2019 European Learning & Teaching Forum

Towards successful learning: Controversies and common ground

Organised by EUA and hosted by the University of Warsaw

14-15 February 2019

Author(s)

Name: Dr Carina Ginty
Position: GMIT Teaching and Learning Officer, Lecturer in Teaching and Learning
Presenter: Dr Carina Ginty
Organisation: Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology
Country: Ireland
E-mail address: carina.ginty@gmit.ie

Short bio:

Dr Carina Ginty is the Teaching and Learning Officer and a Lecturer in Teaching and Learning at Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) in Ireland. Carina has led numerous development projects for GMIT, where outputs include resources in: *teaching and learning professional development; student engagement; digital leadership; mentoring; community engagement and service learning; recognition of prior learning and assessment; technology enhanced learning; learning design; transitions, retention and the first year experience.* Carina is an executive member of EDIN, the national educational developers network in Ireland, a teaching and learning associate for the National Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching in Ireland and an executive member of the national Teaching and Learning Forum for THEA Ireland (Technological Higher Education Association). She is a graduate of GMIT, NUI Galway and the PRII. She holds a PhD, an M.Litt. in Education, a BBS (Hons), a PgDip PR, and postgraduate Certificates in Assessment and Evaluation, Learning Technologies and Civic Engagement. For further information on Carina's teaching and learning development work at GMIT visit www.gmit.ie/teachingandlearning and www.cpdlearnonline.ie

Proposal

Title: Supporting the first year experience in Higher Education in Ireland: Impact on Student Engagement, Teaching Practice and Institutional Policy.

Abstract:

Many students are not prepared for the demands of third level education and first year experience programmes are designed to support this transition and supplement the necessary academic and life skills. A first year experience package was introduced in two higher education institutes in Ireland (an Institute of Technology and a University): a Learning With Peers (LWP) programme led by trained

senior student leaders; and a Skills Development Module (SDM) led by lecturers and is worth 5 ECTS. This research study explored two initiatives (i.e. the LWP and the SDM) and the impact on student engagement, teaching practice and institutional policy. The major themes that emerged from the study include: *creating connections; making friends; understanding expectations; creating learning communities; teaching challenges; and resourcing and supporting the first year experience.*

Key words: student engagement, first year experience, teaching and learning strategies, peer assisted learning, institutional policy, change management.

1. Introduction

1.1   Research Study Aim

The aim of this paper is to explore the first year experience over two higher education institutions in Ireland (an Institute of Technology and a University). This study explored first year student and staff engagement with two first year experience initiatives: a Learning With Peers (LWP) programme and a Skills Development Module (SDM). It also explored how these initiatives have informed changes in teaching practice and institutional policy.

1.1.1   Research Questions

The research questions discussed in this paper are divided into two key areas. Each question relates to a different stakeholder and explores the impact of first year experience initiatives on students and lecturers. The questions include:

1. How is engagement with the first-year experience initiatives (i.e. LWP and SDM) impacting on the students' experience with higher education?
2. How is the lecturers' involvement with the first-year experience initiatives influencing changes in their teaching practice?

1.2   Background to the Study

The higher education system in Ireland comprises of the university sector (7), the institutes of technology (14) and the colleges of education (5), all of which are substantially state-funded, autonomous and self-governing. In 2004, the Irish Government introduced the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) to stimulate innovative thinking and action within and across higher education institutions in Ireland. SIF was all about creating a collaborative culture with a particular focus on: the quality of teaching and learning; improved graduate education; broader access to higher education; and better managed higher education institutions. The HEA was responsible for the allocation of the SIF funding to the Universities and Institutes of Technology in Ireland. To date there have been two cycles of SIF funding.

