The First Year Experience: 
A Case Study at ITB

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Abstract

It is well recognised that the transition to third level is a major challenge for all student cohorts. The increasing diversity of our learner population presents an opportunity to review current practice. As part of the feedback received from stakeholders during ITB’s institutional review, a small cross functional team was established to explore this issue. The team decided to adopt an Appreciative Inquiry approach to their investigation of the theme “first years on campus- how to improve their experience”. A critical first step for this group’s work was the consultation with key stakeholders, including students, staff, managers and team leaders. The challenge of creating an optimal first year experience using this approach required the team to coordinate focus groups and workshops with staff and students that would encourage them to (i) envision what this optimal experience would look like and (ii) describe the steps required to realise this vision.

This group’s recommendations were to adhere to the following guiding principles:

1. Be practical and realistic
2. Be cost effective
3. Be easy to implement on an on-going basis
4. Have the support of key stakeholders

From this consultation and also from an analysis of existing best practice in this area, a set of short and medium term goals were identified and prioritised for implementation. This paper will describe the approach adopted by the team, their experiences in facilitating the various sessions and will conclude with a summary of their findings and recommendations for the next stage of this initiative.

Keywords

Appreciative Inquiry, first year experience, study group, stakeholders
Introduction

The Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB) is one of the youngest and fastest growing colleges in Ireland, with a student cohort of 3000 plus students serving the greater Dublin 15 area and its environs.

The population of the Dublin 15 area is growing apace with proposal to build nine new Primary Schools (including one Gael Scoil) and three new Post Primary schools in Dublin 15 between now and 2016. This is a reflection of the current and growing demand for higher education opportunities in the region. One of the challenges identified at the establishment of ITB an encapsulated in its original mission statement is the goal of increasing third level participation rates in the Dublin 15 area and beyond.

In addition to increased demand we have also witnessed a remarkable increase in the diversity of the indigenous population of the greater Dublin 15 area which now stands at 44% who were born abroad [See Figure 1].

![Figure 1: Changing profile of Blanchardstown](http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2012-Press-Releases/PR12-03-12.html)

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An interesting example of this scenario can be seen in the student intake for the academic year 09/10 where 16% of students registered at ITB had a nationality other than Irish, this cohort of learners represented 39 different nationalities.\(^4\)

In addition 23% of our first year intake is classified as mature students (over the age of 23) with 15% progressing from FETAC level 5 or 6 programmes [McNutt, 2012, p.135].

In parallel to the development of the physical campus and facilities at ITB the portfolio of academic programmes and activities from level 6 to level 10 on the national qualifications framework has continued apace. The culmination of these endeavours resulting in the Institute being awarded delegation of authority to confer awards from the Higher Education and Training Awards Council in June 2006. Since then, it has continued to offer a full range of academic programmes, and taught programmes mainly between NFQ level 6 and 9.

A key responsibility of this status is the requirement to review all academic programmes within a five year cycle – Programmatic Review and a concomitant requirement to undertake an Institutional Review, also on a five year cycle. Of course, at the heart of all these endeavours must be the learner, yet ensuring the development of an optimal learning environment for our diverse student audience can only be achieved by the creation of a quality culture that imbues all of our activities - rather than the process of curriculum design and quality assurance being viewed as an elaborate auditing or “tick the box” exercise or another encumbrance that serves no useful purpose. This initiative recognises the critical role that the first year in higher education plays in a learner’s ability to transition and succeed at third level. As mentioned in UK QAA report:\(^5\)

“Students' first year in UK higher education is critical for laying the foundations of academic study and for developing the key skills of independent learning and intellectual enquiry.”

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\(^4\) An interesting report on this topic can be downloaded from: 

\(^5\) http://www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/documents/IRtheme.pdf
Why this project?

As a consequence, one of the outcomes to emerge as part of the Institutional Review during the academic year 2010/2011 was the formation of a working group to investigate the First Year Experience. The participants in this working group were chosen from key areas in academia and administration, including those with direct responsibility for first year programs. The aim in setting up the working group was to have buy-in to this initiative from as many of the broad range of stakeholders as possible. The working group adopted an appreciative inquiry approach [Kinni, 2003] for this initiative. This is best reflected in the major stages involved which include:

1. **Discover** the "best of what is"—they identified where the company's processes worked perfectly.
2. **Dream** "what might be"—they envisioned processes that would work perfectly all the time.
3. **Design** "what should be"—they defined and prioritized the elements of perfect processes.
4. Create a **Destiny** based on "what will be"—they participated in the creation of the design.

