

2020

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# ***The Student Experience of Final Year in an Undergraduate Degree Programme in Education Studies.***

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## **Abstract.**

This case study explores the student experience of the final year of a four-year undergraduate degree in 'Education Studies', with a focus on the perceived impact of curriculum design of the programme. The context is an Irish college of education, and the programme structure has been designed to allow for flexibility to accommodate varying student interests and professional pathways. As the first full iteration of the programme came to a close, it was considered an opportune time to ascertain if the programme was meeting its curriculum design objectives in terms of preparation for the chosen professional pathway post-graduation from both the student and staff perspective. Literature explored included learning ecologies, work-based learning, and the final year experience. Data was collected through a student survey, individual interviews with self-selecting students, and a focus-group interview with the programme development team. Findings suggest that students could clearly identify the development of skills, knowledge and competencies for the workplace through an internship; also highlighted was value in undertaking a dissertation for researching a topic of personal interest, with it noted as a challenging, intense experience. Having appropriate levels and different types of support for students facing the challenges in final year was a significant outcome. A model emerged for final year support in three contexts: pedagogic, workplace and research, and we argue that this is a main research contribution that this study makes to educational research. A discussion of implications for curriculum development in 'Education Studies' highlights the need for 'cohesion' workshops to be integrated to final year to synthesise student learning, embedding a formalised support structure in order for students to have a greater understanding of choices available to them post-graduation, and introducing a scaffolded approach to ePortfolio development to encourage innovation.

**Keywords:** Dissertation, Ecology, Education Studies, Internship, Professionally-orientated, Undergraduate education, Work-related learning.

## 1. Introduction.

Individuals enter higher education (HE) as students and exit as graduates, and the way in which higher education institutions prepare students for their post-graduation lives is a concern, particularly in relation to policy intervention and institutional practice (Holmes, 2013). This concern can be viewed in a wider, longstanding debate of how employability is understood and conceptualised, and whose responsibility it is to cultivate and maintain it. Many higher education institutions have been considering for some time how to enhance and build a graduate's employability, with various initiatives being deployed, and the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 discusses these. Recent work by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning has 107 teaching and learning enhancement initiatives being implemented across the sector: 28 of the funded initiatives are dedicated to discipline groups and programme teams, 45 initiatives focus across multiple subject areas and a further 12 initiatives are fostering collaborative links with professional bodies and/or industry partners to enhance teaching and learning content and practices and the success of students beyond higher education.

Within the field of education studies, it is recognised that part of the challenge is the fact that there is not a clearly defined pathway post-graduation. Consequently, there is a need to develop a programme structure that allows for maximum flexibility to accommodate varying interests and pathways. According to Sheppard et al. (2010) “...*a singular career trajectory is increasingly uncommon given today's professional and economic realities*” (p.90) and as such an undergraduate award should be seen as the starting point for a variety of career options. This paper focuses on the student experiences of the final year of an education studies degree in terms of preparation for the chosen professional pathway post-graduation.

The aim of the B.Sc. (Education Studies) is to provide skills and competencies that are useful in a wide range of careers in the area of education and training e.g. adult educator, an instructional designer, an education officer, or an education advisor. This programme is distinguished from teacher training programmes because of its focus on the themes of life-long learning, ethics and social justice, education and culture, education policies and practices, technology, the arts, curriculum and programme design, and policy analysis. Having the opportunity to have a specialisation module, in an area of particular interest to each student,

which they pursue through the first three years of the programme, followed by an internship in the final year of the programme in an education setting of their choice is a unique feature.

This qualitative study explores the key elements of dissertation, ePortfolio and internship from a student and staff (programme team) perspective. The paper commences with a contextualisation of education studies from both a theoretical and situated perspective. The literature review explores student learning experience in final year and work-related learning through the lens of a learning ecology framework. As key features of the programme are an ePortfolio and a final year dissertation, the relevant literature is explored through the lens of critical reflection and assessment. The evaluation of the programme can inform the development of the programme for the design team involved, and offer other practitioners' insights on structuring, sequencing and delivering similar programmes in the sector.

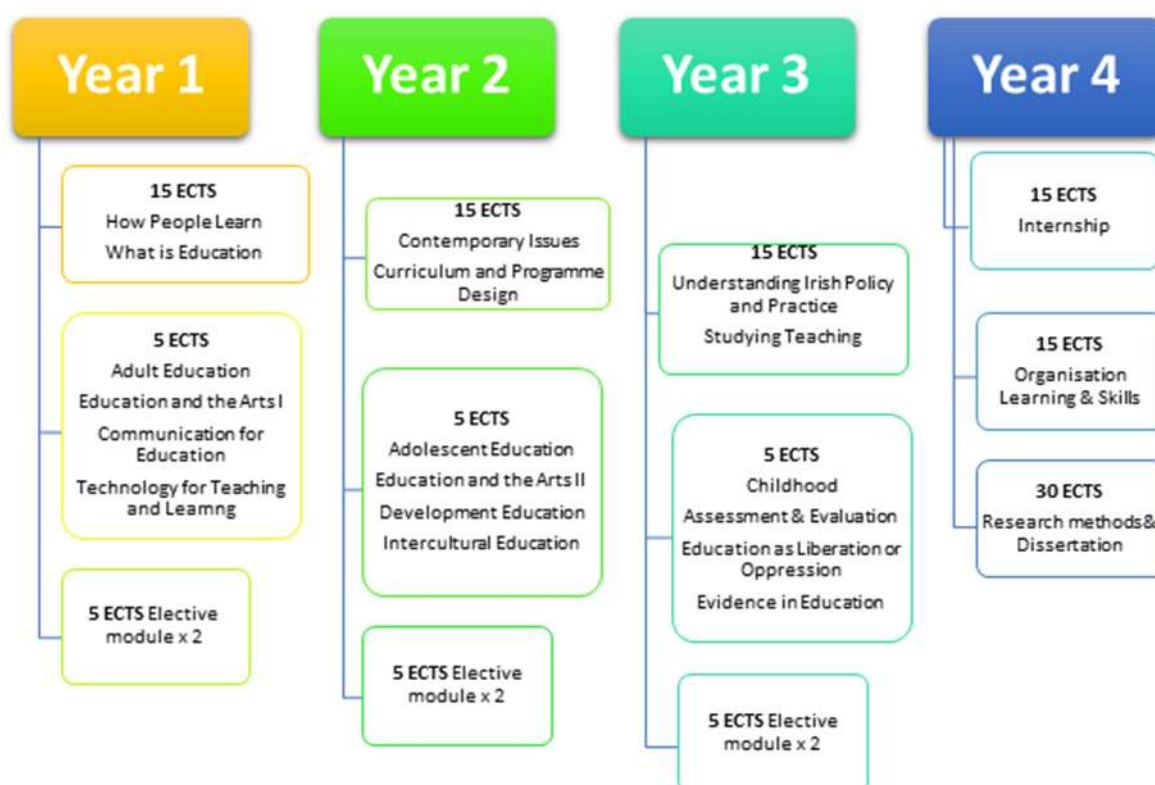
### **1.1 Context of the Education Studies Programme.**

Drudy (2010) has considered Education Studies as a building block of teacher education programmes. As a discipline it includes philosophy, history, curriculum studies, sociology and psychology. In a national setting, this definition is applicable as the majority of education-related, degree programmes in HE lead to teacher accreditation. The focus of education studies is typically on a particular sector of education (early years, primary, post primary, further or higher education). Education studies degree programmes are "*a new context for the study of education*" (Davies & Hogarth, 2002, p.83). Murphy et al. (2009, p.3) define it as "*a process as opposed to a subject area*" whereas Ward (2008) argues that education studies is a subject in its own right, but makes the case that it is not linked to initial teacher education. Sharp et al., (2010) define education studies in terms of: "*...stumbling blocks ...(of) scope, diversity and complexity not only of the content of education as a subject discipline itself but of the processes by which education takes place and the social, cultural, political and historical contexts in which it occurs*" (p.1).

