



Building Engagement from Day One:

*Fostering Belonging for
Every First-Year Student*

SAI | STUDENT
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IRELAND

Foreword

This guide, *Building Engagement from Day One: Fostering Belonging for Every First-Year Student*, was developed through collaborative discussions among higher education practitioners committed to strengthening student success across Irish higher education.

It brings together insights, lived experience and practice from academic and professional service colleagues across the sector. A shared understanding underpins this work: the first year in a Higher Education Institute (HEI) is a critical period in which belonging, engagement and confidence are formed and where inclusive approaches can have a lasting impact on student outcomes.

By establishing common approaches, every staff member can contribute to the success and wellbeing of first-year students.



The guide consolidates sector knowledge and institutional experience into a collection of practical and adaptable approaches for those working with first-year undergraduate students. It aims to support coherence in practice across roles and settings and to encourage inclusive, student-centred approaches from the outset of the student journey.

This work reflects wider national collaboration and ongoing efforts to enhance student success, including the contributions of Student Affairs Ireland (SAI). Seed funding from SAI enabled cross-sector engagement that supported the development of this resource.

This guide aligns with broader sector priorities advanced by the Higher Education Authority, particularly in relation to retention, widening participation, and student success.

By drawing on shared challenges, effective practices and student experience, this guide supports a whole-of-institution approach to first-year engagement and provides a practical resource for staff across the sector. It is intended to inform and inspire practice as it is used, adapted, and built upon by practitioners in the years ahead, contributing to more inclusive, connected, and effective learning environments for future cohorts of students.

Linda Barry

SAI President

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Getting started

The Purpose of this Guide



Purpose

The first year of university is a decisive period that shapes students' sense of belonging, confidence, and long-term success. This guide offers practical, evidence-informed strategies grounded in inclusive design, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and real student experiences to help higher education practitioners create conditions where all students can thrive from Day 1.

Who is this Guide for?

This guide is written for higher education practitioners – a term used here to include staff members involved in teaching, supporting or designing the student experience:

- **Academic staff** (lecturers, tutors, programme leaders)
- **Professional and support staff** (student services, library, wellbeing, careers, disability support)
- **Staff in cross-functional roles** (learning designers, transition teams, progression and retention officers).

What is this Guide for?

This guide aims to help institutions and practitioners to:

- **Design** inclusive, accessible learning environments using UDL and inclusive design principles
- **Strengthen** belonging and engagement from the earliest interactions
- **Collaborate** across roles and units to inform good practice
- **Apply** practical, adaptable strategies that work across diverse institutional contexts.

How to use this Guide

This guide is designed for both individual reflection and collective action. You can use it:

- **Individually** – to identify strategies you can apply in our own teaching, support or design role
- **With teams** – to align approaches, share practice, and plan coordinated interventions
- **Institutionally** – to embed belonging, engagement and inclusive design into first-year strategy.

Because belonging, identity and engagement underpin the practical suggestions, case studies and student insights, the next section explores why these elements are increasingly critical in today's evolving educational landscape.

Why the First Year Matters

The transition into university is not a single moment but a complex and deeply personal process. Students arrive with varying backgrounds, and levels of academic preparedness. Many balance work, caring commitments, financial pressures, disability, long commutes with unfamiliar academic cultures. These factors shape how quickly students can engage, connect and be successful. As one student put it:

Early experiences, positive or negative shape students' academic identity, sense of belonging and willingness to engage. Inclusive, accessible and well-designed first-year environments reduce barriers and support students to take increasing responsibility for their learning and independence.

“It was overwhelming the first weeks – new systems, new people, new expectations. I felt awkward, self-conscious, lost and nervous too.”

Finding their place

Belonging and Engagement in Higher Education



An Evolving Landscape

Ireland has one of the highest rates of participation in higher education worldwide, well beyond the average seen in the European Union.

The participation rate has shown a steady upward trend over time, increasing from 30% in 2011, reflecting a longstanding policy commitment to widening access. This is set to continue as the rates of participation are higher still among younger demographics: 65% of 25–34 year-olds had attained a third-level qualification in 2023 (CSO, 2024).

A More Diverse Student Population

The student population has also grown more diverse in recent years. Increasing numbers of students from underrepresented backgrounds, mature learners, international students, and those with disabilities are shaping a new higher education landscape. While this diversity enriches learning environments, it calls for targeted strategies and inclusive approaches to ensure all students feel included, supported, and equipped to succeed.

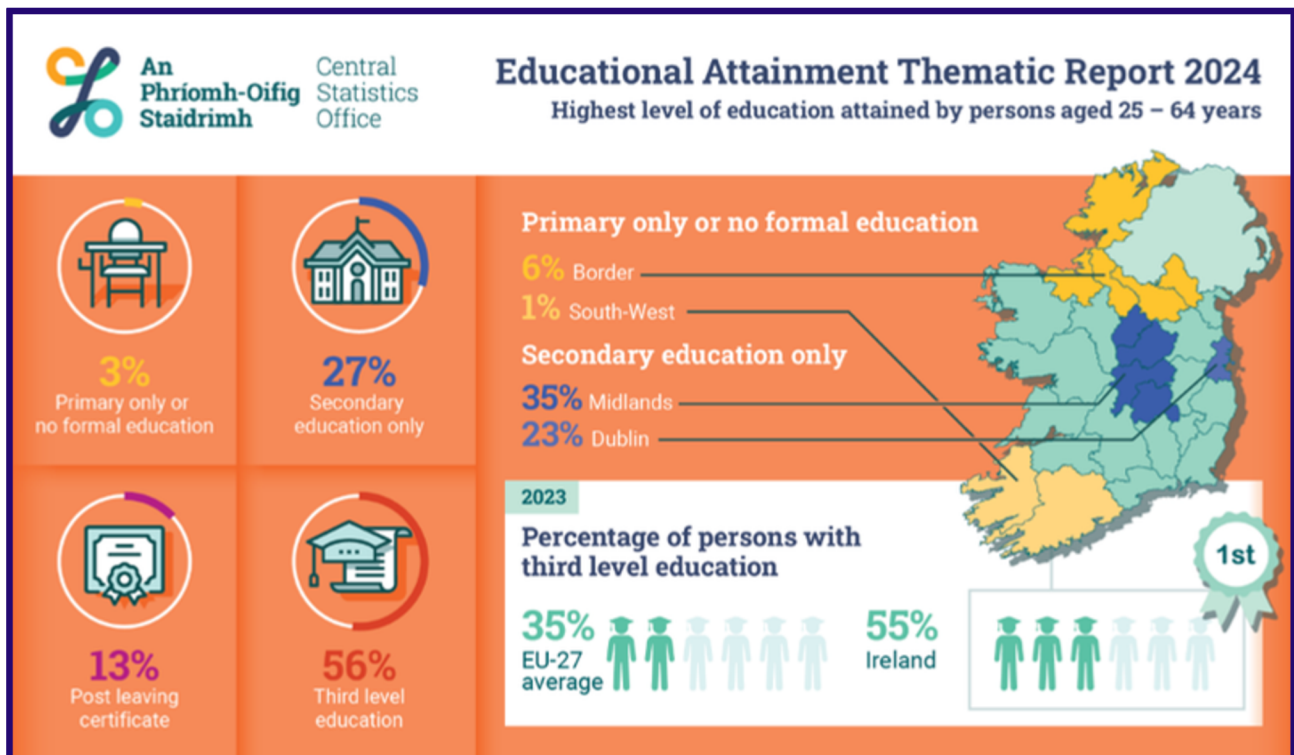


Figure 1. Educational Attainment Thematic Report (CSO, 2024)

Current and Emerging Challenges

Post-COVID research suggests that reduced in-person attendance reflects a complex interaction of assessment practices, recorded lectures, commuting pressures, paid work, and changing expectations of engagement rather than simple disengagement

“I feel like nowadays, with students interacting online, especially during like with the whole COVID situation, I feel like everyone has become a bit less social and less open and not that talkative anymore. Everyone just closed up in their own little box and it’s hard for everyone to open up.”

Many students now commute longer distances because of the housing crisis, often combining study with part-time work due to the rising cost of living.

“Being a student, having responsibilities of family it’s a huge challenge and have to commute to college 3 hours plus Mon–Friday [sic], it’s really taking its toll on my mental health.”
Female, Undergraduate, Mature Student, Connaught / Ulster Region (Roper, and Marrinan, 2026).

At the same time, higher education is operating against a backdrop of increased mental health challenges (Fox et al, 2020, Roper, and Marrinan, 2026), the disruption of artificial intelligence and shifting expectations of what life in a HEI should deliver.

“I will get stressed if I can’t work enough hours because classes are being moved around daily which then I have a financial difficulty paying rent and bills, this affects my mental health. Balancing work, college and placement is hard as I don’t have enough time to study, and I need extra time to study too. I also have sick mum at home so it’s like a maze I am trying to get through every day and balance.” Female, Undergraduate, Mature Student, Leinster Region, DKIT (Roper, and Marrinan 2026)

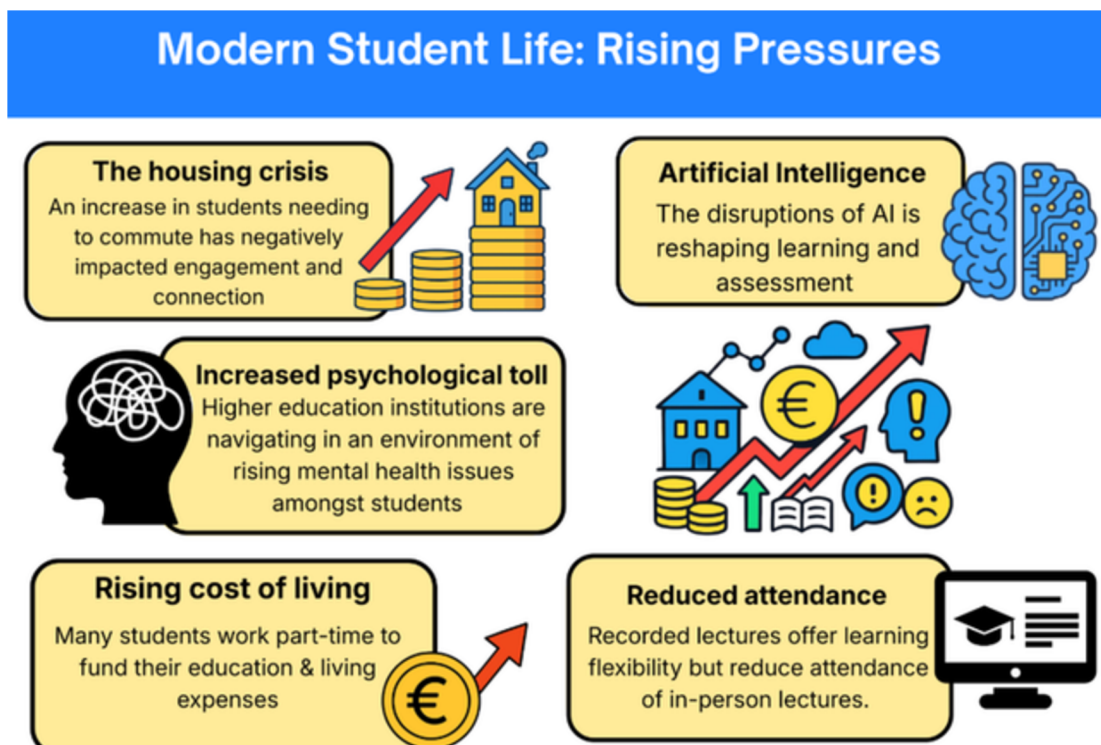


Figure 2: Modern Student Life: Rising Pressures. Data source: Student Success in Their Own Words: Insights from Higher Education in Ireland (Roper, and Marrinan, 2026)

Belonging and Engagement

Contemporary research describes belonging as something with many different dimensions. It includes academic, social, and identity-related aspects, and is shaped both by students' own actions and by how institutions support them (Kahu et al, 2022; Ajjawi et al, 2023; Allen et al, 2021).

Recent systematic reviews confirm that students who feel connected to their institution report better mental health and subsequent academic performance. Fostering supportive relationships and inclusive environments is, therefore, essential for enabling students to feel genuinely part of their higher education experience. Vincent Tinto (Tinto, 1975, Tinto, 2021) proposes that students' decisions to remain engaged in their institutions are strongly influenced by:



Academic integration

feeling intellectually engaged, supported and capable within the academic community (e.g. teaching, assessment, feedback interaction with staff).