It also recognised the importance of seeking volunteers with a drive and vision to make a change. As Whitney and Trosten-Bloom [2003] state:

“Freedom to choose to contribute leads to commitment, the liberation of power, and learning. When people choose to do a project and commit to others to do it, they become very creative and determined about it. They will do whatever it takes and learn whatever is needed to get the job done.” (p.277)

**The Project Scope and Terms of Reference**

In many respects this was reflected in the day-to-day challenge for the working group in keeping the initiative alive, encouraging involvement from all concerned stakeholders and in creating the space to allow for the discussion on recreating the experience for first year students. It was about dreaming what the first year experience would be like if all constraints were removed.
Reality was what we dealt with day-to-day. Getting the balance right between these two diverse situations was an important goal. Knowing that we could do this work better if we could build a critical momentum going forward was a strong incentive for the working group. Getting the right sponsors and resources for this effort were also critical factors in moving forward. Many organisations, both nationally and internationally, were and still are involved in this area of work. Locally, the Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance Focus Group are leading the way in the Dublin area, researching the entire area of the first year experience\(^6\). Noonan and O’Neill [2011] have recently described the background and motivation behind a similar initiative and state that:

“Student engagement in the first year of university has received considerable attention by higher education researchers and policymakers internationally (Krause et al 2005; Kift et al 2009; Nicol 2009). This is perhaps not surprising since participation rates in higher education have been increasing over the last 20 years as a consequence of government policies to produce educated graduates to meet economic workforce requirements. Universities have responded positively by incorporating additional student numbers, developing a wider array of programme offerings and in many cases implementing more flexible curricular structures.” (p.75)

This backdrop within higher education set the scene for the project initiation – after several discussions with various partners and stakeholders the terms of reference were agreed. A key element for the working group was clarification on “What you are being asked to do...” – which was to adhere to the following guiding principles:

1. Be practical and realistic
2. Be cost effective
3. Be easy to implement on an on-going basis
4. Have the support of key stakeholders

A description of the approach adopted will be provided in the next section.

\(^{6}\) http://www.drhea.ie
Our Approach

The key ingredients were now in place including the scope and terms of reference for the project, a management sponsor was nominated and the first task was to issue invitations to the various faculties and administration groups for nominations to join the team. A team facilitator was also put in place. Representation was drawn from academic schools, administration and student support services. The initial team meetings during the period of September – November 2011 involved a number of brain-storming sessions and fact finding exercises. Table 1 below shows a typical list of topics discussed – this particular list came from the initial team meeting, which lead to lively and informative discussions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is there a problem?</td>
<td>Do we need to carry out a survey/study of student issues? Drop-out rates; Fail Rates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges of transition.</td>
<td>They don’t understand the system; e.g. what is an exam board?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A “home” for first years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student support officers</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Short and long term supports</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capture range of examples</td>
<td>Social care; computing; business all have initiatives for September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>across campus and within different departments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First six weeks are crucial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t forget the evening/part time students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater visibility of current supports and initiatives</td>
<td>Could be a virtual portal…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An event celebrating our first years</td>
<td>Perhaps two events – one for staff(first year lecturers) and one for students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pictures of staff in each building…</td>
<td>Who lives here!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drama group</td>
<td>Talk to the Draiocht drama group….</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touch-typing</td>
<td>Are there other key skills as well? …</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Initial Kickstart-Topics
What emerged clearly from these discussions was the need for input to the team from a broad spectrum of our stakeholders in the Year 1 Experience. The idea of holding a Year 1 Experience Event was born, which would pull together these diverse opinions. The day-long event was fixed for January 18, 2012. The timing of the event was chosen to suit academic and administration calendars. All staff and student representatives from all schools in college were contacted by postcard and invited to attend.