This research was set within the context of professional practice at the Marino Institute of Education, where the three researchers contribute to the programme team of the BSc in Education Studies. Sharp et al.'s (2010) definition is applicable to the context of this study as it reflects the pillars of the Education Studies degree programme (ethics and social justice, lifelong learning, education and culture, policy and practice). This newer definition reflects the reality of

the Education Studies degree programme as outlined in Figure 1 as students engage in modules which develop content from the previous year's study (process) and it is not associated with any form of teacher accreditation (it is a degree in its own right). Figure 1 shows the structure of the programme over the four years.

**Figure 1: An overview of the programme structure.**



The B.Sc. in Education Studies programme which commenced in September 2011 is a professionally-orientated degree programme. Over the duration of the four-year programme, students study adult, adolescent and childhood education as well as various core and optional modules under the four organising pillars. In years 1 to 3, the college-based lectures are complemented by a two-week work placement in an education-related setting in Ireland or abroad. In year 4, students undertake a final year (capstone project) dissertation and an eight-week internship (involving the development of an ePortfolio to demonstrate and reflect on their journey of learning and to make connections with learning across the programme). ECTS is the

European Credit Transfer System and is shown for each module. The first three years of the degree follow a similar structure of two 15 ECTS modules and six 5 ECTS modules, two of which are self-selected elective modules. In year four, the course structure is realigned around the internship period, with two 15 ECTS modules undertaken before internship and the remaining credits dedicated to the research dissertation completed in semester 2.

## **1.2 Rationale.**

Nixon & Williams (2014) argue that programme curricula need to be explored to find a balance across modules, and the opinions of students need to be gathered to ensure that the team delivering the curricula understand the impact on the students. This is because the way that learning is delivered, supported and assessed can enhance employability attributes as the individual becomes more aware of their skills and abilities. The aim for this current study is to gain a deeper understanding on the totality of the student experience of the final year of the Education Studies programme, and the balance of an internship (8-week work placement, assessed by a reflective ePortfolio) with a research dissertation.

A systematic review explored the literature under four key areas: how to evaluate the final year students' learning experiences through the lens of learning ecology; the role of work-based learning in this BSc programme; the ePortfolio and associated critical reflection; and the final year dissertation. The rationale for why these key areas were chosen for exploration in the literature review is aligned to the research study parameters of investigating the impact on student experience, engagement and progression of the final year of a professionally-orientated degree programme in Education Studies. Table 1 shows our understanding of how each contribute to preparing the students for post-graduation success in Education Studies.

Table 1. Programme Team's understanding of preparing students for post-graduation success in Education Studies.

<b>Theme explored in the literature.</b>	<b>Key arguments to inform Programme Team.</b>
Evaluating Students' Learning Experiences from a Learning Ecology Perspective.	This can prepare students for post-graduation success by enabling them to explore the spaces they create for themselves to work in, their processes, activities and practices, their relationships, networks, tools, and the technologies they encounter and use in the work-place; ultimately it can provide them with affordances, knowledge and other resources for learning, developing and achieving something that they value in their future careers.
Work-related Learning.	Education Studies is about fulfilment and enrichment, and helping to ensure that students find success in the professional pathway they choose to do. Work-related learning can promote readiness for a career; creating graduates who are more agile, have a solid understanding of how the workplace works and can see how their skills fit into it is important.
The ePortfolio for critical reflection and as an assessment mechanism.	The lifelong learning concept that ePortfolios support can enable students to continue to capture formal, non-formal and informal learning in their careers or postgraduate study and can be especially helpful with personal development planning.
The Final Year Dissertation.	The dissertation can be a key step into further study; the advanced knowledge, dedication and capacity for independent learning demonstrated by the dissertation can help students move into postgraduate study and a specialised Masters can be used to bridge the gap between more general academic subjects and specific career paths.

## 2. The Literature Review.

### 2.1 Learning Ecology Perspective on the Programme.

Learning ecology for an individual can be defined as comprising their process and set of contexts and interactions that provides them with opportunities and resources for learning, development and achievement (Jackson, 2016). More simply, Siemens (2007, p.63) defined it as "*the space in which learning occurs*". As evaluating the student final year learning experience was a key element of the study, Jackson's (2011) conceptual framework for learning ecology (Figure 2) was helpful for considering the student learning experience in Education Studies. The concept of a learning ecology provided the programme team with the means to visualise the dynamics of a complex self-determined and self-organised learning process and to appreciate how the different elements of the programme ecology - contexts, process, relationships and resources, fit together. The concept provided a more holistic perspective on learning and development on the programme.

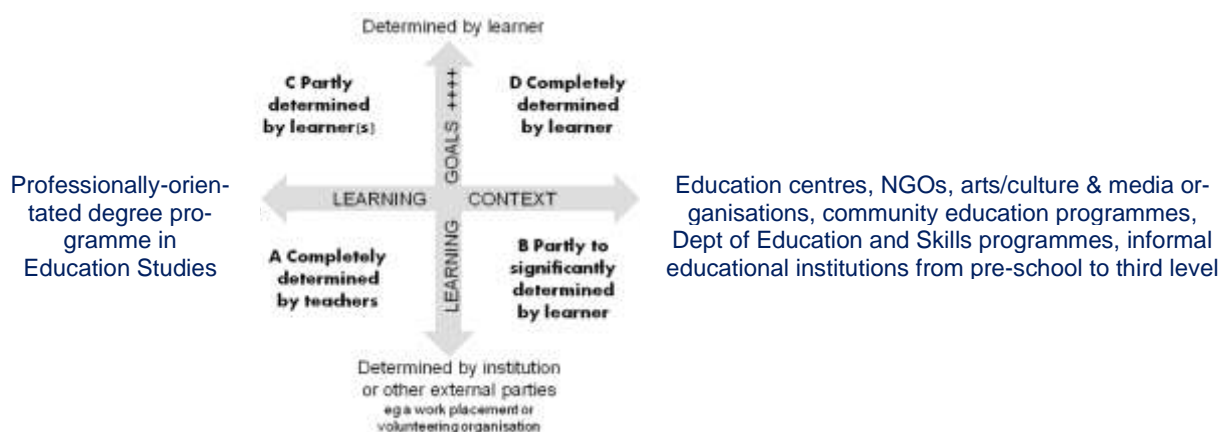
This framework was useful for exploring a shift from a traditional teaching model to a more learner-driven and personalized model, which suited the professional pathways approach of this study. Learner choice is important here and providing the students on the programme with opportunities to make choices in how and when they study is important. For example, in modules situated earlier in the programme, a flipped classroom approach is used where the students are offered a collection of curated interactive resources and tools that will support their interests, growth and learning, as well as foster participation among the cohort. Through the Moodle VLE, students have been introduced to external experts who have been brought into the media enriched conversation. If this were to be extended across other modules, a partnership between the experts and the students could provide an opportunity to create an embedded mentoring learning environment.

