some programmes
- In the context of allocating resources preferentially to 1<sup>st</sup> year of programmes, careful consideration should be given to how the First Year Teaching Team is comprised, to what modules are taught on Year 1 and to the Year 1 timetable and of most significant import, Year 1 tutors must be selected carefully – faculty who are most cognisant of the challenge of transition and most sensitive (empathetic) to student concerns. Teaching and learning resources should be used strategically to support and enhance transition.
- Conduct exit interviews with all “withdrawal students” as a matter of course.

### Induction/orientation

- Ensure an appropriate induction / orientation programme is delivered in week prior to commencement of teaching. “Appropriate” in context of recognising dangers of information overload in first week in College and ability of students to take in / digest too much information at outset. This induction should take place in an informal, friendly and interactive environment. Distribution of the Year 1 Yearbooks to include an extensive FAQ section in both hard and soft copy at induction.
- Programme Directors/Chairs should provide a Welcome briefing to students, with input from Year 1 Tutors, formal lectures on programme content, structure, assessment methodology and philosophy including information on our expectations of students. There should be a legitimate expectation that all members of academic faculty be available to contribute to this induction.
- Provide First Year student lists and photographs to Year 1 teaching teams as a matter of course in Week 1 Semester 1
- Ensure existing aids to facilitate transition are listed in student year books including:
  - [DIT FYI 10 steps to engage your first year students](#)
  - [DIT First year Induction Checklist](#)
  - [DIT First year Induction Contact information](#)
  - [DIT First Year Information website for students](#)
- There should be clear, consistent and transparent communication processes around all programme related information.
- Year 1 tutors should be copied as a matter of course i.e. by default on all communications from Programme Directors/Chairs to First Year students.

#### First 5,6,7 weeks

- Manage student expectations very carefully re workload and nature and degree of challenge and what are our legitimate expectations of them *vis a vis* their behaviour and interaction including in context of attendance
- Monitor attendance for purpose – with an alert system after a certain number of classes are missed. Software such as the File Maker Pro Database system could be utilised to facilitate recording of attendance and automatic follow up.
- Tutors must be encouraged and indeed expected to play a less passive / more active role for instance contacting students they feel are at risk in terms of progression e.g. non-standard entry students and those attaining low marks across a number of formative assessments. To facilitate this active intervention, the names and contact details of higher risk students e.g. mature, access, DARE and Fetac entrants be provided to Year 1 tutors and teaching team as early as possible in Semester 1 and ideally on first day of Semester 1. Associated Tutor Training should clarify re issues pertinent to confidentiality

#### Assessment and feedback;

- Stagger the formative assessment schedule so that submission dates are spread over semester so that students are not overwhelmed and provide detailed and timely feedback on assignments.
- Provide students with choice on how they are formatively assessed ... thereby giving a degree of control and hence a greater sense of ownership of the assessment to the students and supporting autonomy and flexibility in their learning. This will also illustrate a sensitivity to and response to widened participation
- Monitor and act on formative assessment performance including careful analysis of results from mid-year noting / module boards to identify problematic modules and “at risk” students
- Lecturers on Year 1 modules should consider moving away from sessional examinations or introducing open book / open notes examinations in order to relieve the pressure on First Year students at semester / year end.

#### Students as autonomous self-directed learners

- Appropriate supports and resources put into place to support development of key graduate attributes for the first year integrated within the first year curriculum.
- Incorporate into teaching timetables - on a weekly basis - sessions designed to support first year transition such as learning skills, information literacy, academic writing, devil advocacy skills / counter intuitive thinking etc. (we are sensitive to capacity issues in relation to introduction of same on high contact hour programmes – a possible solution if necessary is 7am – 9am sessions, 7pm – 9pm sessions or indeed Saturday sessions). In recognition of fact that the entire Year 1 period is a period of transition, these sessions should continue beyond semester 1 and into Semester 2. To facilitate the greater impact and reinforcement of these sessions, these “topics” should also be embedded into Year 1 modules
- Further develop and resource, to required level, academic learning centres including a drop-in facility for advice on academic writing, on module choices / selection, maths support, study skills, time management, learning styles, intrapersonal awareness etc.
- Broad career planning and personal development conversation with tutor /careers staff provided during semester 1. Opportunity for students to develop personal learning goals, with feedback, to emphasise their responsibility for the learning process.