Social integration

feeling connected to other students, staff and the wider community.

Engagement as an Outcome of Belonging

When we intentionally support belonging, engagement increases. When engagement opportunities are meaningful and inclusive, belonging improves. While belonging can be complex and sometimes debated, student engagement offers a more practical way of looking at things. It focuses on what students actually do, and what they're supported to do, in their learning environments, linking a sense of belonging to real actions and outcomes (Kahu et al, 2022; Lowe et al, 2025).

"Belonging acts as a pathway – fostering engagement or, in its absence, inhibiting engagement."
(Kahu et al, 2022)

"Belonging is a foundational condition for engagement: without it, learning remains out of reach."



The Importance of First-year Transition

The first year brings significant academic, social, and personal change as students develop new identities as learners, peers, and community members. It can be transformative, but also uncertain or overwhelming. As mentioned before, feeling connected early in the student journey is key. Moore–Cherry (2015), with Kahu (2022), highlight early belonging and familiarity as “a necessary precursor to deeper interpersonal and academic belonging” stating “early stage of belonging is integral for negotiating the negative emotions, such as fear or anxiety, that often come with a profound shift in life such as starting university.” (Moore–Cherry et al, 2015, Kahu et al, 2022)

Transition Looks Different For Different Learners

Transition is not experienced uniformly. Students come to higher education with diverse backgrounds and identities. For many students, belonging may depend less on traditional social integration and more on predictability, flexibility, clarity of expectations, and feeling recognised and supported within teaching and institutional systems.

“Often expected belonging activities tend to exclude part-time, online, mature students, and those with caring responsibilities as they are campus-based and buy into the ideal of the young, unencumbered student.” (Ajjawi et al, 2025)

Students are more likely to be academically successful and more settled when they feel they are part of the learning community. The HEA Student Success survey again shows this: “Peer engagement, belonging and community are essential. Over 90% of respondents reported that their own sense of success is influenced by the engagement of their peers, confirming that learning is relational and collective.” (Roper, and Marrinan, 2026)

STUDENT CHALLENGES IN FIRST YEAR

Commute and accommodation issue:

“The journey to and from college each day is on average 3–4 hours which wastes too much time, I cannot afford to live on campus or closer to the college” (Moore–Cherry et al, 2015 p40)

Fear and nervousness on returning to education:

“I dropped out of mainstream education when I was sixteen. Coming back as a mature student was terrifying...” (Roper, and Marrinan, 2026).

Workload expectation:

“...straight away, it was hard work, I had essays to do and assignments and I felt it was really full on, a lot more than expected” (Redmond et al, 2011)

Social Opportunities:

“I couldn’t integrate in any of the sport things... I had some one hour and two hour gaps... I suppose I felt there wasn’t much to do on campus during this time” (Redmond et al, 2011)

“We were introduced to people. In our group the mentors were very involved and were doing stuff with us outside what they were meant to do. Just getting us all together that really helped. Giving us a feel for the college, answering questions. Didn’t feel uncomfortable going to them at all. (University Undergraduate Student)”

Non-progression and Its Impact

While the majority of first years progress successfully, non-progression remains a challenge. In 2022/23, 13% of new entrants did not progress past their first year (HEA, 2026). The decision to leave is shaped by a complex mix of academic preparedness, personal circumstances, financial pressures, and social integration. Many of these factors are beyond the direct control of institutions, and in some cases, the decision to withdraw is undoubtedly the right one. However, in many others, withdrawal or failure during the first year of study may be prevented through sustained, inclusive attention to belonging and engagement.

KNOWN INFLUENCES ON THE DECISION TO WITHDRAW

The decision to leave/withdraw is frequently made because of a set of interrelated issues. A study of reasons for withdrawal undertaken within the Irish HE context found five core categories of influencers: course, personal, financial, health/medical and family (Moore-Cherry et al, 2015). Of these, course was the most prominent influence. However, this was often linked with other complex issues.

“

Making friends, that was a big help in getting through first year

My Peer Mentors were great. They were so welcoming and I would honestly go to them if I ever had a problem at all in the college.

”



What can Staff Do?

While orientation plays a vital role in sowing the seeds for developing a sense of belonging, activities to develop belonging must be maintained through the higher education experience. Supporting student engagement is a shared responsibility. It requires a whole-of-institution approach, with all staff contributing to meaningful opportunities for engagement across the student journey, starting from day one.

“Belonging occurs at the level of the classroom and the discipline as well as the university, so the focus needs to be both inside and outside the classroom.” (Kahu et al, 2022)

First year is an opportunity to establish a learning community that lays the foundations for student belonging, engagement and success:

- **Building** early relationships with students;
- **Creating** inclusive and supportive learning environments;
- **Connecting** students to support systems before problems escalate;
- **Modelling** the behaviours and academic practices that will sustain them through their studies.

First-year teaching increasingly takes place within large class settings, competing interests, and significant staff workload pressures. Not all staff have access to small-group teaching, extended contact hours, or specialist supports. Small, routine experiences such as feeling welcomed in class, receiving timely and constructive feedback, being encouraged to ask questions or forming connections with peers play a powerful role in helping students to belong. This is supported by the HEA’s Student Success Survey 2025 which finds, “the strongest enablers of success are effective teaching, empathy, and communication” (Roper, and Marrinan, 2026)

“... it’s not just that students can be expected to “find” a sense of belonging on their own, like searching for prizes in a mazed hunt. Campus leaders, educators, faculty, and student affairs professionals must also take deliberate, equity-minded actions to root out, replace, and/or revise existing practices, policies, and processes that act as barriers to students’ sense of belonging. They must simultaneously build new scaffolds and supports that enable student success — what I like to call the “constructive” and “destructive” work of boosting, building or engineering belonging.” (Strayhorn, 2023)

Enabling a Strong Start

Adapting Support for the First-Year Journey



Adapting Support for the First-Year Journey

We all play a part in supporting students transitioning into higher education. This means taking a whole-of-institution approach, where academic staff, professional services, and leadership work together to create environments that foster engagement and belonging. When these are prioritised, they help build strong, resilient learning communities.

For students, starting in higher education means navigating unfamiliar environments while making sense of how their past experiences connect to this new context. Early moments, such as orientation, offer a valuable opportunity to shape a culture where students feel confident, capable, and ready to take part.

Here are some approaches to consider which can be implemented into your personal practice or mainstreamed across departmental or institutional activity, inside and outside the classroom, that will work to build student engagement and belonging. These ideas will also complement the approaches suggested in other frameworks, such as Universal Design. Although changes can be implemented locally and you may even already be using some of the approaches below, others require a more coordinated approach, so we have outlined ideas in this section from both individual/module/subject and programme/departmental/institutional perspectives.



WITHIN THE CLASSROOM

01.

Develop a Collaborative Classroom Culture from the Beginning

Strong communication and social skills prepare students to collaborate effectively, ask questions in class, and seek out support or advice when needed. The following approaches serve to build confidence, peer familiarity, and develop student-staff relationships.

AT AN INDIVIDUAL/MODULE/SUBJECT TEACHING LEVEL

Group work

Create opportunities for social interaction and collaboration, such as mixing groups regularly to widen social networks and foster inclusivity.

Reflective exercises

Design structured reflection exercises in small groups on questions such as "How do I typically participate in discussion?" or "How do I expect to receive feedback?".

'Get talking' rotations

At the start of a session, run a brief structured activity where students rotate and speak to 4–5 of their peers for 2 minutes each using a prompt related to the course or content (such as 'What interested you in this subject?').

AT A PROGRAMME/DEPARTMENT/INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

Peer-led micro-teaching

In weeks 5 or 6, ask students in small groups to teach back a core idea from the week's readings or lecture. This builds academic confidence, normalises peer dialogue, and demonstrates that everyone has something to contribute.

'Taster' Peer Mentoring

Facilitate opportunities for 2nd year students (or peer mentors, if there is an established programme) to talk to a first-year class to share their first-year experience.

WITHIN THE CLASSROOM

02.

Encourage Reflective Practices Early on For Students

Students often arrive with expectations about how a classroom works, shaped by their previous experiences. These activities encourage reflection on those assumptions and help build a more collaborative, co-created learning environment.

AT AN INDIVIDUAL/MODULE/SUBJECT TEACHING LEVEL

Reflective listening groups

Use 15 minutes of class time to practise active listening: one person speaks, one listens, one observes. Rotate roles. Debrief together to discuss what effective communication feels and sounds like.

'This is me' learning map.

Ask students to create a short mind-map in pairs or small groups that includes what they bring to university (skills, experiences, interests, aspirations) and what they want to gain. Then invite sharing with the wider group to encourage early engagement.

Expectation-setting discussions.

In the first seminar, lecture, or lab, co-create 'ways of working' by discussing what is expected for participation, feedback and collaboration. Use a whiteboard or sticky notes to gather ideas, helping to surface assumptions and create shared standards.

AT A PROGRAMME/DEPARTMENT/INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

Adopt a strengths-based approach

Ask students, "What do you already know, and how can we build on it?" This empowers students, moving away from a transactional relationship in the classroom to helping them grow as learners. It also helps normalise the idea that everyone, regardless of background, has something valuable to contribute.

Student Transition Questionnaire

Survey students with a mid-semester questionnaire to see how well they have adapted to third-level life and what additional supports they might require. Early intervention could be the difference between a student staying in college or leaving. Collaborate with local student success or student service teams to develop action plans.

WITHIN THE CLASSROOM

03.

Developing a Supportive Culture for Students.

As one of a student's main points of contact, lecturers play an important role in creating a supportive environment. These approaches help embed that support into teaching and programme design.

AT AN INDIVIDUAL/MODULE/SUBJECT TEACHING LEVEL

Familiarise yourself with central student supports

Know where to direct students for various queries. Many resources are already available for new students; request copies and stay up to date so you can make accurate referrals.

Reduce first-day uncertainty with simple signage

Post signs outside your lecture room to reassure late arrivals that they're in the right place, helping reduce anxiety and prevent disruption.

Offer multiple opportunities to ask for help

At the start of a session, let students know who they can approach with questions, whether that's you or a designated point of contact in the wider team. Consider open-door hours, informal drop-in sessions, or an anonymous digital question box.

AT A PROGRAMME/DEPARTMENT/INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

Bring student support into the classroom

Invite student services or advisors to speak directly with your students or lecturing team. When support is embedded into the academic space, it feels less like a sign of weakness and more like a natural part of student life.

Share clear, accessible information early and often

Provide detailed schedules, checklists, FAQs, and "what to expect" guides ahead of arrival and during induction, ideally as accessible, downloadable PDFs or online modules.

'What I wish I'd known' panel

Invite 2–3 second-year students, or 'peer-insiders', to speak candidly to new students about early worries and how they navigated them. Include a Q&A session. Staff can then highlight the support available.

OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

01.

Involve Students as Partners in Belonging

Involving students as partners helps build a stronger sense of community for everyone. Working with representative bodies, such as students' unions or councils, also provides a valuable way for universities to engage with student voices and shape effective support.

AT A PROGRAMME/DEPARTMENT LEVEL

Create student communities

Provide opportunities for students to collaborate with both others in their year group and students in the years above them e.g. peer / academic mentoring, study groups.

Elect class representatives

Encourage first-year students to run for/elect a class representative. This offers a student voice to the classroom, to help highlight issues early and provide feedback in real-time, allowing lecturers to tweak the structure of individual modules and lessons to react to the learning needs of this group to support success.

AT AN INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

Build working relationships with students

Work with students including the institution's Students' Union to develop a collaborative and community-based relationship.

Explore new ways of collecting student feedback

In Ireland, the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) partners with several HEIs to engage students more in their own learning and utilise more than just standard feedback surveys to capture the student voice.

OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

02.

Supporting Students' Health and Wellbeing

Supporting student health and well-being is key to a successful transition into higher education. Both academic and professional staff play an important role, often acting as the first point of contact and providing support when it's needed.

AT AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Be the "One Good Person" in a student's life

Ensure a supportive and welcoming environment at all interactions. A friendly face can make a big difference. Be someone they know they can trust and could turn to if needed.