The learning ecology dimension relevant for this current study includes looking at a number of related aspects: goals and intended outcomes, knowledge and skill content, processes, spaces, relationships, and resources including tools, technologies and mediating artefacts. These dimensions are significant for the present study as they are all alluded to the HEA National Strategy for Higher Education (2011) which states that in order to future-proof undergraduate



programmes, the curriculum needs to “...place more emphasis on generic skills, especially those required for the workplace and for active citizenship. Creativity and entrepreneurship must be encouraged to a much greater extent; and institutions should facilitate reflective learning, applied knowledge, practical laboratory experience, and scientific skills” (p.56). Each of these dimensions are discussed in the findings under the Programme Team Perspective.

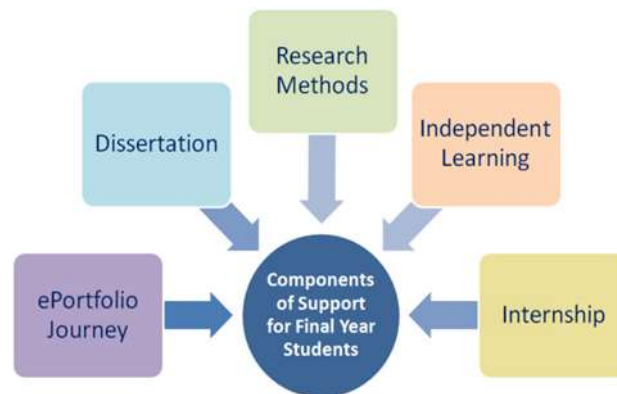
**Figure 2: Conceptual tool for evaluating the affordances for learning available to students based on a learning ecology framework (source: Jackson, 2011).**



In his work, Jackson (2011) argues that curriculum designers could evaluate the potential of a students' curriculum to support their own learning ecologies using a simple conceptual aid such as that shown in Figure 3. The contexts or environments for learning explore whether the contexts are formally constituted and structured within an academic programme, or whether they are more informal semi- or unstructured opportunities for learning and development connected to or outside the academic programme. Important considerations are whether the institution or the learner determines the '*what and why*', the '*how*', '*where and the when*' of learning, and ultimately determines what counts as learning. It can be useful also to have a through-line of research activity built into the programme because students are making connections across subjects and out to the world of work, connecting their academic learning to their workplace learning, and connecting with each other in the final year of the programme. As argued by Petrella & Yung (2008) incorporating a research component along with a sound academic foundation enables students to develop independent critical thinking skills along with oral and written communication skills. The research process impacts valuable learning

objectives that have lasting influence as undergraduates prepare for professional service. Also of relevance was the work of Bass (2014), especially on the internship component of the final year of the programme, offering as its focus the three kinds of work in the future: solving unstructured problems, working with new information, and carrying out non-routine tasks. Figure 3 shows these components structured into the final year of the programme.

**Figure 3: Final year programme structure.**



## 2.2 Work-related Learning.

Work-related learning is defined by Orell (2004) as an element of professionally-orientated degrees which is supported by employers, valued by students and initiated by university faculty. Grosemans *et al.* (2018) state that the main goal of a professional degree is to prepare students for their future careers, and as such is a required element of these degrees. Put simply, the term *work experience* covers a range of opportunities that enable students to experience working life (GradIreland/Work Experience). Marsick *et al.*'s sampling of workplace learning definitions over a twenty-year period in Malloch *et al.* (2011) shows how it has evolved (Table 2)

**Table 2: Evolvement of workplace learning definitions.**

from a focus on developing a work-related learning capacity	(Watkins, 1989)
to specific skill acquisition in a social context	(Resnick, 1987, in Watkins 1998)
to a collective activity centred on a questioning of underlying assumptions of practice	(Raelin, 2000)
to a creation of an environment where learning can happen	(O'Connor <i>et al.</i> , 2007)
to an experiential experience that balances the needs of providers and students	(Jacobs & Park, 2009)

Learning in the workplace is dependent on contextual factors such as relationships, individual participation and the structuring of work tasks; and on learning factors such as challenge and value of work, feedback, support, confidence, commitment, personal agency and motivation (Eraut, 2001). There is evidence that students can benefit from learning in a work environment in terms of key skills, developing further understanding about the context of work, gaining useful career insights and enhancing employability (Chalkley, 2000, in Hills *et al.*, 2003). A study by Fanthome (2017) reported on student responses to an internship programme at a university in London, with the purpose of highlighting potential areas for curricular improvement. It concentrates on whether student expectations of their internships are met, and the nature of students' perceived personal and professional learning outcomes. Of relevance to this current study is its highlighting of discrepancies in the level and nature of support sought by an increasingly diverse student population. Recommendations of broader self-help online resources to include video interviews with past students, additional reflective writing workshops, and the establishment of subject linked social media groups for additional peer support are all beneficial for our Education Studies programme.

### **2.3 The ePortfolio for Critical Reflection and as an Assessment Mechanism.**

Portfolios are a purposeful collection of students' work that tell the story of student effort and achievement, and shows evidence of self-reflection (Arter & Spandel, 1992). ePortfolios are student-owned, dynamic digital workspaces wherein students can capture their learning and

their ideas, access their collections of work, reflect on their learning, share it, set goals, seek feedback and showcase their learning and achievements (EUFOLIO Project, 2015). Sutherland & Powell (2007) define it as “*a purposeful aggregation of digital items - ideas, evidence, reflections, and feedback which presents a selected audience with evidence of a person’s learning and/or ability*”. Attention is drawn here to the importance of ideas, evidence and reflection which are key elements in the portfolio process. Clear criteria in regard to all elements, and in particular how to critically reflect, is essential in order to avoid the issue of ePortfolios becoming simply a collection of information rather than what Moon (2004) has called a mechanism for the development of meaningful knowledge.

JISC (2012) indicate that there is debate whether ePortfolios should or should not be assessed, and have made a case for and against doing so. However, this appears to be dependent on the role and purpose of the ePortfolio. From a pedagogical perspective, it was important for the programme team to establish - what is being assessed: the product or the process? Baume (2003) has previously stressed that tutors must ensure that their students know that they will not be penalised for including less capable work. There should be discussions with the students to include learning from when things went wrong - the assessment criteria need to show that they are being marked on being able to learn from their experiences and their identification of their future learning and development needs.