In 2008, an Institute of Technology which serves as one of the cases for this study was awarded SIF cycle II funding of €2 million to lead a three year 'Student Leadership Programme'. The institute also

collaborated with higher education institutions in the project areas under *Student Led Learning* and *Curriculum Reform.* The student-led learning project outputs from the Institute of Technology included a Learning With Peers programme (LWP) and a Skills Development Module (SDM). During the collaboration process the institute of technology shared the LWP programme with the School of Business in a University which serves as the second site in this research study, to support their plans in developing a first year experience programme. The undergraduate student population of the Institute of Technology is approx. 7000 and the University is approx. 12,000. A range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes is available at both institutions in Business, Engineering, Science, Computing, Medicine, Humanities, Art & Design, Hospitality, Tourism, Education and Nursing.

In 2009, the Learning With Peers (LWP) programme and the Skills Development Module (SDM) was introduced in the Institute of Technology to support first year students' transition to higher education. In 2010, the LWP programme was introduced in the University and this was followed by the development of the SDM in 2011 (see Figure 1.1 for programme description by site).

Figure 1.1 First Year Experience Initiatives – Programme Facts by Site

	Institute of Technology	**University**
LWP	**A weekly one hour study session facilitated by senior students** from the same degree programme to help students: settle into college life; study together: and work on assignments from all modules. **No Assessment or Participation Link with SDM**	**A weekly one hour study session facilitated by senior students** from the same degree programme to help students: settle into college life; study together: and work on assignments from all modules. **Participation in LWP over one semester is 10% towards SDM module**
SDM	**A weekly three hour 5 credit module led by a lecturer** and covers a range of academic development skills including; *time management; plagiarism; personal development plans; research skills; communication skills; note taking methods; stress management; and team work.*	**A weekly three hour 5 credit module led by a lecturer** and covers a range of academic development skills including; *time management; plagiarism; personal development plans; research skills; communication skills; note taking methods; stress management; and team work.*

The rationale for the introduction of LWP and SDM at both Higher Education Institutions was to help first year students:

- integrate more effectively into college life;

- gain a better understanding of lecturers' expectations of them;
- develop learning and study skills to meet the requirements of their chosen programme;
- improve their understanding of the subject matter of their programme;
- prepare better for assessments.

With growth in class sizes and the increasing diversity among the student population, Learning With Peers offered students a distinct advantage as it encouraged first years to engage with each other and reflect on their programme of study. The LWP programme in both institutions involves a group of senior year students undertaking student leadership training. Two student leaders work together with a first year group of up to thirty students in a weekly timetabled, one hour session engaging with a variety of topics.

The SDM for first years was also designed to support first year students' transition to higher education. Some distinguishing features of the SDM is the fact it is led by the lecturer in both institutions, it is delivered over three hours per week and the main aim is to help first year students develop the academic skills required to be successful in third level.

Since the rollout and implementation of the SIF programme, there have been a number of changes in the Irish higher education system[1]. In parallel to this, the National Higher Education Strategy was published in 2011 and this sets out major changes for the sector going forward. Hunt (2011) explains how the strategy is framed against a range of new challenges that are facing higher education:

> The capacity of higher education has doubled over the past twenty years and will have to double again over the next twenty. Those entering the system now and in the future will have very diverse learning needs, and many will be 'mature' students. Higher education itself will need to innovate and develop if it is to provide flexible opportunities for larger and more diverse student cohorts. It will need to do this while simultaneously enhancing quality and relevance, and connecting better with the wider needs of society and the economy, while operating in a more competitive globalised environment.
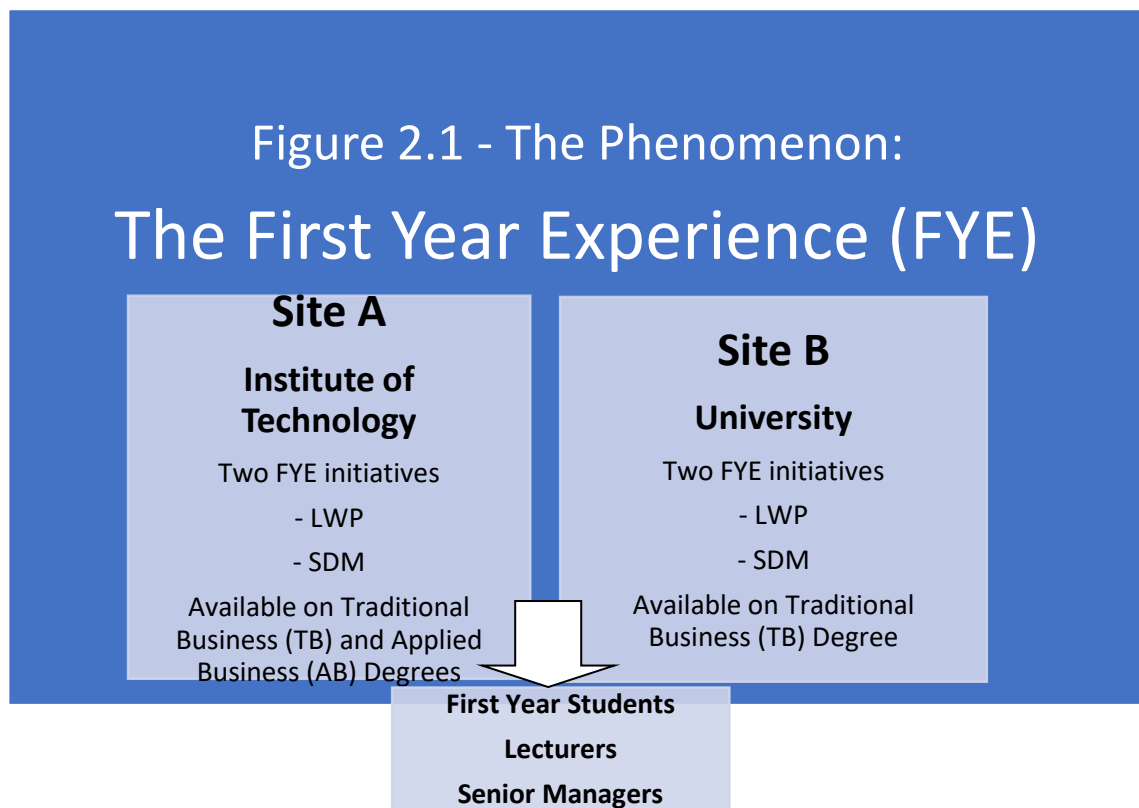
(Hunt, 2011, p.10)

As we recover from the economic downturn period, HEIs are expected to provide knowledge and learning of 'lasting cultural and social significance'. Objectives outlined in the strategy, for example, include a need to provide new structures that better reflect the diverse learning requirements of our students, both those who enter after the Leaving Certificate, and those who enter later. It is in this context that this study links appropriately. As HEIs expand the first year experience will play a major role in helping all students connect to third level, and a range of initiatives can be deployed to support this critical transition and enable successful progression.

---

[1] Including reduced funding by the state and an increase in the student annual contribution fee.

2. Research Methodology

The paradigm chosen for this study is mixed methods and the research strategy is a case study that explored first year experience initiatives deployed in two higher education site. The student led initiative is Learning With Peers (LWP) and the teacher led initiative is an academic Skills Development Module (SDM) to support the transition into higher education. This study examines perspectives of students, lecturers and senior managers involved with these initiatives (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 - The Phenomenon:

The First Year Experience (FYE)

Site A

Institute of Technology

Two FYE initiatives

- LWP

- SDM

Available on Traditional Business (TB) and Applied Business (AB) Degrees

Site B

University

Two FYE initiatives

- LWP

- SDM

Available on Traditional Business (TB) Degree

First Year Students

Lecturers

Senior Managers

Phase one of the research process involved the review of relevant literature with particular emphasis on:

- Student Engagement
- The First Year Experience
- Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategies
- Change Management