Ensure services are accessible

Wherever possible, offer options to facilitate an increasingly diverse student population, such as varied appointment times, options for digital engagement, English text, or meeting students in a accessible area.

Take life into account

Offer flexibility where appropriate. This can be in terms of assessment formats, extensions or meeting times and formats (online or in-person). Consider other pressures that can also be part of the student experience (e.g. fee deadlines) and may impact on student wellbeing.

AT A DEPARTMENT/INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

Publicise immediate crisis services

Where available, digital mental health support services such as [Togetherall](#), offer good immediate options for students to share their thoughts, concerns and feelings safely and anonymously.

Signpost institutional support services

Provide relevant programmes to students, such as settling-in programmes (University of Galway [Start Strong](#), or Maynooth University ['My Maynooth on Moodle'](#)) that familiarise students with the services on offer.

OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

03.

Social Activities in an Evolving Student Landscape

Social connections remain a key part of the higher education experience, helping to shape a more positive and engaging student journey. (Alotaibi et al., 2023)

AT AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Embrace digital connection opportunities

A lot of the social aspects of third level often take place in-person. Offer alternative or online opportunities for students to participate in social interactions.

Create opportunities for social interaction

Typically, opportunities for social interactions will take place in the evenings, isolating those that are commuting, working, or with caring responsibilities. Consider running activities, events, and workshops during working hours to maximise the opportunity for all students to attend, and to allow people to try something new during their college experience.

AT A DEPARTMENT/INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

Highlight potential socialising opportunities with a Social Calendar

If your institution has an online social calendar, online student newsletter or ezine make students aware of this, at every opportunity, so they can keep up to date with what is happening and then decide if they wish to partake.

Run drop-in coffee sessions

Consider opportunities where students can come together to interact, connect and chat in an informal setting. Drop-in sessions with no requirement to register in advance can be very appealing as it removes the pressure to commit and allows students to decide on the day if they would like to attend.

OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

04.

Provide Online Resources to Help Students Navigate Jargon

For many students, starting university can feel like entering a new world, with unfamiliar terms like credits, LMS, or plagiarism. While it's important to introduce this language early, using clear and simple explanations makes a big difference. Students may be returning to education, learning in a second language, or navigating a learning difficulty. Reducing unnecessary jargon and explaining key concepts clearly helps more students understand, engage, and build confidence as they progress.

AT AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Engage with existing orientation and support resources

As part of the orientation and welcome programme, some course programmes may provide online resource hubs with useful information for students transitioning to third level. Whether this is on a Student Portal, SharePoint or a website, seek them out and encourage students to engage, as often these act as a one-stop shop for all relevant information, beyond academic content

AT A PROGRAMME/DEPARTMENT LEVEL

Give students the terminology they need to succeed

Make it a point to introduce new students to terms and jargon they'll be using within their field, whether by defining these in lectures and tutorials or making a specific jargon-buster list in a course handbook.

AT AN INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

Make your resources accessible to all

Ensure that student resources use accessibility measures such as the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) Plain English resources, W3C web standards, and document formatting to minimise unnecessary barriers for new students

Create opportunities to "learn the lingo"

Consider having a Glossary of Terms and/or Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) webpage which introduces any institution-specific terms, and if using acronyms, make sure to spell out the full phrase when initially introducing it.

Challenges: Inside & Outside the Classroom

Some of the above approaches can be introduced with no issues; however, staff often face difficulties that limit engagement inside and outside the classroom.

1

Class attendance can be variable. Irregular attendance could be addressed through accessible materials and asynchronous activities.

2

Large or over-enrolled groups make interaction and monitoring difficult, but simple strategies like quick polls and structured routines can help.

3

Group work can be challenging due to uneven participation and scheduling issues. Assigning roles and using short, guided tasks improves effectiveness.

Ultimately, time pressures on staff highlight the value of small, sustainable changes, repurposing materials, and collaborating with both academic and professional services colleagues to make engagement strategies more manageable and effective. Creating a vibrant, engaged higher education community isn't something you will accomplish on your own from scratch, utilise the resources available in this guide and in your institution to build the puzzle one piece at a time.



From Engagement to Impact

Measuring What Matters



Measuring what Matters

Measuring student engagement works best when it is purposeful, proportionate, inclusive, and clearly focused on improvement. Engagement indicators are just one source of insight, not a definitive measure of teaching quality or student success. Used well, they help us understand what is working, for whom, and in which contexts, so that teaching, support, and wider practices can continue to evolve.

Be Clear About the Purpose and Level

Before choosing how to measure engagement, it's important to be clear on why it's being measured, whether for teaching reflection, programme review, or student support planning. It's also useful to consider the level at which the insights will be used, such as within the classroom, across a programme, or at an institutional level, and who will use the findings in practice. Keeping this in mind helps ensure that any data collected is meaningful and actionable.

SELECT APPROPRIATE APPROACHES

Self-Report Surveys and Rating Scales



These are most useful for understanding social, emotional, and cognitive engagement. They can be used by staff to identify patterns in motivation, confidence, or belonging across modules or cohorts, and by professional and support staff to monitor wellbeing and engagement at key transition points.

At a broader level, institutional teams can use this data to track trends linked to progression or retention. Survey results should be treated as indicative rather than definitive, as responses can be influenced by timing, context, or survey fatigue. Differences in responses may also reflect varied ways of engaging, rather than disengagement.

To use these tools effectively, it's best to gather data at key points (such as early in the semester or after assessments), combine it with qualitative insights or behavioural data, and communicate clearly how findings will be used and what changes follow.

Interviews, Focus Groups, and Case Studies



These approaches are particularly useful for understanding why engagement varies and for exploring student experiences in more depth. Academic staff can use them to gain insight into how students experience teaching, assessment, and workload, while professional services can identify barriers to engaging with supports, especially in relation to accessibility and Universal Design.

At a broader level, the institution can use these methods to evaluate targeted initiatives or transition supports. To use these approaches effectively, sessions should be focused, purposeful, and inclusive, supported by clear, open and non-leading prompts, and findings should be shared as key themes linked to action, rather than just raw data.



Direct Observation of Learning Environments

This approach is most useful for understanding behavioural engagement during learning activities. Staff can use it to reflect on student participation and interaction, while learning designers or teaching enhancement staff can support more structured observation and pedagogical review. It's important to note that observation captures visible behaviours, but not necessarily students' emotional or cognitive engagement, and should not be used for individual performance management. Used well, it can be a valuable developmental tool, particularly when focused on patterns over time rather than single sessions, and when combined with student feedback to support interpretation.

Interpret Inclusively and Act Responsibly

Across all approaches, it's important to recognise that engagement can look different for different students. A lack of visible participation should not be taken as disengagement without additional context, and links between engagement indicators and outcomes should be interpreted carefully rather than assumed to be causal. Insights should lead to appropriate action at different levels: staff may adapt learning design, assessment, or communication; or maybe it's about refining access, outreach, and support. The institution can align findings with wider strategies around transition, retention, and progression. In all cases, the use of engagement data should lead to clear insights, proportionate and inclusive actions, and visible feedback to students and staff on what has changed.

Check Ethical, Governance, and Practical Implications

Engagement data should always be handled in line with GDPR and institutional policies, with clear guidance on its purpose, access, storage, and retention. It's also important to distinguish among its uses for quality enhancement, quality assurance, and research. Measurement approaches should complement, rather than duplicate, existing processes such as programme reviews, external examining, and national or institutional surveys.

Appendix

Table:

Mapping Student

Engagement

Measurement Methods to

HEA-Relevant Indicators

Measurement Method	Engagement Dimensions	Belonging – Indicative HEA-Aligned Indicators	Retention – Indicative HEA-Aligned Indicators	Progression – Indicative HEA-Aligned Indicators	Primary Data Source	Key References
Self-report surveys and rating scales (USEI, NSSSE, StudentSurvey.ie)	Emotional, Cognitive, Behavioural, Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> % of first-year students reporting sense of belonging Perceived peer connection and staff approachability Confidence in being a “legitimate” university learner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Early-semester disengagement risk scores Intention to persist to end of Year 1 Differential retention by student group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic confidence and self-regulation scores Engagement with learning activities Self-reported preparedness for progression 	Institutional surveys: StudentSurvey.ie; SAI instruments	<p>Fredericks et al. (2004); Kuh (2001); Maroco et al. (2016); Bowden et al. (2021); Buntins et al. (2021)</p>
Interviews, case studies, focus groups	Emotional, Cognitive, Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Qualitative evidence of social integration Narratives of inclusion/exclusion Student identity transition experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reported reasons for withdrawal or stop-out Barriers to continued enrolment Perceived usefulness of institutional supports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student understanding of academic expectations Perceived readiness to progress Alignment between expectations and experience 	Qualitative evaluation studies; SAI case studies; student voice initiatives	<p>Fredericks & McColskey (2012); Fredericks et al. (2004); Bowden et al. (2021)</p>
Direct observation protocols (BERI, BROMP)	Behavioural, Affective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visible participation in class activities Interaction with peers in learning settings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attendance and active participation patterns Early disengagement in large-group teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sustained on-task behaviour Engagement with active learning approaches linked to achievement 	Classroom observations; learning analytics; teaching enhancement reviews	<p>Lane & Harris (2015); Ocumpaugh (2015); Fredericks & McColskey (2012)</p>
Experience Sampling Method (ESM)	Emotional, Cognitive, Behavioural (momentary)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In-the-moment feelings of belonging or isolation Stress and wellbeing during early transition weeks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Short-term disengagement signals Stress or overload during critical retention risk periods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concentration, challenge, and “flow” during learning Cognitive engagement linked to academic momentum 	Targeted ESM studies; digital engagement pilots	<p>Csikszentmihalyi (1990); Hektner et al. (2007); Buntins et al. (2021)</p>
Mixed-methods approach (combined)	Social, Emotional, Cognitive, Behavioural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Triangulated belonging indicators across cohorts Disaggregated insights for equity-focused reporting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear evidence linking early engagement to continuation Robust identification of at-risk groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong evidence of engagement–progression pathway Year-to-year progression trends explained 	Integrated institutional datasets; SAI evaluation frameworks	<p>Fredericks et al. (2004); Bowden et al. (2021); Buntins et al. (2021)</p>

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Where Theory meets Action

**Case Studies of Belonging
and Engagement
Initiatives across Higher
Education Institutions.**

Change of Course – University College Cork

Institution

University College Cork

Service/ School/ Unit

First Year Experience Admissions Office

Format

In-person and online

Introduction and Context

Many students in higher education may later realise that their chosen degree programme is not the best fit academically or personally for them. At University College Cork (UCC) this situation is formally recognised and addressed through the Change of Course policy – a structured process that allows students to change to another first-year programme early in Semester 1.

Background

In September 2024, Sophie, a first-year undergraduate student in UCC, began her studies in Mathematical Sciences. Having excelled in maths during secondary school, she felt this was a 'safe' and expected pathway. Within the first week of Semester 1, Sophie began to experience growing dissatisfaction with the programme. While academically capable, she felt disconnected from the content and struggled to see herself pursuing a career in maths. Her engagement levels declined in week 2 and she began questioning her decision to continue.

The Challenge faced by Sophie

Sophie faced three key challenges:

Lack of academic alignment – she found little that was intrinsically interesting in core maths modules

Reduced motivation – her attendance and participation began to decline

Anxiety about the future – she feared that changing direction would mean taking a year out while all her friends 'moved on' and feared disappointing her family.

Intervention: The Change of Course Process

Sophie made an appointment with the First-Year Experience Coordinator (FYEC) who guided her through her options and the Change of Course Policy which included:

Discussing interests and strengths

Reviewing eligibility criteria which included Leaving Certificate cut-off points and matriculation requirements

Consultation with Admissions Officer regarding availability of places in Arts-Music

Consultation with Head of Music Department to request a late music test to enable Sophie to meet the matriculation requirements for Arts-Music.

Through a process of reflection Sophie recognised her passion for music and Italian – subjects she had previously considered but did not pursue due to uncertainty about career outcomes.

Sophie passed the music test and successfully changed course to Arts–Music.