Boud (2000) argues that ePortfolios constitute a form of sustainable assessment because in ePortfolios, students build themselves a resource that, once assessment is complete, they can take with them into the workplace. As ePortfolios were one of the main assessment strategies on the final year of programme, the programme team needed to consider what Stefani *et al.* (2007) indicated as important features of ePortfolio implementation and support such as tutor reaction, system functionality, administrative procedures for handling online assignments and external examiner perspectives.

In the context of this programme, a key component was the integration of an ePortfolio. The ePortfolio used as the assessment approach for the internship was a stand-alone ePortfolio using the Mahara Platform. It was highly prescriptive in terms of content, layout and structure. In order to avoid the issue of the ePortfolios becoming simply a collection of information rather

than what Moon (2004) calls a mechanism for the development of meaningful knowledge, it was important for the programme team to develop clear criteria for the assessment of critical reflection within the ePortfolio. In the assessment of the students' ePortfolios, we concentrated on the assessment of students' reflections on different artefacts and the process of learning. For the students to understand the standards, they needed to know what they were expected to learn over the course of the 4 years and the expectations were clearly defined in the assessment criteria. The programme team could then assess not just current student work, but also student development over time. This was important for the aim of the study as it could show if the Education Studies degree was seen by students as a process (as defined by Murphy *et al.* (2009, p.3)). Finally, the students were encouraged to think about additional audiences for their work. Their best work was selected to showcase their overall skills for the assessment on the programme but they were also asked to think about how it could be repurposed for another audience beyond the programme – postgraduate study or for a potential employer where it would be useful for the student to be able to show that they have mastered technology through video, podcasts, digital mind mapping and other multimedia.

The evidence-based nature of the Mahara ePortfolios required the students to provide critical reflection on the process of learning across their modules and supporting their reflective entries with appropriate digital artefacts. These entries included students' skills and competencies in the formal setting of the BSc programme as well as their non-formal and informal learning from their workplace experiences; the reflection component of the work asked the students to first describe what they learned from these experiences, and then it was important for them to discuss *how* they learned – what would they have done differently if they re-visited the experiences. Finally, a meta-reflection was completed prior to submission and this gave an overall summary of their body of work.

## **2.4 The Final Year Dissertation.**

The Final Year Project is an important feature of the undergraduate experience and Marshall (2009) posits that the use of projects and dissertations in university curricula has been seen as increasingly important. For many students, it can be the longest and most focused piece of research that they will undertake in their undergraduate degree, and it can play an important part in determining the final award classification. It has been argued that the role of the dissertation as the capstone of Bachelor degrees is likely to be of growing significance as a key

way of delivering programme-learning outcomes and research-informed teaching (Healey *et al.*, 2013). The dissertation is the main undergraduate research activity that integrates academic notions of research as syllabus, pedagogy and assessment, and the dissertation experience is seen by both supervisors and students as having value (Malcolm, 2012).

The dissertation is often promoted as a means of advancing autonomous learning and is said to offer the potential for students to move along a continuum from dependence to independence (Greenbank & Penketh, 2009). By engaging with the student one-to-one, supervisors can enable and empower the student to move forward in their learning (Wisker *et al.*, 2013). For the students, the completion of the dissertation process shows commitment, perseverance, self-motivation, independent study, initiative and critical thinking and leads to a sense of achievement and pride (Todd *et al.*, 2006). However, while students value the autonomy, authenticity and ownership in relation to their dissertation, they also experience considerable challenges, particularly in relation to time. Research suggests that students find completing the final year dissertation stressful (Devenport & Lane, 2006). Although supervisor-student interactions have become more regulated, more attention is needed for human interactions and feeling during the process (Strandler, *et al.*, 2014), as the emotional dimensions of the research process tend to be overlooked (Shadford & Harvey, 2004).

### **3. The Research Study.**

As 'insider' researchers, we, as a research team, were cognisant of the opportunities brought about by our position (access to participants, rapport with participants and our deeper frame of reference) as well as the challenges (preconceptions, bias and ethics) (Mercer, 2007). The aim of the case study was to investigate three main areas of the final year of the B.Sc. in Education Studies:

1. The final year student experience;
2. Student engagement with the learning, teaching and assessment strategies;
3. Preparation and support for professional pathways post-graduation.

The research question for this study - what is the impact on the student experience of the curriculum design of the final year of a professionally-orientated degree programme in education studies?

The primary focus was on the experience of the students, but the programme team perspective was also sought. We were aware that research is value laden, and requires ethical principles that safeguard participants particularly when carried out in the context of professional practice (Lee, 2005). Zeni (2009) urges researchers to think about the responsibility and accountability they have towards stakeholders of research. We had responsibility to the two sets of stakeholders of the research, foremost the participants of the research, the students, and also our colleagues on the programme team and the wider department within which we worked. The students and staff who were participants in the research were made aware of the research approach from the outset through an ethics statement and completing the participant informed consent form. The institutional ethics committee was informed of the study, and ethical permission was sought through a standard ethics approval application and was granted from the head of the institution in relation to both the research approach and data collection methods. Table 3 below shows details regarding the size of the programme in order to understand contextual scale.

**Table 3. Programme size and cohort composition.**

<b>Student Numbers</b>	<b>Student characteristics: disability, gender, maturity</b>	<b>Programme Team Composition</b>
25 recent graduates from the programme	No students registered with disability services for this cohort Male 5 Female 20 Maturity: all in range 23-25 yrs	8 lecturers including module co-ordinators of the three final year modules; the Education Studies years 1-3 lecturing team; the Education Studies development group

The qualitative case study began in November 2015, with the design of an online survey for the 25 graduates of the programme using the SurveyMonkey tool. This was implemented in mid-January 2016, and 14 graduates responded. The survey was a mix of closed and open questions – the former was designed to firstly establish the current professional pathway of the graduates following completion of the programme. It offered options from being enrolled in further study to either full or part-time employment in an education-related field or other

discipline, and whether work or study was taking place locally to MIE, nationally or internationally. A subsequent section in the survey consisted of a series of open questions to explore the final year experience, in terms of highlights, challenges and supports. The balance of the internship and the research dissertation were investigated from a professional pathway perspective. A final section gave the students an opportunity to share their perceived impact on their professional pathway of the graduate skills they acquired in the programme.

The survey data was analysed first in order to inform the subsequent individual interviews with 6 of these survey respondents in May 2016. These later interviews were used to probe more deeply into the areas that emerged from the survey responses. Questions probed overall perceptions and enjoyment of the final year experience, the value and balance of the research dissertation and internship, on the variety and timings of assessments in final year and if the structure of final year assessment enhanced employability attributes and research skills. Questions were included to explore challenges encountered and subsequent coping strategies, perceived benefits and impact of programme engagement on professional pathways. Finally, they were provided with an opportunity to share an example of what they considered to be a good learning experience.