For phase two (see Figure 2.3) of the data collection process (January-May 2013), three sample groups were identified in both HEI sites including: business degree students; lecturers; and senior managers. A description of the sample and participation numbers is outlined below and in Figure 2.2. All undergraduate first year students studying a business degree in the Institute of Technology (n=300) and the University (n=300) who had experienced the LWP programme and/or the SDM in 2012-2013, were invited to participate in the survey. 122 students volunteered to do so. All students who

participated in the survey were unaware of my initial involvement in developing the programme for the IoT and University. Overall a 20% response rate was achieved. I choose purposeful sampling as business degree students were the only school offering the LWP programme in the University. This limited my examination on both HEI sites to one discipline area (*any students that chose to drop out early in semester one - were not included in this survey).*
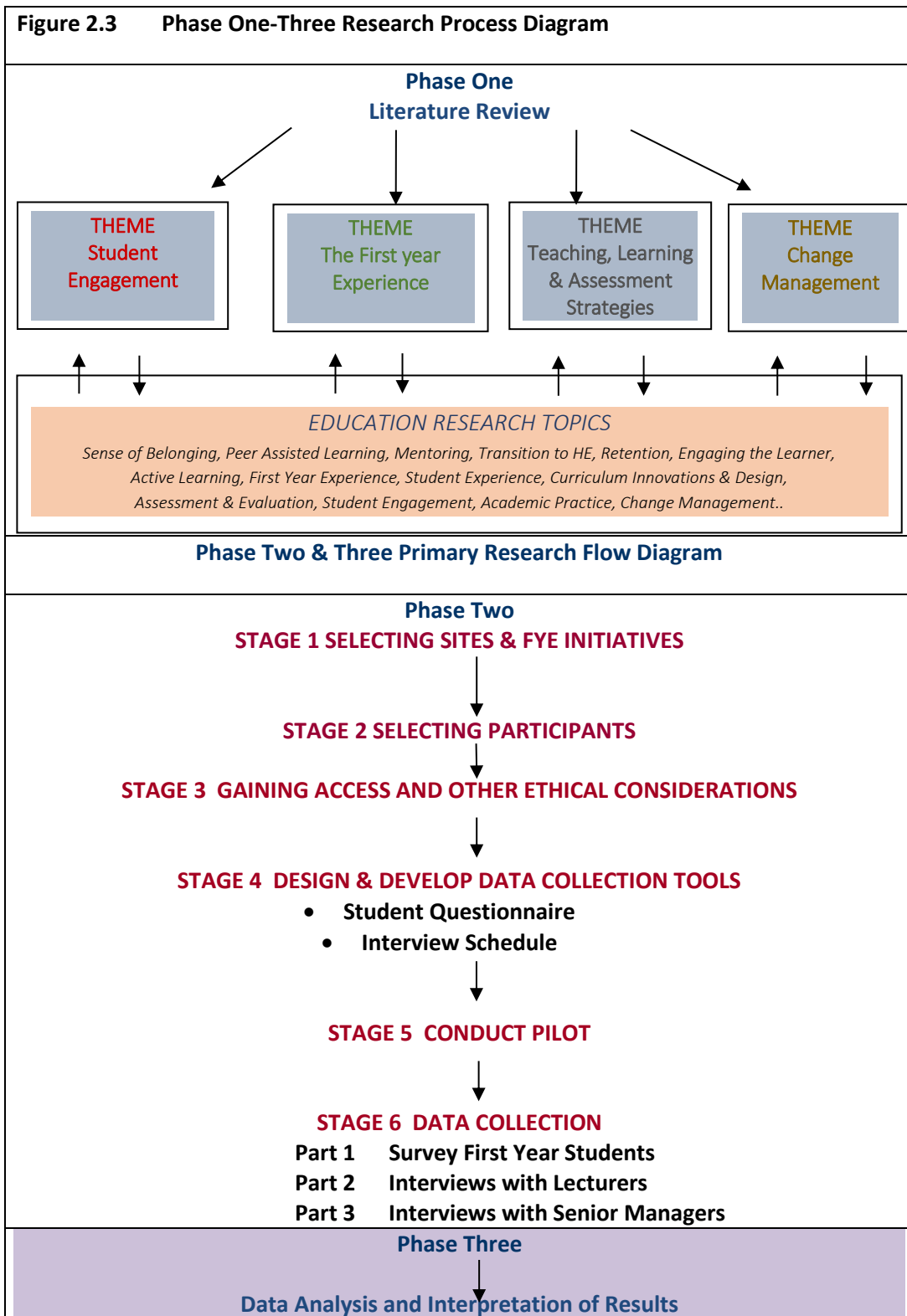
In summary, in the Institute of Technology (IoT) 25% (n=78) volunteered to participate in the survey. This amounted to an even split of 50% applied and 50% traditional business degree students who had experienced first year initiatives including: the LWP programme led by senior year students; and the SDM led by a lecturer. Overall 29% were male and 71% female and out of this 28% (n=21) were mature and just 9% (n=7) were international students. In contrast, the sample in the university student survey was made up of 100% traditional business degree students (n=300) and approximately 14.6% (n=44) volunteered to undertake the survey. Overall there was a good gender balance, with 47% male and 53% female, out of this 11% (n=5) were mature and just 4% (n=2) were international students.