Outcomes

Improved Engagement: Sophie’s enthusiasm and participation increased within days of changing to Arts–Music

Strong Academic Performance: She continued to excel in all modules throughout her first year

Enhanced Wellbeing: Anxiety levels decreased

Clarity of Direction: Sophie explored pathways and at the end of first year and decided to continue in the Arts–Music (International) Pathway because she wants to spend her third year in an approved Italian university.

Institutional Impact

Early Intervention: Structured timelines ensure students can change course with minimal disruption

Positive Student Experience: The Change of Course Policy reinforces UCC’s commitment to supporting students holistically

Retention: Providing flexible academic mobility at the beginning of the academic year reduces withdrawal rates.

Key Success Factors

1. Clear communication about eligibility and deadlines.
2. Timely decision making to minimise academic disruption.
3. Academic and administrative support.

Conclusion

The Change of Course initiative demonstrates how institutional flexibility can profoundly impact individual student outcomes. By normalising Change of Course as part of academic exploration UCC fosters self-awareness and long-term student success.

Note: Throughout the Change of Course window/Timeframe, CAO waiting lists are honoured and prioritised above Change of Course applicants. This means that the Admissions Office seeks to fill all available places with CAO waiting lists.

Contact

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Onwards, Upwards and Outwards

Institution

Atlantic Technological University (ATU) Sligo

Service/ School/ Unit: Faculty Business & Social Sciences

Note: The OOU project was created, developed and led by the named authors and is not an institution-wide ATU initiative. The intellectual property, project materials and associated data are retained by the named authors.

Format

In-person (creative reflective workshops)

What was the Initiative?

Onwards, Upwards and Outwards (OOU) is a research-led, creative transition initiative designed to support first-year undergraduate students within a case-study faculty to reflect on their educational journey and future aspirations. Delivered through interactive workshops during the first six to seven weeks of Semester One in each academic year (2023–2025), students used drawing and LEGO® modelling to explore their past aspirations, current experiences and future goals. They identified potential barriers to achieving these goals and worked collaboratively to consider practical ways to overcome them.

Why Was It Needed?

OOU was developed in response to findings from the Capital Hills research project (2022) which was rolled out by Breda McTaggart, Sandra Hallinan, Clare Finnegan and Paula Ryder. It identified significant challenges among final-year students relating to career mapping, financial literacy and limited awareness of the value of their degree.

Students reported a lack of social capital, uncertainty about postgraduate pathways and difficulty translating educational capital into employment opportunity. At a time when first-year enrolment numbers continue to rise nationally, concerns about transition, belonging, and student persistence remain. OOU responded proactively by engaging students earlier in their academic journey to strengthen reflection, clarity and strategic planning. Between 2023 and 2025, the initiative engaged over 340 first-year students, generating actionable insights to inform Faculty transition planning and student support provision.

What Happend

- Two-hour, in-person creative reflective workshops.
- Delivered during the first six to seven weeks of Semester One (2023–2025).
- Over 340 first-year students participated (2023–2025).
- Workshops delivered across multiple programmes within the Faculty of Business and Social Sciences. Each workshop group included a blend of student cohorts from the faculty to offer varied perspectives.
- Students created drawings and LEGO® models representing childhood aspirations, their current position in university and their aspirations for future learning and employment.
- Students identified personal, academic and structural barriers and discussed practical strategies to address them.
- Facilitated small-group, and whole-group discussions on transition, motivation, confidence and belonging.
- Facilitated by Faculty lecturing and support staff.
- Key themes and student insights were recorded through field notes and photographs of workshop artefacts.
- Findings were shared with Faculty leadership, Student Services, Admissions, Access Office, Exams Office and Student Success teams.
- Student feedback and lived experience directly informed follow-up actions and cross-departmental collaboration.

Outcomes

Student Impact:

Reported increased clarity regarding aspirations.

Identified personal strengths and barriers.

Valued the opportunity to “step back” and consider long-term planning.

Staff Impact:

Enhanced cross-programme collaboration.

Improved understanding of student transition challenges.

Informed discussions on curriculum and student supports.

Institutional Impact:

Strengthened collaboration between Faculty, Student Services, Student Success Office, Admissions, Access and Exams Office.

Increased in-person delivery of key student information (2024/25). Contribution to ATU Student Journey and Experience Team.

External Recognition:

- Presented at Advance HE Conference (2023).
- Presented at WORLDCTE Conference (2024).
- Methodology published in Sage Research Methods (2025).
- Accepted for ESAI Conference (2026).

External Recognition:

- Presented at Advance HE Conference (2023).
- Presented at WORLDCTE Conference (2024).
- Methodology published in Sage Research Methods (2025).
- Accepted for ESAI Conference (2026).

Lessons Learned

Creative and participatory methods surface deeper emotional and structural barriers than traditional surveys.

Students value non-assessed reflective space within the academic calendar.

Cross-programme facilitation strengthens institutional understanding of transition.

Staffing capacity limits scalability – expansion requires dedicated resource.

Early intervention (first year) may prevent later uncertainty seen at final-year level.

Contact

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Library Murder Mystery

Institution

Atlantic Technological University (ATU) Sligo

Service/ School/ Unit

Library

Format

In- person

What was the Initiative?

A murder mystery event running over the 2 induction days in the evenings from 6–8pm.

Why Was it Needed?

This activity was designed to enhance early engagement and social connection amongst our new students. We were trying out a new approach to getting students to:

- Make new friends in a relaxed way for Induction Nights.
- Get familiar with Library layout & spaces.
- Have fun with the Library team.

What Happened?

- The set-up for the game was the aftermath of an After-Party in the Yeats Library for the Garavogue Film Festival. When the Library team came in the following-day, they found a body... so the student detective teams are called in to help solve the mystery.
- We welcomed over 120 students to test out their investigative skills, make new friends from across all disciplines, discover the library through the clues and have great fun during Induction Week. Many of the students stayed on in the Library for the Board Games Night too.
- The SU was involved in testing the game beforehand and giving feedback.

Outcomes

- 100% of students said they would recommend to a friend
- Students had a really positive association with the library following the event:

"It was such a funny and unique way of introducing us to the library. Truly charming"

"The whole event was really engaging and what a nice way to get familiar with the library"

"the staff were so friendly! The place fosters a positive learning environment."

Lessons Learned

International students engaged really well with the initiative and appreciated having a structured social evening activity as part of induction

Materials



Contact: Dr Johanna Archbold, ATU Sligo Head Librarian. Johanna.archbold@atu.ie

Peer to Peer Mentoring scheme for first year female Engineering students

Institution

Dundalk Institute of Technology

Service/ School/ Unit

School of Engineering

Format

In-person

What was the Initiative?

A mentoring scheme has been running for two years to provide peer support to first year female students across Mechanical, Electrical & Electronic and Civil Engineering. Senior students volunteer as mentors and meet regularly with mentees to support their transition to third level education, build confidence and encourage social integration. Graduate guest speaker sessions also take place to showcase inspiring female role models and to help students connect their studies with real Engineering careers.

Why Was it Needed?

Female students in Engineering may face challenges during the transition into Engineering education, particularly around developing a sense of belonging and building confidence. Studies have shown that peer to peer mentoring has long lasting positive impacts on female Engineering students, in terms of emotional wellbeing as well as academic success. This initiative provides first year female students with relatable support from experienced students and contributes to ongoing work to foster inclusivity and student engagement within the School of Engineering.

What Happened?

- This scheme was initially piloted within Mechanical Engineering, before being scaled up to include Electrical & Electronic and Civil Engineering.
- Senior students volunteer as mentors.
- A mentoring handbook has been created to support consistent practice.
- Monthly mentor-mentee meetings are held across semester 1.
- Graduate guest speaker sessions have been included for additional support and networking opportunities.
- Students have been engaged as partners in developing the scheme and activities.
- The pilot scheme was supported with N-TUTORR funding.

Outcomes

- Mentors helped new students settle into Engineering.
- Mentees reported that the mentoring scheme has been beneficial, adding to their sense of belonging.
- Graduate speaker sessions strengthened peer connections.
- Mentors also reported personal benefit.
- Approximately 10 first year female students are currently benefitting across all three disciplines.

Lessons Learned

- A structured but low burden mentoring model is effective and sustainable.
- Student-informed design increases relevance and engagement.
- Additional early semester social or networking events may further strengthen students' sense of belonging. A social "meet your mentor" event is planned for next year, to include all mentors and mentees.

Materials:



Contact

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Creation of a department hub to support the student experience

Institution

Dundalk Institute of Technology

Service/ School/ Unit

Department of Creative Arts, Media and Music

Format

Online

What was the Initiative?

- Following feedback from students in relation to some of the challenges they experience upon entering third-level education, I wished to provide information to students in accessible and inclusive formats which would support them on their learning journey. The aim was to provide access to all relevant information in one central location on our VLE platform in a dedicated Department hub.
- With support from IT services we set up a Department Hub on Moodle and I worked in partnership with two small groups of students (3 in each phase to date) to develop resources with input from our educational technologist.
- The hub is aimed at all students, with a particular focus on new entrants i.e. Year 1, advanced entry students, Erasmus students and international learners. The development of the hub is ongoing with continuous feedback from students.
- The hub was initially launched at induction in September 2024, with additions introduced at subsequent inductions. Phase 3 of the project is underway with a launch planned for September 2026.

Why Was it Needed?

I created the Department hub to support the diversity of learners to provide information in accessible formats. I was aware of the challenges students face when they enter third level in understanding new terminology and new formats of learning, while also being expected to comply with various procedures, policies and guidelines. We often forget that students are entering third level from different prior learning experiences and backgrounds, and we underestimate how terminology can create barriers to understanding and hinder student success.

Students are overwhelmed with the information when they arrive to the institution. Feedback from students indicated a lack of understanding about some terminology, processes and procedures and a desire for visually engaging materials with concise explanations.

I wished to create a resource that would support the transition to third level but also be available to students post-induction to continue to support their learning journey.

What Happened?

- I undertook a review of the information I share with students and the queries I receive, with the aim of improving clarity and accessibility. Guided by UDL principles I sought to make my communications more inclusive and supportive of all learners and develop resources in a range of formats to suit different learning styles in partnership with students which would be available on a dedicated Department Hub on our VLE platform.
- Students had the opportunity to provide suggestions on a prototype via a survey and focus group. With support from IT services, we set up a Department Hub on Moodle.
- After securing funding student interns were recruited and I worked in partnership with the students with input from our educational technologist to co-design resources which considered language, design and layout. The students were introduced to UDL principles, and templates were designed to create a cohesive visual identity. Resources include "Learn the Lingo," explaining higher education terminology, alongside a FAQ section, infographics signposting key supports, and short instructional videos and guides for common "How to..." queries.
- The students had strong creative and design skills which greatly enhanced the quality of the resource and as learners with different experiences they provided valuable perspectives.
- The development of the hub is ongoing with continuous reflection, and we are refining existing materials and developing new resources. The initial launch took place at Induction in September 2024, and the current developments will be launched at Induction in September 2026.

Outcomes

- The availability of an engaging resource to explain a complex query is very useful to share with students to supplement a response to a query or when they need to check a detail.
- Student have indicated that visual resources have been useful in their understanding of some processes and concepts.

Lessons Learned

Designing resources in partnership with students supported the success of the project and ensured that the student voice was central to the design of the resource.

To continuously support our learners, we need to build awareness among everyone on the principles of UDL in our communications.

As an institution we need to refine and populate a central resource for sharing information on terminology, concepts, policies and procedures that is accessible in various formats to support a diverse community of learners transitioning into third level.

Materials



LEARN THE LINGO

What is an Assignment Brief? Search

Assignment Brief

(/ə'saɪnm(ə)nt bri:f)

An assignment brief is a set of instructions given to you by your lecturer providing you with details on the assignment to be completed. An assignment brief includes information on the type of assignment, the length, the due date and the deliverables requested by the lecturer.



you asked...

What happens if a 5-credit repeat is failed?

- If you fail a repeat, you can carry one 5-credit module into the next year of your programme.
- However, it is best to clear this module in the repeat sitting.
- Speak with your lecturer for repeat options.

we answered.

For information about repeats - exams@dkit.ie

Contact

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The Midwifery Peer Assisted Learning and Support (My pals) project

Institution

Dundalk Institute of Technology

Service/ School/ Unit

Section of Midwifery, Department of Nursing,
Midwifery and Early Years

Format

In-person

What was the Initiative?