The dual dimension of the study was an investigation of staff perspectives of the connected curriculum; a focus group interview with the full programme team of 8 lecturers was held in April 2016. Questions focused on the programme team's beliefs of what a final year programme should support students to do, and what skills and values should they develop. They were asked to discuss how the Education Studies final year curriculum was designed and how they worked with colleagues in developing it, and they had the opportunity to share examples of their design approach and what they considered a good student learning experience. Probing questions were included to ascertain from the team what aspects of the programme they considered had worked particularly well, and why; and conversely what areas they felt were challenging or problematic both for the students and themselves in delivering it. The questions then moved into their views on whether and how the programme prepared students for entering the workplace, and equally whether and how the programme prepared students to pursue postgraduate study. Questions were included from the programme team perspective on the balance between research and work-based learning in the final year, and if the final year assessment was



structured for enhancing employability attributes and research skills development. A final series of questions explored the programme team's views on the balance of activities across the programme to enhance student engagement and innovation, and what they would like to see more or less of in the final year curriculum.

### 3.1 Data Analysis.

Qualitative thematic analysis was used for the case study, and the approach adopted was to analyse the data for significant phrases, develop meanings and cluster them into themes, and then present a description of the themes (Creswell, 2013). It has been argued by van Manen (1990), that a theme is the desire to make sense of something and it is through the process of finding, naming and elaborating a theme that understanding is heightened.

Drawing on the work of Green *et al.* (1989) and Niglas (2004), the use of multiple data sets in the thematic analysis was justifiable for the following reasons:

**Table 4. Thematic analysis justification in the context of this study**

Justification	Explanation	Related to the study
Research objectives, Triangulation, Explanation, Completeness.	Research objectives can be enabled more effectively through the use of multiple data sets; Greater validity integrity and credibility of findings by triangulating one data set against the other. Fuller picture is given through the use of different data sets, with one data set explaining the other.	Data analysed from student survey, student interviews & programme team focus group to give a fuller picture of the student and staff experience of final year in Education Studies.
Context.	Contextual factors can be explained.	The context of the final year student experience emerged in relation to the balance between the internship and research.

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Rigour.	A combination of all the justifications above adds to the rigour of the study.	It was important that the findings from this study have the integrity to make an impact on practice in Education Studies delivery.
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The focus group interview was transcribed verbatim, and the three researchers read, and re-read the transcripts. Open coding was used to organise the data in a meaningful and systematic way. Analysis involved looking at several category sets (causes, effects/consequences, strategies) present across the questionnaires and the focus group interview in relation to the final year student learning experience. We examined the codes and some of them clearly fitted together into a theme e.g. programme-level design. The work of Maguire & Delahunt (2017) was helpful for our context in illustrating the qualitative analysis process using a worked example conducted with undergraduate students, particularly in identifying themes at the semantic level.

The process and outcomes of the final year design and delivery was the key theme which emerged from the data analysis. This was categorised as 'Programme-level design'. Two other themes emerged which were illustrative of common elements found throughout the online qualitative survey and the interview transcripts. They were categorised as follows:

- Institutional-level support
- Personal-level practice

These three themes cover the spectrum of the undergraduate student experience. The programme team perspective is also presented to provide balance to the student voice.

## 4. Research Findings and Discussion.

The research findings presented here provide valuable insights into the final year student experience, student engagement with the learning, teaching and assessment strategies and their preparation for professional pathways post-graduation. The key theme that emerged from data analysis was programme-level design in relation to the balance of the final year work-related learning component and the dissertation; two other themes on institutional support in relation to the resulting quality of the student learning experience, and personal-level practice

for the students are also considered below. The programme team experience was important to include in the latter part of this section for the insights it provided on the programme-level design of the final year structure and how it impacted on the student learning experience.

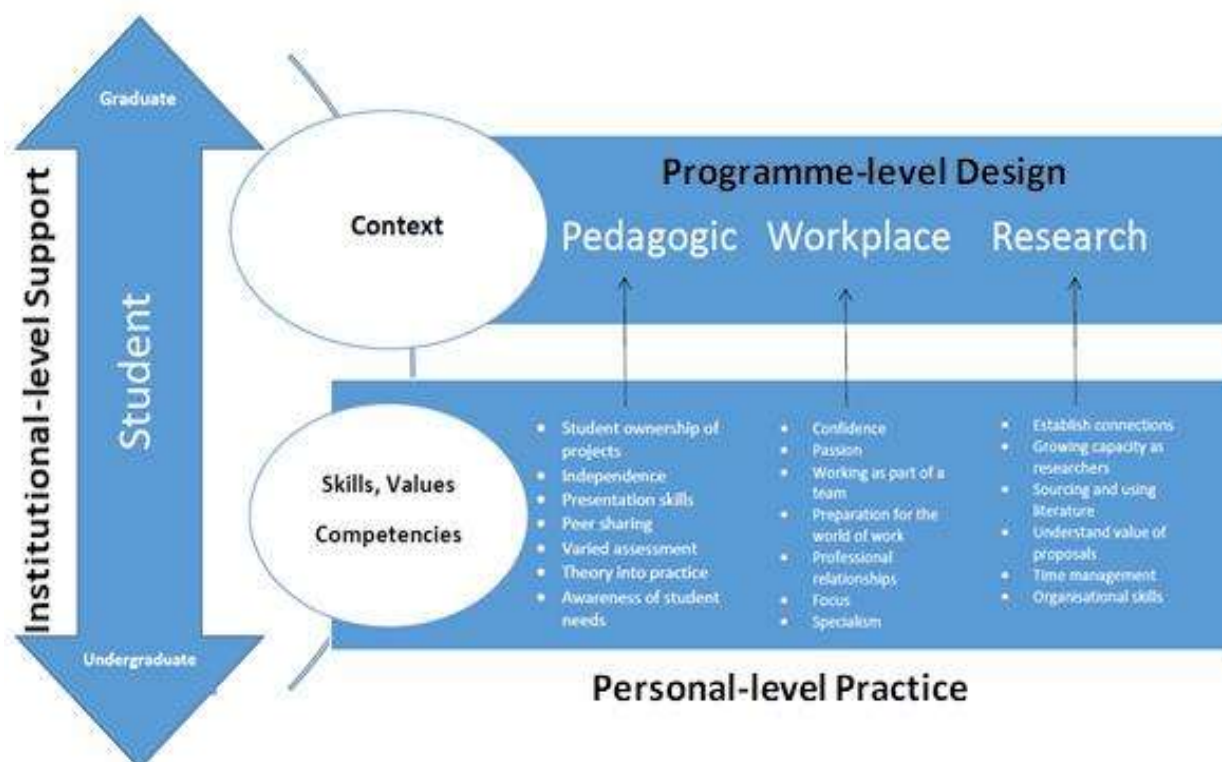
A model is presented (Figure 4) based on the findings of the research study for supporting the final year student experience in the three key contexts: pedagogic, workplace and research. These contexts form important considerations of Programme-level design, and it is well established that careful attention to how programmes and curricula are designed can make a real difference to the student learning experience. Institutional level support is vital from first year in students' undergraduate study to final year to enable them to progress to graduate study as a chosen professional pathway. It provides the vital sense of belonging and engagement that makes a real difference to a successful student learning experience. At the senior level, the institution must take responsibility for nurturing a culture of belonging and creating the necessary infrastructure to promote student engagement (Thomas, 2012).