Figure 2.2 Number of Participants in the Study

HEI Site	Students	Lecturers	Senior Managers
Total Numbers Invited	600	14	2
Total Numbers Invited in the Institute of Technology	300	12	1
Institute of Technology Participants	78	7	1
Total Numbers Invited in the University	300	2	1
University Participants	44	2	1

All lecturers teaching the SDM to first years in the business degree programmes in the Institute of Technology (n=12) and the University (n=2) were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview and 9 volunteered to do so. Senior managers in both institutions (n=2) were invited to participate in a one-to-one interview and both agreed.

Figure 2.3   Phase One-Three Research Process Diagram

**Phase One
Literature Review**

| THEME Student Engagement | THEME The First year Experience | THEME Teaching, Learning & Assessment Strategies | THEME Change Management |

EDUCATION RESEARCH TOPICS

Sense of Belonging, Peer Assisted Learning, Mentoring, Transition to HE, Retention, Engaging the Learner, Active Learning, First Year Experience, Student Experience, Curriculum Innovations & Design, Assessment & Evaluation, Student Engagement, Academic Practice, Change Management..

Phase Two & Three Primary Research Flow Diagram

**Phase Two
STAGE 1 SELECTING SITES & FYE INITIATIVES**

STAGE 2 SELECTING PARTICIPANTS

STAGE 3 GAINING ACCESS AND OTHER ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

STAGE 4 DESIGN & DEVELOP DATA COLLECTION TOOLS
- **Student Questionnaire**
- **Interview Schedule**

STAGE 5 CONDUCT PILOT

STAGE 6 DATA COLLECTION
Part 1   Survey First Year Students
Part 2   Interviews with Lecturers
Part 3   Interviews with Senior Managers

Phase Three

Data Analysis and Interpretation of Results

3. Discussion on Findings

A selection of themes that emerged from this study will be discussed in two sections.

- Section 3.1 - Student Engagement with the First Year Experience Initiatives (i.e. LWP and the SDM).
- Section 3.2 - Teaching, Learning and Assessment Approaches.
  The themes that emerged from the overall study are grouped by participant (i.e. Student, Lecturer and Manager) and presented in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1: Stakeholder Findings and Themes

3.1 Student Engagement with First Year Experience Initiatives

Student findings reported in this study include perspectives on the social, personal and academic challenges involved in moving from second to third level education and their experiences with the first year experience initiatives, LWP sessions and the SDM.

The challenges encountered by the first year business students in this study, seem to be common to most students entering higher education regardless of discipline and include: *creating connections, making friends, belonging,* and *understanding what is expected at third level.* There is evidence in the literature that supports this claim for example, Yorke and Longden (2004) found that two thirds of withdrawals happen during or at the end of the first year and there are a number of factors cited that make it difficult for students to adjust to third level education including: financial pressures; the wrong choice of programme or module; difficulties with making friends or being homesick. The biggest factor reported is the lack of preparation for and understanding of the type of learning that is required at third level (Pike and Kuh 2005; Schrader and Brown 2008; Brownlee *et al.* 2009; Jamelske 2009; Morosanu *et al.* 2010).

