Getting Smart about the First-Year Undergraduate Experience

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Getting Smart! about the first-year undergraduate experience

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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 (% Increase)</th>
<th>Projected 2029/30 (% Increase)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UG FT</td>
<td>12,307</td>
<td>13,168 (7%)</td>
<td>15,261 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PG FT (taught &amp; research)</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>1,005 (7%)</td>
<td>1,164 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UG FT (incl cap)</td>
<td>4,052</td>
<td>4,330 (7%)</td>
<td>5,004 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PG FT (taught &amp; research)</td>
<td>1,374</td>
<td>1,470 (7%)</td>
<td>1,704 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior Music</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>900 (0%)</td>
<td>900 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>19,573</strong></td>
<td><strong>20,878 (8%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>24,083 (24%)</strong></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
- Broader/learning 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
    - Engaged 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

- Self-management
- Information management
- Socialisation
- Group management
- Writing & communication skills
- Personal development & peer mentoring

Closing the loop

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
- Other schools have embraced principles
- Recipient of 'Teaching Excellence' award 2013
- Hawthorne effect

The negatives
- Can we be 'friends'? No!
- What happens after first year?
- Can the results really be quantified?
- Recipient of 'Teaching Excellence' award 2013
- Can we be 'friends'?
- No!

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