Personal-level practice for students encapsulated pedagogic gains through their sense of ownership of their final year project, and their improved presentations skills and peer sharing through the ePortfolio. The programme structure provided variety in assessments and an emphasis on theory of education studies into practice, and all predicated on a clear understanding by the programme team of student needs. The workplace gains for students were primarily through the lens of preparing for the world of work by experiencing independence and raised confidence levels that the internship provided, the opportunity for them to pursue an educational passion through their chosen specialism, and benefiting from working in teams and learning to develop professional relationships. Research gains took the form of establishing professional connections through the research context in which their dissertation study was located, growing their skills and capacity as researchers, improving how to source and review literature on educational topics, understanding the value of proposals in the life cycle of a research study, and acquisition of practical skills development in the form of time management and organisation.

We are proposing that this model of student support in the final year of an undergraduate degree programme has the potential to facilitate added value to education studies. It can provide a

robust framework for the work placement period during this important stage of the programme as well as enabling students to have a mature ePortfolio that can be used for career purposes.

**Figure 4: Towards a model of student support in the final year of an undergraduate degree programme.**



This model encourages programme designers to look at the transferable skills, values and competencies that final year undergraduate students need in order to be able to progress from students to graduates, ready for success in their post-graduation lives. We suggest that this model has the potential to be applied across other discipline areas or in different contexts. There are plans currently being considered by the programme team to potentially validate this model for its implication in the provision of a holistic final year experience in education studies and to show its effectiveness.

#### 4.1 Programme-level Design.

The final year experience and the optimum balance between the practical internship and the research dissertation was a result of the programme level design. Penttinen et al. (2013) argue

that the development of working-life orientation and expertise can be enhanced in HE programmes, and suggest that more research is needed to gain a better understanding of how it can be built into HE studies. In this programme, work-related learning was an important part of the final year experience, and the data indicates that the internship impacted students on a variety of levels:

- Their learning from the internship was active as a result of the goal orientated projects;
- It was cumulative as it called on the student to look back on the programme content since first year, and at the same time to look forward to their life after graduation;
- It was purposeful in that it provided clarity of future pathways;
- It was personal in terms of the level of individual growth and development;
- It was situated in specific learning environments that called on professional relationships to be developed with staff and/or students.

Students were reassured by the information given to them pre-internship and it was felt that they '*we had all the information we needed and what was expected of us.*' Reference was made to the individual, person centred nature of the internship as it allowed students to '*see what I would be like in the workplace, how I would organise things; also my strengths and areas of weakness - identify them first and then work on them during the eight weeks.*' The internship also allowed a space to develop new skills, but it was noted that '*it was up to us to take the initiative which in itself was a good skill to have.*' Students reported a need to trust in the programme that was in place for them although at times this meant that there was a sense of uncertainty of being '*obviously taken out of our comfort zone*' and of feeling '*like I don't know what the relevance of these are.*' However, on reflection post-experience of the internship, the benefits were more obvious to the students and they could see that the final year experience was '*structured very well towards employment*' in particular the competency based interview preparation and the fact that it the students felt '*more comfortable in the workplace*' and prepared '*to carry ourselves in the workplace.*'

It has been argued that "while key skills are addressed in many undergraduate programmes, self-management, professional development and the employability context were rarely covered" (Hills *et al.*, 2003, p.217). They go on to suggest that work-related learning provides the best possibility for enhancing the employability of students through exposure to the world of work,

and this from this small-scale study this would appear to be the case. Holmes (2013, p.551) writes about the “graduate identity” approach which involves more than developing skills and attributes – it is about *‘developing ways of presenting your claim on the identity (of being a graduate worthy of employment) in such a way that it stands a good chance of being affirmed by those who make the selection decision on job applications you make.’* It was important to the programme team to support the students to develop in this way, and the internship was the mechanism.

The use of reflective journals made demands of the students in the context of becoming critically reflective. A study by Moore (2013) concluded that while there was broad agreement about the need for students to be critical in their studies, there is much variation in how the term is understood by academics and students, and thus there is a whole range of different ways of being critical. Becoming reflective is not an automatic process and becoming reflective is not easy for students (Dearnley & Matthew, 2007); student perceptions echoed this. It was reported that writing *‘the reflective journal is in itself a skill, and it took me several weeks to just to even get the critical reflection thing down, because reflecting is one thing but then actually being critical is another level’.*

In order to help the students to reflect on the internship experience, different frameworks were explained (Gibbs, 1988; Johns, 2009; Brookfield, 2009), and time was built in for developing critical reflective writing drawing on the work of Moon (2013). However, it was challenging for students, not in terms of recording what they had learnt and providing illustrations, but in writing a critical commentary within the reflections.

The findings clearly show that the students were challenged by the dissertation which was cited by many as an intense experience. They described the dissertation writing process as *‘a very difficult challenge’, a huge learning curve’ and ‘probably the biggest learning experience of the whole programme’.*

However, students highlighted a number of areas of value in undertaking the dissertation process. Looking at impact on their satisfaction in researching a topic of personal interest,

students believed it enabled them to show passion in education topics, develop research skills, help them understand the value of research, and develop education specialisms such as special educational needs and literacy. Students appreciated the 'autonomy' of the research experience which was described as learning *the different ways of research, the rules, the ethical issues with research, the things you don't even think about*' but at the same time they felt reassured that *there was as much support as you needed*'. Students were also forward looking in their approach to the dissertation and acknowledged that it would prepare them well for undertaking post graduate research because *'anyone who went on to do a masters is going to have to do a thesis, so it has prepared us really well for going on and completing one'*.

This echoes studies by Todd *et al.* (2006) which would concur, arguing that completing the dissertation process shows commitment, perseverance, self-motivation, independent study, initiative and critical thinking. However, the students did find the experience stressful which echoes earlier research findings from Devenport & Lane (2006). The relational element of the process also featured in their comments, and this would suggest the importance of giving attention to human interactions and feelings during the process (Strandler *et al.*, 2014). Interestingly, when thinking about the value of a dissertation for their professional futures (Minnighan, 2010), the direct impact on employability did not arise, and yet recent literature concluded that the dissertation has currency, and offers transferable skills that may have value to employers (Feather *et al.*, 2014).

The students' preference for on-going assessment as opposed to exams, which is also highlighted by Nixon & Williams (2014), is clearly evident in the data. It was felt that it was *'much better that there were different types of assessment throughout the year rather than one big exam at the end*. The benefits articulated included the variety of the *'the mix of assessments'* and the fact that *'different learners have a chance'*.