This study examined two first year experience initiatives which took place in a classroom environment (i.e. LWP and SDM). The findings from both initiatives demonstrate that they were effective environments for engaging students with their programme of study. This is supported by Krause (2007) who takes a broad view of student engagement and has identified three environments in which students may become engaged with their learning including: in the classroom or conducting study-related activities; participation in out-of-class activities located either on campus (e.g. student clubs, sports, mentoring programmes) or off campus (e.g. paid part-time employment); or in the workplace (i.e. skill-based employment training). Other processes and characteristics of student learning in higher education as cited by Crehan (2013) include development of critical thinking; motivational effects; self regulated learning; and the effects of student centred approaches and active learning (Felder & Brent, 1996; Barr & Tang, 1995; Lea, 2003; O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). In this study in the LWP classroom environment and through the SDM assignments student engagement emerged in many forms and examples included: *group work; discussions; networking; research; problem solving; and creating.*

Thomas (2012) described the importance of students having a strong sense of belonging in higher education and this is effectively nurtured through mainstream activities with a clear academic purpose in which all students participate. The skills development module and the LWP sessions explored in this study demonstrated good examples of mainstreamed activities where students engaged well and to different degrees depending on: the teacher; the institute; and the type of business degree programme they were studying (i.e. applied and traditional). This is demonstrated in the recurring themes that emerged in the findings where students described their experiences in the LWP sessions with student leaders as: *learning to work together; getting a better understanding of lecturer's expectations; understanding how to approach assignments and exams; settling into college; help managing the workload; making friends and networking with the student leaders.* In contrast the

student experience with the SDM which was led by the lecturer covered academic skills development topics such as: *time management; plagiarism; personal development plans; research skills; communication skills; note taking methods; stress management; and team work.*

It is clear from the findings that the LWP student-led learning initiative provided peer support which helped students settle into college life and make new friends while also helping students tackle exams and assignments on their course. All of this was achieved through building a support culture and connecting senior and first year students on the same programme. Findings from the University experience explained the benefits gained from 'building small learning communities' through the LWP programme has resulted in students learning how to help each other, creating connections and supporting each other and this is all having an impact on engaging students better with their degree programme of study. In contrast, the SDM led by the lecturer is developing the academic skills required in order to be a successful student in first year and beyond. This links appropriately to the concept of first years' need to belong, which emerged as a key idea from the literature and it is closely aligned with the concepts of academic and social engagement. Goodenow (1993b) explains a sense of belonging in educational environments as students' sense of being accepted and valued. All of this links to the connection theme that emerged in this study where students want to feel part of the classroom and college life and are being supported.

Looking at the LWP student led learning experience findings alone, Couchman (2008) explains that students learn by being socialised into the particular ways of thinking, speaking and writing valued in the institutions and disciplines they study. Overall, students indicated a positive experience with the LWP sessions, with 88% in the university and 64% in the IoT agreeing (*scale: somewhat to very much*) that LWP sessions helped them get a better understanding of the expectations of their lecturers. In the University 75% agreed (*scale: somewhat to very much*) that LWP sessions helped develop learning and study skills to meet the requirements of third level education. This statement equated to 53% in the Institute of Technology. Topping (2005) argues that students that attend more than five LWP sessions will gain greater appreciation of peer learning environments and they develop skills to support their progression. In this study a higher attendance rate was reported in the university, however this is partly attributed to the 'University Student Attendance Policy' in place and the fact that participation in LWP sessions is worth 10% of the SDM - therefore there was an incentive for students to attend. This finding poses the question of whether an attendance policy needs to be implemented in the IoT, which may result in engaging more students in LWP sessions. Several studies and reports (Topping and Ehly 1998; Holton 2001; Nestel and Kidd 2005; Ritter *et al.* 2008; Morosanu *et al.* 2010; Tuckman and Monetti 2010) show that peer assisted learning programmes usually address problems such as academic failure, cognitive and metacognitive strategies deficit, and difficulties in social integration. Studies also suggest that these types of benefits can only be achieved by students attending LWP sessions regularly throughout a term or an academic year.