#### Peer mentoring/personal support

- All students who register with the DIT are assigned a year tutor (sometimes called the year coordinator). A year tutor advises students on academic and related aspects of their programme of study as outlined in the Student Handbook.
- Further roll out of the Buddying / Peer Mentoring system – leveraging our 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year students. The research evidence is clear ... such a system is mutually beneficial i.e. to mentors (development of leadership and intrapersonal skills), mentees and Colleges. This can be facilitated by use of txt tools. Students may be encouraged to act as buddy / peer mentor if acting in this role was formally recognised e.g. carried out as alternative to an assignment in a cognate module.

#### Learning spaces – virtual and physical

- Lecturers on Year 1 modules should also be cognisant of importance of “connected learning” both as an effective pedagogy and as a student experience enhancement. Social media can and should be utilised more so as to provide constant connectivity e.g.
  - A class facebook page – with year 1 students and mentors as members
  - “Any questions? – “Just ask” via twitter
- Technology used to provide weekly support, prompts and guidance to all first year students at potential critical points throughout their first year
- First year informal learning/study spaces established in all campus buildings

#### Staff Development and support

- Roll out, across the College, First Year Tutor Training (which all Faculty assigned and timetabled tutors be obliged to attend) and expansion of the “Transition into Higher Education Light Lunch Series” for First Year Tutors. The LTTC should continue to offer workshops, short courses and programmes relating to First Year Student experience and to first year transition.
- Disseminate best practices in transition enhancement activity through events, presentations and publications and communicate Fellowship Research Projects Recommendations at School level i.e. Head of School should be responsible for inviting fellows to share their research findings and recommendations with staff AND the expectation that faculty attend such sessions be communicated clearly. In this regard, the scheduling of such sessions is key.
- Ensure Structured Staff, Teaching Team and Year Tutors are committed to introducing the most appropriate of initiatives (decided locally) and follow through on same should be measured (including through PMDS)

#### Effective communication and dissemination strategies

- There should be clear and transparent communication processes around all programme related information
- Communicate the negative impact of referral / withdrawal on programme and Institute brand, on income (c. €6m loss of income from RGAM, grant in lieu and capitation fess in 2011-2012 academic session as consequence of 346 withdrawals and 315 deferrals) and critically on our students’ lives to all those who interact with students
- Measure and communicate the substantive quantifiable impacts of initiatives via increases in student attendance, improvements in sessional pass rates and progression rates and decreases in student withdrawals<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We have not made any proposals / recommendations relating to the non academic dimension of the first year experience e.g. on the role of Student Union, Clubs and Societies etc.

## Conclusion

First Year Transition is complex. A myriad of factors impact on student transition and hence on the wider first year student experience. Initiatives to enhance transition interact with these factors. These factors are both structural and agentic. DIT can play a role in the wider national policy context in challenging structural barriers. DIT can learn from itself through reflection, and by wider communication of the several and various excellent transition initiatives and supports already in place, roll out same on a DIT wide basis. We should continue to monitor and review first year transition and gather, evaluate and act on feedback from stakeholder groups. We hope programme teams will review the first year experience with focus on induction, ongoing supports, modules, Year 1 teaching teams, timetables, and learning, teaching and assessment methodologies etc. We hope support of any current and proposed initiatives will be supported by senior management.

The proposals (recommendations) above may not be particularly or sufficiently radical. We feel however they can at least stimulate further debate and ideas going forward.

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