The student response to the ePortfolio, which they had not experienced before the final year, was interesting to the programme team. Clearly, creating an appropriate assessment mechanism is only the first stage, and more support is needed in this regard. Students felt that the ePortfolio was *'time consuming and it didn't reflect how much work you put into the internship'* and that *although I learnt a massive amount on the internship, (...) I don't feel I was able to express that in the best way because of specific methods of assessment'*. From the

programme team's perspective, the students were developing their Mahara ePortfolios with the aim that the reflective practice of creating them could enable the students to document and track their learning over the duration of the 4 years of study. It also gave them the opportunity to develop an integrated, coherent picture of their learning experiences on all the BSc modules and enhance their self-understanding. As it turned out, this process enabled the students to plan and proceed towards their future goals in the different pathways available to them from the degree programme and allow them to showcase their skills and knowledge to prospective employers and research supervisors. The ePortfolio was designed to be broad enough to allow students to use it in a variety of settings, thus replicating and reinforcing some of the postgraduate options available to them. Findings of this study suggest that the design and development of the ePortfolio provided an appropriate platform for integrative learning where the students can visualize the links between the different concepts learnt throughout their programme and beyond into the workplace. The collaborative activities and peer feedback strategies that were utilised were effective for improving social learning on the programme. There were also some identified challenges that the students experienced, prime of which was the time intensive nature of development and difficulties in mastering the use of the Mahara platform.

In bringing all three components (internship, thesis and ePortfolio) together in the final year of the programme, for value to be more evident from both students and staff, there is further work to be done from the curriculum design perspective, given that this was the first delivery of the programme: *"I think even it was the first year of a new degree where there were no models anywhere in the country [and certainly not in this institution]"*. While the ePortfolio showcases students' internship well, the Programme Team felt there was more to do here:

*'We need to really work on that and how we can enhance it and capitalise more on using ePortfolios.'*

*'There can be a clearer bridge between them all, more of a synthesis.'*

*'There were huge gaps and room for manoeuvre - which we're building on now.'*

Taking into consideration how the final year of the programme was structured to allow a connection to the world of work via both the internship and the research dissertation, a range of benefits were identified by the students. These included that it was *'enjoyable, interesting,*



*rewarding, practical, linked to link to further study and/or world of work, was career focused and career shaping, allowed for the exchange of ideas as well as enhancing self-esteem and personal competences*'. The lectures which ran in conjunction with the practical elements of the year (internship and capstone project), supported students' understanding and experience of the connected curriculum (Fung, 2015; Bass, 2014). The experience of the final year allowed students to develop a range of new skills and to refine existing skills. The structure of the final year, in particular the blend of theory and practice, meant that *'we were taught about it and then we were doing it.'* The skills articulated by the students include *'better communication and presentation skills - interpersonal and intrapersonal (skills)....to be able to express yourself, but also to listen to others at the same time - active listening'*.

In addition to communication skills and academic writing, they mentioned problem-solving, teamwork, leadership, organisation, time management; motivation, the ability to multitask, take risk and teach, interpersonal skills, confidence, independence, ideas generation, presentation skills and the ability to conduct and analyse research whilst putting theory to practice. This level and depth of skill development was facilitated by the learning environment (Jenkins & Healey, 2012), which students described as *'supported, guided, challenging, exciting and reassuring'*.

#### **4.2 Institutional-level Support.**

Many of the students mentioned that the institution had taken a 'pioneering' stance with the programme, and while this raised issues at times, the teaching staff were identified as very supportive to them. Reference was made to the *'uneasiness of being the first year, and uncertainty, but they (the teachers) were very open to listening to anything that we had to say'*. The context of the of the degree programme, in particular the size of the institution was seen as an advantage in that *'it comes back to the type of culture you had, because it's a smaller college, people are so open to assisting you'*.

Harris (2005) has drawn attention to the importance of the recognition of the needs and experiences of students as central to the mission of HE institutions and the statements above are testimony to the desire by lecturers to support the students, and this contributed to a 'good atmosphere' on the programme. Rodger *et al.* (2007, p.91) argue that *"education can be regarded as the sum of its parts, which include learning, teaching and testing of performance"*.

The words of the students draw attention to another very important variable which is the learning environment within the institution, and the importance of the relationship with the staff. For these students, a good learning environment is central to the educational experience: *'The teachers give me time before and after class and have conversations about things that interest me.'* Dorman *et al.* (2006) highlight that students learn better when they view the learning environment as positive and supportive. It was important to the programme team to cultivate a positive environment where the students feel a sense of belonging, trust their peers and the teachers, and feel encouraged to tackle challenges, take risks, and ask questions. A variety of qualities can form the basis of a positive student-teacher relationship, including good communication, a safe learning environment with mutual respect, a positive and patient attitude, student equality and timely praise.

### **4.3 Personal-level Practice and the Student Learning Experience.**

In terms of balancing the two key components of the curriculum in the final year of the programme, a number of challenges emerged from the student perspective. There were opinions expressed about securing the internship initially as *'stressful, apprehensive, overwhelming and intense'*. Also, the dissertation was perceived as *'challenging, especially 'the process of conducting interviews, finding an organisation to conduct the interviews with, undertaking academic writing, and wanting more time on the dissertation along with further supervisor meetings'*. The final year experience heightened *'awareness of the range of educational organisations in Ireland and further afield, the varying postgraduate qualifications needed to work in these organisations and the importance of culture and environment when choosing where to work or study'*. Students indicated that these variables were at times in contrast to what they had expected to be a linear journey to the world of education, in particular those who had initially intended on becoming primary school teachers. The Programme Team also picked up on this: *'Students after fourth year will probably either enter the world of work, or they'll continue on into a master's programme.'* The guest speakers from the 'world of work' made opportunities around non-linear pathways clearer for the students: *'Rather than having them as passive lectures where the students just come along and listen to somebody for an hour, students can be involved more actively, working with those highly skilled people [guest speakers] from different areas, who are extremely competent and experienced in their own particular field of work.'*

The choices made by the students post-graduation adhere to the notion of the Education Studies degree being professionally-orientated, as opposed to professional or non-professional (Arora, 2015). The data showed that there was no one clear direction taken by students post-graduation, with a spread of pathways including further study in both education-related and non-education related fields, as well as employment in both education-related and non-education related fields.

