Getting Smart about the First-Year Undergraduate Experience

Mary O’Rawe
Dublin Institute of Technology, mary.orawe@dit.ie

Follow this and additional works at: https://arrow.dit.ie/tfschhmtcon

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons

Recommended Citation
Getting Smart! about the first-year undergraduate experience

Mary O’Rawe
College of Arts & Tourism
Dublin Institute of Technology
Dublin, Ireland
mary.orawe@dit.ie

D.I.T.
- 125 year history
- combines the academic excellence of a traditional university with career-focused learning
- Student numbers currently 19,500.
- Shortly in transition to new Dublin city centre campus
Current and projected student numbers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Category</th>
<th>12/13</th>
<th>Projected 2019/20 +7%</th>
<th>Projected 2029/30 +24%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UG FT</td>
<td>12,307</td>
<td>13,168</td>
<td>15,261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PG FT (taught &amp; research)</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>1,005</td>
<td>1,164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UG PT (incl cap)</td>
<td>4,052</td>
<td>4,335</td>
<td>5,054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PG PT (taught &amp; research)</td>
<td>1,374</td>
<td>1,470</td>
<td>1,704</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior Music</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19,573</td>
<td>20,878</td>
<td>24,083</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Irish perspective

- Irish higher education now at a point of transition
  - Student numbers and participation – increase from 5% in 1960 to 65% in 2010
  - Numbers enrolled are expected to rise continuously - 2019 +7%, 2029 +24%
  - Changing profile of student – demographics, learning styles & their impact on engagement
  - New emphasis on high order knowledge-based skills
  - Economic & recessionary pressures

  Renewed interest in:
  - Quality of the student experience/strengthening student engagement
  - Broadening the curriculum
  - Adaptability & entrepreneurial skills
  - Particular emphasis on the first-year experience

  (Hunt Report, 2011
  Dept of Education & Skills, 2013
  ESRI, Nov 2012)

Development of key skills
- the national picture

Range of key generic skills identified:

- Critical thinking
- Creativity
- Communication skills
- Team skills
- Leadership ability

“The simple acquisition of knowledge is not enough to count as an education”

(Hunt Report, 2011, p. 79)
Development of key skills – the local/D.I.T. picture

- An environment of change for all stakeholders was identified (post 2007):
  - Opportunities and challenges
    - Engagement and retention
    - Student motivation
    - Professional and personal development
    - Oral and written communication problems
    - Students’ ability to manage work and learning
    - Increased demands on curriculum space

"Key skills" set identified
Theoretical underpinnings

Strengthening student engagement – the theoretical challenges

Engagement-based Learning & Teaching approach (Jones 2009)

1. Cultivate one-on-one relationships
2. Learn new skills & habits
3. Incorporate systematic strategies
4. Take responsibility for student engagement practices
5. Promote a school/department-wide culture of engagement
6. Focus on professional development of staff

Strengthening student engagement – the practical challenges?
The Get Smart! initiative

Get Smart!

- An initiative developed through a bottom-up lecturer-led approach through which the emphasis is on teaching through engagement
- Designed to communicate with students in their language as well as formal communication modes;
- Sits laterally across modules and forms an integrating mechanism between academic and non-academic areas;
- Embeds learning strategies, information literacy, study skills, personal & professional development into all first year module content.

Teaching for engagement – closing the loop

Supportive feedback on formative assessment
Teaching for student engagement
- "The potential for enthusiastic engagement in the curricula should be harnessed in the critical first days of the first weeks of the first year, thereby promoting a sense of belonging, so often missing for the contemporary learner" (Kitt & Nelson, 2005, p. 229)
- Induction – a new approach
- Getting a buzz – Get Smart! workshop
Lessons learned from Get Smart!

The positives

- Inspirational & motivating
- Can we be ‘friends’? No!
- What happens after first year?

The negatives

- Hawthorne effect
- Recipient of ‘Teaching Excellence’ award 2013
- ‘Can we be friends?’ No!
- What if resources/goodwill dry up?

Conclusion

A journey of chaos & cultural change... and trying to quantify the unquantifiable?

- Students only learn in an engaged environment
- Emergent role of lecturer as a provider of (academic) support mechanisms;
- New modes of communication employed (with varying degrees of success);
- The lecturer may now be viewed as an enhancer of the selected key skills;
- Need to interact strongly with non-academic areas.
Get Smart! in action

http://www.youtube.com/user/DITGetSmartVideos