My PALS is a peer mentoring project bringing together first and third year students on the BSc. (Hons) Midwifery programme. My PALS involves the third year student midwives (mentors) providing social and academic support to the first year mentees in a structured way to help their transition to college life and to the profession of midwifery.

Why Was it Needed?

The evidence demonstrates the difficulties students may have in the transition to college, this is particularly so for professional programmes, where students have to negotiate work placements and professional responsibilities. Peer mentoring has been shown to be very effective in helping students adjust to this role.

What Happened?

- My PALS runs every year in the first semester for the first 6 weeks when the first and third years are timetabled together
- Weekly sessions are student led and include discussions on academic and social transitions to college
- Practical activities are also included to support engagement and belonging.
- Professional skills are modelled by the 3rd year students
- The 3rd year students get academic credit for their participation and engagement through a reflective self-assessment.

Outcomes

Formal and ongoing evaluation of the project demonstrates evidence of benefits for both cohorts of students. This included enhanced engagement and belonging for first years and improved leadership and interpersonal skills for 3rd years.

Lessons Learned

- Ensure the initiative remains student led, whilst facilitators are available
- Structure and timetabling are essential
- Module credit for mentors supports full engagement
- Participants have recommended that the initiative would be useful to embed fully into all four years of the programme.

Contact

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Belonging First: Redesigning Orientation for Connection and Confidence

Institution

Marino Institute of Education

Service/ School/ Unit

Student Engagement, Registrar's Office

Format

In-person

What was the Initiative?

Marino Institute of Education redesigned Orientation 2025 to prioritise connection before content, structuring it as a three-day transition experience for approximately 280 first-year students in September 2025. Day 1 centred on Campus Connections which featured a menu of choice-based activities (drama, sport, creative workshops, history tours, debating, and more) designed to build camaraderie and foster belonging. The academic and course-specific content was subsequently moved to Day 3, when students were more settled and ready to engage. This redesign was led by the Student Engagement Officer in collaboration with the Assistant Registrar, SU President, Student Services, and academic staff.

Why Was it Needed?

Prior to this change, student feedback consistently identified the need for more structured opportunities to meet peers and build early connections during their first week on campus. Over time, orientation had become information dense and front loaded, leaving students tired and less able to retain key messages. With increasing numbers of commuting students, the traditional sequence of 'information first and connection later' was no longer serving students as well as it had done in the past. Redesign was prompted by these changes and worked to a simple hypothesis: students engage more effectively with academic content once they feel part of a community.

What Happened?

What the activity involved

- A pre-arrival email followed CAO offers introducing the concept of Campus Connections* and allowed students to register for preferred activities
- Early campus access before Orientation Week allowed them to collect student cards and take campus tours
- Day 1 was dedicated to community, including Campus Connections, course group icebreakers, and a reflective letter to future self-exercise (9am – 5pm)
- Day 2 introduced transition supports, including Student Services input, peer talks, clubs and societies fair, and evening ceilí (9.30am-5pm)
- Day 3 focused on academic expectations and course specific engagement, with interactive sessions led by academic staff (10am – 4pm)

*Campus Connections activity options included creative, cultural, sporting, and discussion based sessions such as drama workshops, debating on AI in education, Irish language and culture, mixed five a side soccer, GAA skills, art workshops, folklore and music, campus history tours, Dungeons and Dragons, and practical wellbeing sessions.

Who delivered It?

- Student Engagement Officer, as programme lead
- Assistant Registrar, as planning support
- Institute President
- Student Services team and Chaplain
- Academic staff
- Staff facilitators for Campus Connections
- Student Union President and student ambassadors
- Peer speakers throughout the week

When it took place

Pre-arrival communication and activity registration followed by three days on campus Orientation in Week One, September 2025.

How students shaped the initiative

Feedback from 2023 and 2024 cohorts directly informed the redesign. Students highlighted the need for more opportunities to meet peers. They also raised concerns about long unstructured periods and repetitive sessions. Campus Connections was developed as a structured, choice based response to those patterns in feedback.

Outcomes

Student Voice

Selected student feedback included:

"Activities and chances to socialise that felt comfortable."

"Hearing from past students made it feel more realistic."

"I enjoyed the activities, getting to meet people in my course. It helped so much for making friends."

Across open feedback, connection, meeting people, and making friends were the most frequently referenced aspects of Orientation.

Behavioural Indicators

- Scholarship applications increased from 18 in 2023, to 38 in 2024, to 89 in 2025
- Students volunteering as Open Day ambassadors increased from 26 in 2024 to 55 in 2025
- Reports from clubs and societies indicate stronger first year participation, including a first year student leading the Art Society
- Staff reported students settling more quickly and engaging earlier in the first weeks of semester

While multiple factors influence engagement, the redesigned Orientation structure set a clear tone encouraging early involvement and participation.

Lessons Learned

What worked

Leading with belonging reduced early anxiety and strengthened peer connection

Choice based activities supported autonomy and allowed students to connect around shared interests, rather than identifying themselves only by courses

Centring the peer voice early on built credibility and trust

Sequencing academic content later improved engagement, attention, and retention

What we would change

Shorten each of the three days to reduce fatigue, particularly for commuting students

Collaborate on content coverage to reduce repetition across presentations

Build in more structured breaks

Start Day 3 later, at 11am, and keep it tightly focused and interactive

Expand activity choice so more students can experience multiple Campus Connections

Advice for others

If changing one element, change the sequence. Put connection before content.

Frame redesign as a change in timing rather than removal of important content.

Use student feedback to build the case internally. Even constructive criticism from one cycle can be persuasive.

Start with Day 1 and refine incrementally rather than attempting a full overhaul at once.

Treat feedback as a signal. It sharpens the model rather than diluting it.

Contact

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My Maynooth on Moodle

Institution

Maynooth University

Service/ School/ Unit

Student Skills & Success

Format

Online

What was the Initiative?

'My Maynooth on Moodle' is a dynamic, student-centered digital transition programme that evolves with undergraduates throughout their first-year journey.

Why Was it Needed?

A comprehensive online transitions programme was a key recommendation of Maynooth University's 2020 SATLE-funded Student Success Strategy. Consultation with staff and students identified the need to recognise that our student's personal development goals, and supports they will require, will vary throughout individual learning journeys and our transition opportunities need to be flexible and approachable to cater for this.

The goal was to create a dynamic online transition experience that evolves with students over time.

- Asynchronous, self-paced and modular content on Moodle, MU's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)
- Holistic support for students' academic, personal, and professional development across multiple student transition points
- Co-created, peer-led digital storytelling and activities
- Regular content releases tailored to students' evolving needs

What Happend?

Launched in September 2024, 'My Maynooth on Moodle' has reimagined the traditional fixed-period orientation into a year-long online orientation programme for new undergraduate students.

Two modules are available to students when they first register with the university.

Content includes:

- Welcome to the university campus and introduction of our values and expectations;
- Information on student timetables, subject choices and what to expect in your first lecture,
- What the first 4 weeks on campus will look like; introducing assignments, labs and tutorials;
- Information on areas such as the library, learning supports and extra-curricular activity.

This information is complemented with interactive activities, reflections, and student experience videos.

Each month a new module is released with the aim of meeting students where they are on their first-year journey. For example, our colleagues in Student Services have seen increases in students presenting with issues such as loneliness after the first few weeks have passed—we address this online during the November release, where university colleagues collaborated on content around loneliness, overwhelm, and developing study/life balance. This approach is taken across the programme with content early on encouraging students to develop their learning style and habits while signposting them to university services and supports that can assist with this.

Students were key stakeholders throughout its development and were involved across the programme in roles as advisors, developers and creators. Programme oversight was provided by the Student Success Officer and an 'Online Orientation Taskforce' of staff and students reporting to the Orientation Leadership Group, ensuring alignment with institutional priorities.

Outcomes

The innovative use of digital tools has resulted in high engagement, improved preparedness, reduced anxiety, and stronger cross-institutional collaboration.

Student Impact: 7,921 students have engaged with the programme so far, gaining confidence in their transition into and through university life. Feedback indicates that the relatable, modular design helped prepare students for university, reduce anxiety, and fostered a sense of belonging.

Staff Impact: The collaborative model encouraged cross-departmental learning and engagement, fostering a culture of innovation and shared ownership in student success.

Demonstrating Impact

The rate of eligible students engaging with the programme has also increased year-on-year, demonstrating appetite among students for this digital delivery of orientation information:

- 63% – Academic Year 2023/24
- 66% – Academic Year 2024/25
- 75% – Academic Year 2025/26 (so far)

The 2025/26 release of 'My Maynooth on Moodle' was accessed by over 2,600 students by the end of September (67% of the eligible student cohort). An in-built evaluation mechanism which students (n=427) undertake at the end of the second module reports that;

- 98% of students agreed the topics were relevant to them.
- 97% were now more aware of services and supports to help them succeed.
- 91% felt better prepared for starting university after taking the course.

These outcomes demonstrate how continuous, modular digital delivery and student co-creation directly contribute to measurable improvements in student transition experiences.

Lessons Learned

- **The Value of Co-Creation.** Students worked with us in a variety of roles across this project. Working in partnership has called for us to re-examine beliefs that we as staff had about particular transitions and what students think and feel. Co-creating with students in this manner allows us to sense-check our activity and respond to the current student experience.
- **Cross-Institutional Engagement.** The multi-unit collaboration created challenges relating to timelines, content consistency, and accessibility standards. These were managed through shared templates, structured workflows, and a regular cross-unit content review.
- **The Power of Peer Validation.** A key challenge was ensuring content was engaging without overwhelming students; this was mitigated by moving to staged, monthly content releases based on student-identified priorities teamed with student-led video and blog content. Feedback demonstrated that students valued the peer-led elements most as it provided them with a relatable view of the student experience, providing reassurance that they were not alone in experiencing challenges.



Contact

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P2P Peer Mentoring Programme (Transition+ Model)

Institution

South East Technological University

Service/ School/ Unit

Student Life and Learning (Student Supports and Services)

Format

In-person

What was the Initiative?

SETU's peer mentoring programme, called P2P, was established by SLL and aims to help new students transition to university life. Students from year 2 and above act as mentors, meeting first year student regularly and attending P2P activities with them. Mentors help new students to get to know one another and to make connections whilst sharing insights about their course, university life and other useful tips.

Why Was it Needed?

Students tend to go through multiple adjustments in the first year, from changes in social networks to developing a new identity while also trying to navigate their new academic environment. Supporting psychosocial aspects of the student experience for new students (mentees) like belonging, social supports, social networks and friendships, during transition into university is a core aim of the P2P programme. Transition is not a linear process and requires support and scaffolding throughout the first year. The Transition+ model of peer mentoring focuses on mentors helping students form connections, develop a sense of belonging, build meaningful relationships and provide information throughout the first year.

What Happened?

First year students are assigned to a small group consisting of five to six of their fellow classmates and are assigned a mentor.

Mentees and mentors are matched in accordance with their degree programme and meet for the first time during on-campus orientation.

Who Delivered it?

Student Mentors and Student Engagement Team

When it took place

- Recruitment and training of mentors occurs in the previous academic year.
- At orientation mentors meet their mentees and start getting to know one another and also organise events like campus tours and set up informal communication groups.
- Activities organised by the student engagement team take place throughout semester one and two including coffee mornings, teambuilding sessions (fun activities and games), workshops, table quizzes etc. throughout semester 1.
- Mentors arrange meetups with their mentee groups.

Partners Involved

- Student mentors
- Student engagement team from Student Life and Learning
- Academic Leads (assigned staff members from academic departments)

How students shaped the initiative

- Feedback is sought throughout the year from mentors in regular meetings.
- A survey is sent to both mentors and mentees each year and feedback informs ongoing development of the programme.
- Two graduate ambassadors (interns) are employed for two years to work with the development and coordination of the programme with the team. Having previously been mentors themselves, they bring a wealth of experience and innovative ideas to inform and shape the programme on an ongoing basis.

Outcomes

Our feedback indicates that peer mentoring resulted in students developing meaningful connections with other students, providing them with role models for successful transition through the sharing of experiences and helped to overcome difficulties that they encountered.

Mentoring provides the opportunity for students to develop strategies for addressing and managing the needs and challenges they may encounter and helps to develop a sense of belonging.