#### **4.4 The Programme Team Perspective.**

The programme team perspective was interesting to compare to that of the students. Collaboration by team members was considered to be key in design and delivery of modules across the four years of the degree:

*'It was a very small team and we work extremely well together.'*

*'There was a lot of collaborative work in the design and delivery of modules... to ensure that there wasn't any significant overlap.'*

Collaboration also extended to outside the core programme team: *'I would have collaborated and spoken to a number of clients from outside of here who would've had experience of taking on interns and sounded them out on what their experiences were, what kind of things they'd be looking for from our interns.'*

In relation to the Project in the final year, it was felt by the programme team that it was well-grounded in research across the academic year, and there was a strong connection between the theory and the practice in education studies. Specifically, in year 4, the research and internship modules worked, but there was an indication that there was a need for a new module to be developed to connect the learning from the preceding years of study. This could address the issue of year 4 being somewhat isolated from the rest of the programme: *'I suppose one of the feelings I would've had maybe about it was that it was more isolated [from the rest of the programme] and that there wasn't enough linkage back into the other three years that went before it.'*

There was also mention of the programme pillars: ethics and social justice, lifelong learning, culture and policy. Specific emphasis was on how these could be used to orientate choices made by students regarding research topics and internship locations, thus providing a link to the first three years of the programme: *'Talking about values...the whole Education Studies*

*programme has a foundation of social justice and equality, and I think that could be to the fore more in the fourth year...there's a very heavy emphasis on academic achievement and it's clearly focussed on the thesis and a lot of research, but I think those other aspects could be used in fourth year to tie things together.'*

Looking at how the programme impacted the students, there was also a collective belief from the programme team that the curriculum design supported the students to become more independent learners, and that it gave students the ability to reach a level whereby they become autonomous:

*'I would expect the skill-base for them...that they are much more responsible and self-learners at that stage, so I (would) say, making them independent.'*

*'In fourth year ideally they'd have a sense more of who they are and where they want to go, and that maturity to take responsibility for whatever direction they want to go in.'*

All on the team observed a change in the students after the internship, evidenced by their development of workplace skills, and that they could talk the language of recruitment. It was perceived by the team that it would be a disservice to the students if they did not have a significant piece of work experience as part of the degree programme. Thinking ahead to the next iteration of the programme, it was agreed that there was a need for more of a focus on innovation: *'In terms of innovation, I would say we didn't concentrate enough on it at all that first time round.'* *'If we're looking at workplace competencies we should have innovation and creativity right in there as one of the competencies.'* However, it was acknowledged that in this current year, the ePortfolio had greatly improved: *'What I see as regards a development and what worked well this year was the use of the e-portfolio to showcase their work internship, and I think it was a huge step up and development from the year before.'*

The learning ecology aspect of learner choice and teacher imperative was discussed from the Programme Team's perspective, moving from instructor to learner control, and back again:

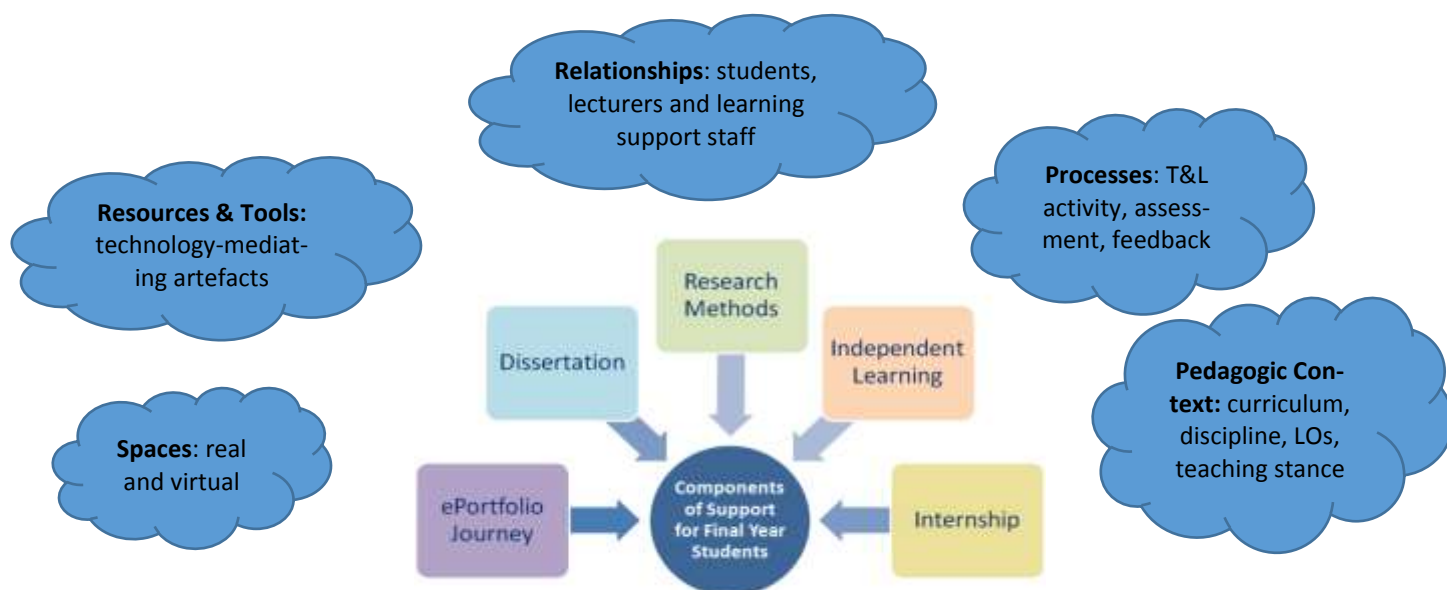
*'After the placement, they now have a clearer sense of 'self' and what their interests are, and the direction (that) they want to put their degree into.'*

*'In the internship we really did see them grow, all of us who visited them, but when they came back into college, into the dissertation mode, they fell back into relying on the*

*teacher.'*

Figure 5 shows the learning ecology dimensions discussed earlier and how they align with the programme team's vision for the Education Studies programme going forward: pedagogic context; processes; relationships; resources and tools; spaces.

**Figure 5: Curriculum selected for exploration through the lens of Learning Ecologies.**



## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations.

This study has reported on the impact on the student experience and engagement of the curriculum design of the final year of a professionally-oriented degree in education studies. The research findings presented in this paper can inform the development of similar type programmes at other institutions. Students were in the main very positive about the impact of the programme on preparing them for their chosen professional pathway. They identified the development of skills, knowledge and competencies for the workplace through the internship, and highlighted the value in undertaking the dissertation process as it enabled them to research

a topic of personal interest, and develop research skills, but was also a challenging and intense experience. Balancing the internship and the dissertation to provide a holistic learning experience appears to be working, so that the students can fulfil their potential through undertaking their final year more closely aligned to their needs and aspirations. The importance of appropriate and different types of support for students facing the challenges of a final year undergraduate programme was a significant outcome of the study.

After synthesising different perspectives from students and staff on the curriculum design of the final year of the BSc in Education Studies, a number of areas emerged for the programme team to concentrate on in order to improve the final year student experience:

- Workshops to provide students with opportunities to synthesise the learning from the first three years, with a view to providing students with a platform to bring cohesion to their learning over the four years, culminating in their chosen pathway post-graduation.
- A scaffolded approach to the use of the ePortfolio from year one in order that students can construct more innovative portfolios.
- Workshops to support dissertation supervisors and students through this challenging process.
- A formalised support structure for students in order for them to have a greater understanding of the range of choices available to them post-graduation.

We suggest that these recommendations are applicable across a wider international audience and to other related disciplines.

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