![Figure 2: Invitation to the ITB Year 1 Experience Event](image)

Guest speakers from Dundalk Institute of Technology and Dublin Institute of Technology were asked to come along and talk about their experiences and initiatives relating to the Year 1 Experience. We decided that the day-long event would be facilitated by an external facilitator and that we would divide the participants into three breakout sessions. Each of these sessions would be facilitated by two team members and feedback would be requested on separate colour coded cards as follows:

- **Green Cards:** What Year 1 initiatives **worked well**?
- **Red Cards:** What Year 1 initiatives **did not work well**?
- **Blue Cards:** What **New** Year 1 initiatives **could be tried** for the coming term/year?

The emphasis in these breakout groups was to encourage discussion and debate and the approach was light-hearted and conducted in an appreciative inquiry style. It was a celebration of what we had done well, but did not ignore the challenges.
A graphic artist also attended these breakout sessions and captured the essence of the day’s proceedings on video and mind-map. The mind-map is included below in Figure 3.

![Figure 3: Mind-map of the ITB Year 1 Experience Event Breakout Sessions Output](image)

On reflection, the day-long event left us with a rich source of data to analyse, captured in the colour cards and mind-map. The event was well attended by academics and administration staff, but we also recognised that the student participation was disappointing. The task now was to build on the success of this event – what to do next?
Building on Success - What to do Next?

The data gathered from the event was brought back to the team for analysis. Further discussion and deliberation took place. Conscious of the relative lack of the student voice at the event, we opted for a secondary source of student data from the ITB Marketing Department. We also received feedback from a team member who had recently attended an online LIN Seminar⁷.

All data was discussed and prioritised. While acknowledging that all initiatives that worked well in the past would be continued with, each team member was asked to provide his/her top five recommendations for new initiatives that could be trialled in the coming academic year. This democratic approach yielded a number of short term (Table 2) and medium term initiatives (Table 3). These are listed below.

- Mentoring students— peer-to-peer and academic
- Study Skills package
- Videos for Website
- Monitoring students
- Worry Box
- Clinics / Workshops

Table 2: Short Term Initiatives

⁷ [http://www.linireland.com/events/webinars.html](http://www.linireland.com/events/webinars.html)
Table 3: Medium Term Initiatives

- First year space
- Resources
- Make Attractive
- No Year 1 exam
- More lab work – less lectures

At this juncture the team decided to progress with the above recommendations which were included in an interim report summarising the team’s work and achievements to date. The report was circulated for comment to all ITB staff, Academic Council and ITB management. A budget was allocated to trial a new initiative – the team selected the study skills package as an immediate priority. Based on feedback from partner Higher Education Institutes, the skills4study online resource was identified and selected. This new initiative will be used as a platform to capitalise on the energy and enthusiasm to date and seek to encourage other staff members to join the working group.

Conclusions and Future Work

The purpose of this paper is to describe an initiative designed to address the experience of first year students at ITB. As with all projects there are many perspectives and critiques that can be undertaken to evaluate their respective success and/or impact. This project is in its initial stages but the team have adopted an approach that allowed them to explore the potential of appreciate inquiry as a practical guide and framework with which to ground and direct their work. All members of the working group were volunteers – driven by their own motivation and interest in an

8 http://www.palgrave.com/skills4study/index.asp
area that is recognised nationally and internationally as a major challenge for all higher education institutes.

Wood [2010] referring to the work of Yorke and Longden who

“...suggest institutions need to cater for student diversity by optimising the chances of individual success, echoing the recommendations of Harvey et al. who argue for greater attention to building on student strengths and engaging first year learners rather than merely focusing on their inadequacies and issues of retention.” (p.32)

This case study is an embryonic attempt to contribute to this call to “build on student strengths” – the skills4study package is the first of several resources that will allow staff to work collaboratively with each other and their students to realise this ambition.

Other work in this area in Ireland

The following are links to other work currently being undertaken in Ireland relating to the first year experience:

**DRHEA** (Dublin Regional Higher Education Alliance (http://www.drhea.ie)
Fellowship Project entitled ‘Enhancing the First Year Learning Experience’. This group is reviewing and assessing developments in the First Year learning experience (social and academic) from which they hope to build a toolkit for students and lecturers.

**University of Limerick First Seven Weeks** induction program:
http://www.facebook.com/first7weeks

**University College Dublin Teaching and Learning Projects:**
http://www.ucd.ie/teaching/projects/learningforsuccessatuniversity/

**DIT**
http://www.dit.ie/lttc/
References