The numbers of participants continue to increase as does the collaboration between student support services and the academic departments, particularly in supporting the SPA.

A range of specialist workshops and training were developed and delivered to the mentors and senior mentors (including, Active Listening, Careers Workshops, Understanding and Supporting Students with Autism and Using Canva.) Mentors gained valuable transferable skills by attending these workshops which are relevant to both their role as mentors and future careers.

There has been increased involvement and collaboration with academic departments. In order to recognise the commitment and achievements of the mentors, a 10 credit Special Purpose Award in Peer Mentoring was developed.

This award runs over two semesters and is offered to senior mentors (those that have completed at least one year's mentoring) that can be completed in addition to mentoring duties. Delivering a workshop to first year students on their programme, a presentation to various members of staff, as well as submitting a reflective log about their mentor experiences are required for this award.

Participation numbers

The numbers of peer mentors and senior mentors undertaking the SPA in Peer Mentoring continues to increase each year as can be seen below:

Academic Year	No. of Programmes	No. of Mentors	No. of Senior Mentors
2023/24	22	131	21
2024/25	32	167	39
2025/26	36	231	37

Comments

"I think peer mentoring programme is working really well, I like that there isn't too much pressure on meeting up. It isn't a time picked by the mentors, it is a group effort between the whole group of students. I also enjoyed the group bonding day, although I was nervous for it, it did turn out to be very fun"

"I feel like it [P2P] like, really involves you more to community. I just feel like there's a really big sense of community when you're with people you know and just like, and it just makes college a whole lot better."

Early Indicators of Impact

From the most recent survey, the majority of respondents stated that they benefitted from having a peer mentor.

75% stated they found their time for enjoyable,

86% said their knowledge of student supports and services had increased and 90% felt more confident that they could complete their course.

88% of the mentees stated that the teambuilding activities helped to get to know their classmates

Lessons Learned

What Worked

- Central team with responsibility for co-ordinating the programme.
- Matching mentors to mentees by programme.
- Assigning academic leads within department to work with the mentors and the student engagement team.
- Recruitment and training taking place in the previous academic year.
- Graduate ambassador role.
- Award ceremony to recognise mentoring.

What we'd change

- Having a longer orientation period to allow more time for activities.

Advice for others

- Start with a small pilot group
- Keep mentor/mentee ration to 1:5/6
- Ensure support available for mentors
- Collaboration with academic departments is very important

Website details : <https://www.setu.ie/current-students/student-support-services/peer-mentoring/peer-mentoring-waterford>

Contact

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Computing Learning Centre & Faculty Retention Strategy

Institution

TU Dublin

Service/ School/ Unit

Faculty of Computing, Digital and Data

Format

Hybrid

What was the Initiative?

TU Dublin's Strategic Plan has identified student retention as a key priority. The Faculty of Computing, Digital & Data aims to achieve a retention rate of at least 90% for full-time undergraduate first- and second-year students by 2028 and has tasked the Computing Learning Centre (CLC) with implementing and monitoring retention initiatives across all Schools, ensuring a coordinated approach.

The CLC, established in 2023, offers targeted academic and emotional interventions to support students at risk of disengagement. A CLC Academic Lead oversees academic support initiatives, ensuring students receive targeted guidance in their learning, and the Transition's Coordinator plays a role in supporting students from diverse backgrounds to successfully transition to higher education. The CLC works with Student Success Champions (academic staff) located in the four Schools who help to identify, monitor, and support at-risk students.

CLC Interventions include extended induction for first-year students, tailored academic support, and wellbeing initiatives to strengthen students' sense of belonging. The initiative leverages evidence-based approaches to improve retention by continuously monitoring progress using data-driven insights. Tailored support is provided to students who do not successfully progress in the previous semester.

Why Was it Needed?

Aim: To achieve the national benchmark for retention rates among first- and second-year students in computing-related disciplines, in alignment with the University's strategy to increase student numbers.

Objective 1: To analyse student data and to conduct student surveys, focus groups, and interviews to gather insights that can be used by stakeholders to make informed data driven decisions on programme level planning and student monitoring to enhance student retention and success.

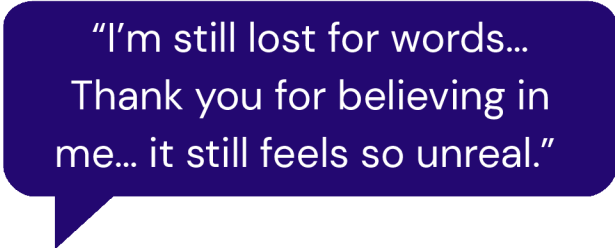
Objective 2: To enhance student participation, engagement and sense of belonging with the objective of improved academic performance, and increased retention rates.

What Happened?

- The CLC employs data driven decision-making through ongoing student attendance and performance monitoring, end of semester status review, data analysis, and trend reporting on progression.
- The CLC reports to the Faculty Executive Team and the Faculty Board on the progress of the retention strategy.
- TU Dublin reports annually to the HEA on the application of ITIF funding for support of student progression.

Outcomes

Although the CLC has only been operating since 2024, early indicators are very positive. Attendance and engagement tracking systems are in place, enabling proactive identification of at-risk students for targeted interventions and tailored support. Baseline retention data provides a benchmark for future comparison, and initial evidence shows improved monitoring, and progression support. Student feedback highlights the impact on well-being, with one reflecting:



"I'm still lost for words...
Thank you for believing in
me... it still feels so unreal."

Focus

- First Year Students
- New Entrants
- Early Intervention Initiative
- Transition Focus
- Targeted Initiative (specific student cohort/faculty)

Theme

Student wellbeing, experience, success

Contact

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Peer Assisted Student Support (PASS)

Institution

Technological University of the Shannon (TUS)

Service/ School/ Unit

Office of VP Student Education and Experience, Centre for Pedagogical Innovation and Development (CPID)

Format

In Person Student Led

What was the Initiative?

Peer Assisted Student Support (PASS) has been operating at TUS since 2009. PASS is a structured academic peer-learning initiative available to first year students. Weekly, timetabled sessions are facilitated by second-year students – PASS Leaders – who guide collaborative learning activities.

Why Was it Needed?

The aim of PASS is to ease the transition to higher education. Many students face challenges such as increased academic demands, independent learning expectations, and feelings of isolation when starting university. PASS provides structured, peer-led sessions where students can collaboratively review course material, strengthen study skills, and build confidence in their discipline in a supportive environment. By encouraging engagement, improving understanding of difficult subjects, and fostering a sense of belonging, PASS helps enhance academic performance, retention, and overall student success while building social connections and a strong peer support network.

What Happened?

- **What the activity involves:** PASS fosters cross-year support between learners on the same programme. It encourages first year students to help each other and learn cooperatively under the guidance of PASS Leaders, during weekly timetabled PASS sessions.
- **Who delivers it:** PASS Leaders facilitate PASS sessions. They undergo extensive training, for which they receive a digital badge. Leaders can complete a 5 ECTS Leadership module.

- **When it took place:** PASS sessions are generally offered for the first 6 – 10 weeks of semester one. They begin alongside first year students' academic classes.
- **Partners involved:** The PASS Team, made up of academic and professional support staff train students, assist them with planning and reviewing sessions, and assure quality at all levels of the initiative. PASS is centrally coordinated through the Centre for Pedagogical Innovation and Development (CPID).
- **How students shaped and informed the initiative:** Quality assurance and evaluation are integral to PASS. PASS Leaders encourage first year students to rate the sessions, suggest improvements and identify the topics for discussion. PASS Leaders are assessed during training, weekly debriefs and are observed during a session. Both are evaluated once sessions have ceased.

Outcomes

Since 2009, 276 students have been awarded the PASS Leadership module. Since its introduction in 2021, 150 students have been awarded the digital badge for PASS Training.

"Since taking on the role in the PASS programme, I've seen a significant improvement in my leadership and communication skills. The opportunity to mentor and support peers has not only been fulfilling but has also enhanced my understanding of the subject matter, making me a more confident and effective leader." Veterinary Nursing PASS Leader, 2025.

Lessons Learned

- **What worked:** The quality of PASS sessions is assured through the provision of weekly debriefs, where Leaders review and plan sessions with members of the PASS Team and/or academic staff.
- **Changes:** At least one member of academic staff for each PASS session should complete SI-PASS Supervisor Training. Ideally lecturers should be teaching on the same first year programme as the PASS session and facilitate debriefs with Leaders.

- **Advice for others:** a suitable timetable slot for PASS, connected on both first and second year timetables, a “sandwich slot” should be created. PASS should not be the first or last class on any day, instead it should be sandwiched between a lecture and a free period. This will optimise attendance and engagement at sessions as both students and Leaders are excited and motivated to work together.



PASS

Peer Assisted Student Support

Contact

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Extended Orientation: Transition Content Co-created by Student Leaders

Institution

University College Dublin

Service/ School/ Unit

Office of Student Experience and Well Being –
Student Advisers

Format

Online

What was the Initiative?

UCD Peer Mentor Senior Leaders (PMSLs) act as the first point of contact to support mentors during the programme and to bring the student voice to the Peer Mentor Working Group. Since 2023, they also cocreate and curate transition content for first year students which is disseminated via social media and email. The purpose was to provide relevant micro-learning about college life, UCD supports and services to students in a distributed and timely and relatable way over the first semester.

Why Was it Needed?

Colleges tend to front-load information for first year students and disseminate much of it during Orientation week in quite a formal style. Student miss many of the messages as they are overwhelmed at that stage. This initiative was introduced to release relevant information to first-year students on a weekly basis based on what older year students deemed was important for that week. Content was presented in a visual format for broader appeal to students and reflected the student voice, perception and experience.

What Happened?

- PMSLs reviewed transition resources from other universities together with their own ideas and decided what they thought was important from a UCD perspective.
- They created a plan of the content for each week and assigned a pair of PMSLs to design the content and take responsibility for posting it on Instagram.
- They used Canva to design the content with relevant links. Content was checked by the manager for gaps and accuracy.
- Content was posted on Instagram each week and downloaded in pdf format and emailed from the manager to peer mentors to email to their mentees to ensure those who weren't following the Instagram account had access to the content.

Who delivered it?

- Orientation and Peer Mentoring Manager
- Peer Mentor Senior Leaders

When it took place

Preparation for content, content selection and design took place over the summer. Content was disseminated over 11 weeks of the first semester.

How students shaped the initiative

Students chose the content based on their experience of what is important for students to know mapped to each week in of the first semester in UCD. They brainstormed ideas among themselves, created a content schedule and then selected and designed the content. The manager involvement was to identify gaps, accuracy and sign off on content.

Outcomes

Survey of first year students (n=280 c6%)

- 74% found the information very / somewhat useful
- 51% followed advice covered in the topic
- 23% connected with a service
- 18% asked their peer mentor for further information

For PMSLs: they gained skills, confidence and made friends across programme areas

Lessons Learned

What worked

- PMSLs had autonomy to decide what was relevant – developed confidence and trust.
- Content was in visual rather than written format – more engaging.
- Using Instagram to deliver content meant content was available to a wider audience who may not have become aware of services and advice in their first year.

What we would change

- Dissemination via Instagram gets to followers and not all first years follow the account.
- Dissemination via email to peer mentors to send to mentees can't be verified.
- Find another channel to ensure that content is delivered to all first-year students. For example, via the Introduction to UCD module on the VLE.

Advice for others

- Choose students to represent different programme areas as they bring different strengths and ensure diversity of the student leadership team for perspective.
- It is important to check in regularly with student leaders to ensure they are staying on task and content is completed before their academic year starts.
- Ask them to schedule the posts and nominate a small number of leaders to be responsible for posting as it is easier for them to manage this way.
- There is payment involved – consider your budget.

Materials



Contact

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Inside Organisations: Building collaboration skills, peer leadership and community.

Institution

University College Dublin

Service/ School/ Unit

Business School

Format

In-person. Student group engagement, occasionally online.

What was the Initiative?

BMGT10170 Inside Organisations is a first-year module delivered in the autumn semester. The module works to build a knowledge of individual, group and organisational behaviour (OB), while targeting students' collaboration and communication skills. One of the aims of the module is to help people get to know each other and build relationships as a large class and newly forming first year community.

Students are assigned to random teams and given an unstructured task to deliver a short team film illustrating an aspect of module content of their choosing. This unstructured task ('OBLive') requires students to self-organise and grapple with teamwork – later using this 'live learning lab' to inform and reflect on group dynamics and effective collaboration – material also being learned about in class lectures. The nature of this unstructured task is intentionally challenging and messy but with great creative potential. The focal point of this note is the introduction of a new option, the LIFT programme, to this module, offering an alternative group experience. Students are introduced to both and given the opportunity to apply for LIFT should they wish.

Why Was it Needed?

LIFT is a highly structured and guided roundtable group experience. This addition was made to support students who would like to experience greater structure, or find self-organised groups daunting at the start of their college career. LIFT stands for Leading Ireland's Future Together <https://liftireland.ie>.

It is a peer-to-peer leadership development programme that develops personal awareness focused on leadership values. The LIFT programme was developed by a UCD Alumnus, Joanne Hession, and operates in schools, colleges and workplaces nationwide. While the programme can run for longer, a six-week roundtable model was adopted to parallel the timelines and themes of the module. Weekly topics chosen include active listening, positive thinking, building resilience. Each week students work together as a team to explore one core human value, guided by a trained senior student volunteer LIFT facilitator. The focus of the roundtable is for each participant to focus on their own recent behaviour in that area, and commit to incremental changes and reflective learning.

What Happened?

- Participation: Demand for LIFT is very strong, and applicants indicate they favour certainty and structure over self-organising groups. Over five iterations we have grown to approximately 50% of the class choosing LIFT. The number of LIFT groups possible is a function of the number of senior students volunteering to train and serve as LIFT facilitators. Approximately 90% attended regularly.
- The activity involved: the exploration of 6 values through structured, in-person, weekly roundtable meetings.
- Who delivered it: The lecturer managed the offering, LIFT trained volunteer senior students as LIFT facilitators who delivered the roundtables and a staff member coordinated the logistics, administration and room bookings.
- When it took place: It took place over 6 weeks of the first Semester starting in week 3
- A 3-hour block of time was set aside on Wednesdays for the 30–40-minute meetings between Stage 2 facilitators and Stage 1 students to take place. Where there were occasional timetable clashes students were encouraged to identify a mutually agreeable time to meet online.
- Any partners involved: LIFT. There are associated costs.
- Students sometimes report previous experience of LIFT in secondary schools or through other students who took it – this has generally been positive.
- Both the structured and unstructured (OBLive) teamwork options support student transition, helping students to make friends and gain confidence. However, for those choosing it LIFT was strongly favoured for its structured, predictable format and steady six week commitment.
- Both LIFT and OBLive teams culminate in a final creative submission. For LIFT teams, this involves a creative team presentation highlighting a key learning in the team.

Outcomes

LIFT has enabled the choice of a more structured teamwork experience, and ability for students to compare the self-organising and structured team experience deepening their learning about groups and team skills. LIFT is a contained and effective way to start groupwork in college, and particular for more nervous or structure seeking students.

Student Feedback:

I've learned a lot about things I thought I knew everything about. LIFT has really changed my outlook on my life and who I am as a person.

I found myself becoming more open to listening and engaging with other people's opinions and values. Respecting what they have to say and taking experiences with me along the way.

I am trying to integrate these values into my everyday life for example with diversity I am trying to be friends with more people from different backgrounds and not just stick to my Dublin friends

My thinking has been influenced by the roundtable discussions, and helped me relate the theory to practical situations

- LIFT enhances self-awareness, enabling students to better understand their triggers, habits, and behavioural patterns and develop more positive responses.
- A very positive feature of the design is the connection made between first year and senior student facilitators. Akin to peer mentorship, the sustained nature of the six week relationship allowed growing comfort in asking questions and learning the culture of the school. Similarly, senior students report that they gain greatly from the leadership experience of serving as LIFT facilitators.
- Slow pace and deliberate structure of the roundtables was beneficial to students.
- Enhancement of lifelong skills as well as collaboration and communication skills.

Lessons Learned

What worked: it developed confidence, interpersonal and relational skills.

What you'd change: Facilitator training is done by LIFT and collaboration on the training is helpful. Selection of senior student volunteers for motivation and engagement.

Advice for others: keep the number of groups participating to a manageable number. It worked well to start small and grow the number of LIFT groups in future iterations.

Contact

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First Year Experience Programme

Initiative

First Year Experience Programme

Institution

University College Cork

Service/School/Unit

First Year Experience

Format

Online and in-person

Background

Belonging is not something students bring with them to campus – it is shaped early in the first year and is created by intentional efforts to foster inclusive learning environments, meaningful peer interactions and supportive staff student relationships.

Tinto (2005, 2017, 2023) proposes that students' decisions to remain engaged in their institutions are strongly influenced by:

Academic integration – feeling intellectually engaged, supported and capable within the academic community (e.g. teaching, assessment, feedback interaction with staff).

Social integration – feeling connected to peers, staff and the wider community.

Similarly, Terrell Strayhorn conceptualises belonging as students perceived social support and sense of mattering within the campus community, emphasising that belonging is particularly critical in the first year.

Drawing on these theoretical frameworks, the First-Year Experience (FYE) Programme is intentionally designed to operationalise belonging through structured, proactive, and sustained engagement from the point of offer through completion of first year.

Aim

Grounded in Belonging and Integration theory, the FYE Programme aims to:

- Foster early social and academic integration
- Strengthen students' sense of mattering and connection
- Create visible, accessible, relationship-based support
- Provide proactive outreach at critical transition points
- Reduce isolation following academic setbacks
- Improve first year retention and progression rates

Belonging is a design principle underpinning all FYE interventions.

Method

The First-Year Experience programme adopts an institution wide multi-point student centred approach throughout first year.

Designing for Early Belonging (Pre-Arrival)

- The First Year Guide to Success and the Freshers' Fest Brochure are mailed to students in advance of arrival.

Making these publications available helps students feel informed, welcomed and connected to the community. The intention is to communicate You Matter. You Belong here. Connecting early reduces uncertainty, sets clear expectations and fosters excitement about transition.

Belonging is therefore embedded before students arrive on campus.

Relational Belonging: Orientation/Peer Support/ Freshers' Fest

- Structured peer matching take place during orientation rather than assuming students will organically connect with peers.
- Initiatives such as PAWS@UCC provides informal opportunities for students to connect with emotional support dogs and peers in a relaxed setting, helping to reduce early transition anxiety and support emotional wellbeing.
- Active presence of academic staff and student support professionals during Orientation and Freshers' Fest provides immediate connection points.

Belonging during Orientation and the Freshers' Fest is designed through connections, visibility and approachability.

Designing Academic Belonging (Course Structure, Feedback, Timetables, Curriculum Content and Change of Course)

- Providing students with direct engagement opportunities with academic staff, particularly in relation to course expectations and learning outcomes reinforces their identity as valued members of the academic community.
- Belonging plays a critical role when students find themselves in a degree programme that is not the right fit. When Belonging is intentionally embedded within institutional processes, changing course becomes an act of academic realignment.
- A change of course is framed as a developmental adjustment. The message communicated is You belong here. You Matter. Let us help you to find the right academic pathway.

Designing Belonging through Open Access First Year Experience Meetings

- Students can book scheduled appointments Monday – Friday, signalling reliability and institutional commitment.
- Option of in-person and online appointments.
- Avail of walk-in meetings.
- Engage in flexible, student led coaching and guidance conversations.

Offering multiple avenues of engagement is a deliberate strategy to promote accessibility and support. This flexibility fosters inclusion by accommodating diverse needs, preferences and circumstances.

Belonging is cultivated through responsiveness and adaptability ensuring that every first year student has access to support.

Designing Belonging through Coaching Conversations

At the heart of the first year coaching model is a commitment to cultivate belonging. By focusing on academic adjustment, wellbeing, confidence-building and transition, coaching conversations create a space for students to feel seen, heard and valued.

These conversations communicate:

- Your experience matters.
- Your challenges are valid.
- You can navigate your way through first year.

Through affirmation, empathy and guided reflection coaching strengthens and validates students' sense of mattering which is an essential component of belonging.

Designing Belonging through Proactive Outreach after exam failure

Belonging is critical at moments of academic vulnerability. Proactive outreach following exam failure is intentionally designed to protect students' sense of connection and capability during periods of heightened self-doubt. The First Year Experience Coordinator (FYEC) emails students directly to communicate:

- Your progress matters.
- You remain a valued member of the academic community.

Emails are intentionally framed to present support, options, and next steps in a constructive and solution focused manner. The emphasis is on opportunity, progression and partnership. This approach normalises struggle and reduces stigma.

Belonging: Continuous Relationship Building

Belonging is strengthened through intentional, sustained relationships over time. Continuous relationship building ensures students feel consistently supported, visible and valued within the university community. The commitment to belonging includes:

- Follow up emails after meetings reinforce care and continuity.
- Encouragement before exam periods that acknowledge pressure while building confidence and reassurance.
- Ongoing visibility throughout the year so that students know support is present, reliable and accessible.
- Clear signposting to academic and wellbeing services to ensure students can confidently navigate resources.

Each touch point communicates simple but powerful messages: You are not alone. You belong here. By maintaining meaningful connections over time, the university actively strengthens students' sense of belonging through sustained engagement with the community.

Students Reported

'I felt noticed'

'I felt like I mattered'

'It helped knowing that failing exams wasn't the end'

Results

Belonging is the purpose. Retention is the proof

The FYE programme is grounded in fostering belonging – ensuring students feel seen, supported and connected within the university community. Strong retention and progression outcomes of 93.4% from 2024–2025 to 2025/2026 serve as an important institutional indicator. Ultimately, student retention and progression is achieved through the cultivation of meaningful relationships, responsive support structures and sustained engagement.

Contact

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References

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Tinto, V. (2005). Moving from theory to action. *College student retention: Formula for student success*, 3, 317–333.

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Galway 100 – Student Staff Partnership

Initiative

Galway 100 – Student Staff Partnership

Institution

University of Galway

Service/School/Unit:

Student Services – Student Engagement

Format

In-person and Online

What Was the Initiative?

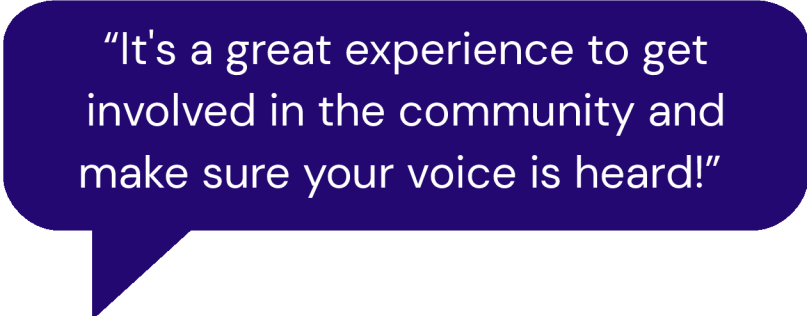
The Galway 100 initiative, established by Student Services, is a student partnership and engagement project at University of Galway designed to bring the student voice into the heart of institutional decision-making and service development. Galway 100 comprises a cohort of around 100 University of Galway students who act as a representative sounding board for the University, contributing feedback and insights on new and existing initiatives, resources, and student-facing projects.

Why Was It Needed?

Established in 2021, the Galway 100 was developed in response to a need for more structured, student-centred input into university services, policies, and communication platforms. Its purpose is to ensure that services in the University are student-centric, accessible, inclusive, and responsive to the lived experiences and needs of a diverse student body.

The group has played an active role in shaping a range of institutional developments, including the creation of a student journey map, the user experience of the Cara chatbot, the review and enhancement of exam supports, the review of library services, input into the University strategy, and the Weekly Student Ezine.

Participation offers students an opportunity to connect with others during in-person activities, and helps students feel heard, included, and connected.



“It's a great experience to get involved in the community and make sure your voice is heard!”

This highlights how participation fosters a sense of belonging and empowers students to feel that their perspectives matter.

"I've gained an abundance of confidence and improved communication skills. I felt better giving feedback on a small scale and the following year, seeing the difference."

Structured participation can help to build confidence over time and helps students build communication skills and see the real impact of their contributions.

What Happened?

- Students are recruited at the start of each academic year. An expression of interest form is shared in our weekly ezine and on social media platforms. In 2025, there were over 800 expressions of interest from students to join Galway 100.
- Students are then asked to complete a questionnaire sharing information related to the demographics of the student population e.g., gender, ethnicity, entry route, age, sexual identity etc. Students are then selected to ensure that the final 100 is a representative sample of the overall student population.
- Support is provided by researchers at the School of Psychology to ensure that the final participants are representative of the entire University population.
- Selected students can be part of the group for up to 3 years. At the start of each academic year current participants are invited to stay on the panel or release their membership to allow others to join.
- Once established, communications with members are via a Teams Channel and email.
- Student Services works with colleagues within the unit and the wider institution to plan activities for the Galway 100 group.
- Activities can be in-person or online. Students are paid by the hour for their participation.
- The group is typically a very engaged cohort of students and freely shares their thoughts, views and insights on a particular topic.

Outcomes

Students value having a trusted space where their voice is heard, their contributions lead to visible change and where they can collaboratively shape improvements to the student experience.

Feedback shows us that involvement provides a meaningful opportunity to act as a voice for the wider student body, with tangible outcomes arising from their contributions. Overall, this demonstrates that participation strengthens student engagement, builds trust in institutional processes, and leads to visible improvements in services.

"It has been good to get involved and see the changes to platforms like Cara & the student enquiry email that came about from our surveys and discussions."

"It's great to be a voice for all students in a setting where we continuously see our feedback implemented and valued."

"Galway 100 provided me with a platform to share my thoughts (both good and bad) on how to improve the University and the student experience. I feel safe sharing my thoughts and being in an environment where everyone wants to improve the school."

Working with the Galway 100 has also had a positive impact on University resources and services. For example a review of the Weekly Student Ezine has led to clear improvements in its graphics, content and overall style. The group have also strengthened the role of student voice across our services. Students have had a chance to input their thoughts into many University strategies, ensuring students voice is heard in decision making. One specific example is their input in developing a name for our new Student Success Centre.

Lessons Learned

- Ensuring students are paid for their participation is vital. It recognises the value of their time and contributions and reinforces the importance of the insights they provide. Tea/coffee and some light refreshments are also offered at each session, this conveys the importance and value we place on the insights received.
- A blended approach that combines online and in-person sessions works well for students. Changing the timing and scheduling of in-person sessions to ensure they don't always take place on the same day or time is important as it enables students to attend sessions that fit around their timetable.
- To manage paperwork involved with payment, ensure students are set up on any internal payment systems early in the semester.

Materials

This [webpage](#) has information for staff and students about how they can get involved with the Galway 100.

Image below of a Galway 100 focus group in action.



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Initiative

The new First Seven Weeks at the University of Limerick (F7W@UL) initiative is a collaboration by staff and students which provides an inclusive, supportive and accessible experience for all new and incoming students including:

- students transitioning from secondary school to higher education
- international students
- mobility students (Erasmus and Study Abroad)
- mature students
- advanced entry students
- access students
- distance learning students
- commuting students

F7W@UL supports these students by creating a rich transitions ecology to immerse themselves in as they adjust to university life, helping them feel welcomed, informed, and ready to succeed both personally and academically.

Institution

University of Limerick

Format

In-person / Online / Hybrid

Service/School/Unit

Centre for Transformative Learning coordinate the program on behalf of university wide stakeholders including Library, ITD, Student Affairs, UL Global and Student Life.

What Was the Initiative?

First Seven Weeks @UL is an incoming student transition programme run over seven themed weeks with a university wide F7W Calendar of Events and Activities and First Seven Weeks @UL Interactive Handbook which seed positive student engagement outcomes:

1. **Belong @UL (Weeks 1 & 5):** Helps students build connections, meet people, and grow their community networks.
2. **Do Well @UL (Weeks 2 & 6):** Focuses on developing good study habits and building academic confidence.
3. **Be Well @UL (Weeks 3 & 7):** Encourages students to care for their mental, physical, and financial well-being while introducing available supports and services.
4. **Reflect, Reset and Reach Out (Week 4):** Provides an opportunity for students to catch up on anything they may have missed and to reach out to university supports including their Academic Advisor and Student Engagement and Success Officers.

The program ensures events and services are visible and accessible when and where our incoming students need them, fostering a welcoming and supportive environment for all. We want them to remember – they are not alone; all they need to do is Just Ask!

Why Was It Needed?

The transition to higher education can be challenging and overwhelming particularly during the first critical weeks. Common challenges faced by incoming students include navigating university campus, services and resources, adapting to new teaching styles, and developing independent learning skills. This program is designed to support all incoming students adjust to university life through targeted activities, workshops, and supports. Our goal is to help them feel welcomed, informed, and supported, setting them up for personal and academic success.

What Happened?

- Involves events and activities over the first seven weeks built around three key themes of student engagement: belonging, being well and doing well.
- Delivered by stakeholders across the university including Library, ITD, Student Affairs, UL Global, Student Life and Centre for Transformative Learning through its First Seven Weeks Hub.
- Takes place during Orientation and Weeks 1 through to Week 12 with a reduced offering in the first four weeks of the Spring semester.
- Partners include Library, ITD, Student Affairs, UL Global and Student Life and Centre for Transformative Learning.
- Our First 7 Weeks Hub coordinator and hub staff are all current UL undergrad and post-grad students who remember what it was like to be in first year. They are there to help, support and guide students with any issues incoming students may have. It's run by students, for students – the team know and remember exactly what first year feels like!
- Student, stakeholder and F7W Hub staff feedback inform improvements and guide redesign.

Outcomes

What changed as a result:

- Students have more opportunities to connect through clubs and societies, and events supporting belonging and wellbeing.
- Has direct positive impact on students' decisions to remain in university and progress.
- Key sources of information Instagram, orientation and email, not lecturers. 'The most organized and tidy info communication, best at whole university!'

Lessons Learned

- Target and call out diverse cohorts more intentionally with communications and events and activities e.g. Commuter, International, Age Friendly, Mature, Part time.
- Change message from 'support if you are struggling' to 'support to help you settle, connect and succeed;' shift from stigma of struggle to culture of empowerment.
- Be more clearly in explaining and mapping supports to program themes of belonging, being well and doing well.

Materials

- [First Seven Weeks @UL](#)

Contact

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CÉIM – Academic Peer Learning

Initiative Title

CÉIM Academic Peer Learning

Institution

University of Galway/ University of Galway Students' Union

Service/School/Unit

Students' Union

Format

In-person

What Was the Initiative?

CÉIM is a peer learning initiative based on the Supplemental Instruction/Peer Assisted Learning/Peer Assisted Study Sessions model for 1st year students at University of Galway. Peer learning sessions take place weekly during timetabled core hours across 9–10 weeks each semester. Centrally coordinated by the Students' Union since 2013, CÉIM operates in 17 programmes across 3 colleges, with 3 more programmes piloting in 2026/27.

Why Was It Needed?

Many courses are very large and students were struggling to develop a sense of belonging and social connections. Research pointed to the importance of the 'academic sphere' for nurturing belonging and the well-documented success of existing peer learning schemes globally. The academic 'hook' was seen as a way to encourage attendance throughout the year and support the development of learning communities, belonging, social networks, transversal skills, student wellbeing and progression to 2nd year. This type of programme was also selected for piloting as it is highly student centred and takes a strengths-based approach.

What Happened?

- **What the activity involved** – Weekly small-group peer learning sessions for 1st year students to help them settle into University of Galway and keep up with coursework throughout the academic year. The 1st year students work through their course content building on their skills and critical thinking via engaging peer focused activities.
- **Who delivered it** – CÉIM sessions are delivered by 2–4 higher year student leaders from the same discipline as the 1st year students.
- **When it took place (prearrival, Week 1, ongoing)** – Ongoing programme since 2013. Sessions take place once a week for 9–10 weeks in semester 1 and semester 2.
- **Any partners involved (e.g., SU, peer leaders, Student Services)** – CÉIM is centrally coordinated by the Students' Union in partnership with University of Galway staff and student leaders. Academic leads and administrative staff in partner disciplines are integral to the success of the programme.
- **How students shaped or informed the initiative** – Students took part in focus groups and were surveyed extensively before the programme began, and they chose the name of the programme. The weekly peer learning sessions are facilitated by trained student leaders, while the content focused on is selected by the 1st year students. Student leaders meet the CÉIM team and academic staff weekly or bi-weekly to share feedback, and students are surveyed bi-annually, all of which shapes how the programme develops.

Outcomes

- Engagement varies from around 40%–100% depending on the discipline.
- Higher grades have been observed for students who regularly attend CÉIM versus those who do not attend/attended irregularly.
- 1st year comments on the best things about CÉIM include:
 - ‘Inclusive learning, making friends’.
 - ‘Understanding the course better and exam preparation’.
 - ‘The opportunity to engage with others in my year, in a way that allows you to both meet new people and gain a better understanding of the subject you are studying. It also provides you with numerous resources for subject content and study.’
 - ‘The laid back chatty environment while still being very educational’.
- Survey feedback shows that CÉIM is helping students to feel a part of the University of Galway community, settle into 1st year, get to know people in their year, build confidence, and gain a deeper understanding of coursework. In the November 2025 survey of 1st year students, 93% of respondents say CÉIM supported them to meet others in their course.

Lessons Learned

- Start with a manageable pilot, and seek out partners who are innovative, adaptable and genuinely invested in supporting student success
- Train student leaders thoroughly and collaboratively establish clear expectations with all partners
- Evaluate and communicate with stakeholders – be clear before you start about what you are measuring and communicate your successes clearly to garner greater buy in
- Wide departmental buy in for an academic peer learning programme improves student attendance – without this it is hard to run a successful programme
- In these rapidly changing times, don't underestimate the power of initiatives that foster social interaction!

Materials

[CÉIM website](#)

[Impact of CÉIM](#)

[INPAL CÉIM case study](#)

[NStEP CÉIM case study](#)

[INPAL – Irish Network of Peer Assisted Learning](#)

Contact

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Freshers' Point: Peer-Facilitated Drop-in

Institution

University of Galway

Service/School/Unit

Student Engagement Team

Format

In-person

What Was the Initiative?

Freshers' Point is a drop-in event which aims to create a dedicated social space for first-year undergraduate students to help them feel connected, supported, and part of the university community. By encouraging interaction and reducing isolation, it promotes a strong sense of belonging, which is linked to better wellbeing and academic success. It also supports the university's Healthy Campus approach by prioritising social well-being.

Why Was It Needed?

The programme is needed to contribute to student health and wellbeing, a pillar of which is fostering social support among peers and cultivating a sense of belonging to the University community. Research has established that more students are experiencing loneliness during the transition to a new university environment. Therefore, social connection is needed to improve the overall health and wellbeing of students along with being a contributing factor for academic achievement and student success.

What Happened?

Freshers Point sessions were run by current students in their 2nd, 3rd, and 4th year facilitators, creating an informal, accessible, safe, and inclusive hub for first-year students to connect. The space offered free snacks, hot drinks, comfortable seating, and a range of activities and games, encouraging attendees to meet new people and socialise with friends in a relaxed, peer-led environment.

Outcomes

Freshers Point successfully supported student connection and engagement, with facilitators reporting that first-year students were communicating and socialising well and that peer relationships were strengthened through the initiative. Overall, facilitators highlighted the positive impact of the informal space in helping first years ask questions, receive advice, and settle into campus life.

Students that attended Freshers' Point said that they found the environment supportive:

"Many people there were just like me, so I felt safe"

"Groups of people were communicating with each other, and everyone seemed to be new"

"Everyone was kind"

Many students said they would recommend the event to a friend, felt comfortable making friends, and felt a sense of belonging to the university community.

Lessons Learned

- The lack of non-commercial social spaces was a barrier to running the initiative smoothly and resulted in the event space moving week to week, leading to more confusion for first years. Consistency in time and location is needed for future sessions.
- Numerous students suffer from email fatigue with many receiving multiple institutional emails weekly. Marketing for the initiative was promoted via the student Ezine, social media, lecture shout-outs and posters, however, some students felt advertising of the event was poor and that many Freshers may not know about it.
- Food is key, any event where we provided pizza was an enormous success. Feedback centred around the provision of food being an opportunity to gather.
- For a whole of institution approach, social belonging needs to be infused into curricular design with promotion of initiatives like Freshers Point

Materials



Contact

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