Furthermore, the SDM findings reported on how it contributed to students' knowledge, skills, and personal development and this supports Pascarella (2005) argument that two-thirds of the gains students make in knowledge and cognitive skill development occur in the first two years of college. In this study, the IoT students rated working with others and developing confidence as the main gains from both FYE initiatives - however they particularly felt that the SDM helped them learn on their own (62%), think critically and analytically (63%), write clearly and effectively (55%) and speak clearly and effectively (54%). Furthermore, Pascarella (2005) reported that the first college year is critical not only for how much students learn but also for laying the foundation on which their subsequent academic success and persistence rest, as nearly two-thirds (63%) of the gains students make in critical thinking skills occur in the first two years of college (Reason *et al.* 2006). Therefore it is encouraging to note the positive student experiences reported in this study and how the SDM developed students' thinking abilities.

3.2 Teaching, Learning and Assessment Approaches

In a lecture environment, it is claimed that students' attention begins drifting after 10- 15 minutes and they are asked and respond to questions for less than 10% of the class time (Pilner and Johnson 2004). This paucity of time for interaction with and among students is especially noteworthy given that there is an inverse relationship between lecture listening time and critical thinking (Alters and Nelson 2002). Therefore, in order to become active learners, students need teachers to use methods that involve them in grasping important concepts. Only 10-30% of lecturers use methods other than traditional lectures as their primary pedagogy (Alters and Nelson 2002). The lecturers' in this study reported on their approaches to teaching first years the SDM. This included a range of techniques such as: *traditional lectures; note taking; games; presentations; role play; and class discussions.* On review of the teaching and learning approaches deployed in the SDM, the lecturers in both HEI's reported similar difficulties and challenges dealing with first year students. Differences emerged however, depending on the individual teacher delivering the module and their own teaching philosophy and approach.

It is worth noting some of the more creative examples of lecturers engaging students in the classroom came from the applied business programme in the Institute of Technology. The teaching, learning and assessment approaches chosen for first year groups are critical to engaging students effectively with course content and this all helps in retaining students on programmes. One approach taken in this study was active learning and this plays an important role in teaching practice in higher education according to Bonwell & Eison (1991) in (Seel 2011). Active learning is any class activity that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing. MacVaugh and Norton (2012) describe active learning practice as focusing on a variety of tools that cognitively engage learners to explore ideas, accumulate knowledge and develop schema. They argue this has several proven advantages, including increased personal motivation, reduction of strategic learning behaviour, improving deep understanding, development of critical thinking and development of reflexive abilities that support life-long learning. MacVaugh and Norton (2012) explain that all of this has become part of the articulated outcomes for higher education worldwide. In this study, in both HEI's, these examples were transferred through a variety of techniques in the LWP sessions and in the SDM in the

form of: group work; case studies; worked examples; field research; peer teaching; project work; debate and the use of games.

Bingham (1999) in O'Farrell (2009) recommends educators list different skills and competencies that they would like their students to achieve based on the module learning outcomes and that this should inform the assessment plan. Furthermore, Biggs (2007) describes the importance of both formative and summative assessment in all modules to support student engagement. Formative and summative assessment are interactive and they seldom stand alone in construction or effect - what is important is the student experiences that lead to the learning outcomes (Gipps, McCallum & Hargreaves, 2000, in WEI, 2011).

In this study, the most common assignment in the SDM reported in both HEI's was a group assignment which involved delivering an oral and poster presentation. Another popular group assignment was a photography/media project. Individual learning assignment methods experienced by the students included essays (over 90%/n=110 in both HEI's), open book tests, a log book/a reflective journal. From the findings presented it seems that the more applied assessment tools such as web page creation were experienced by more students in the IoT (66%) than in the University (33%). This was particularly evident for IoT students undertaking an applied business programme in the Institute of Technology. Furthermore the first year students explained the learning activity in the SDM that they learned the most from and why. Feedback included: *referencing; learning styles; teamwork; essays; mind maps; presentations; creative problem solving; and research skills.* In particular the first year students noted how they enjoyed discovering how they learn and their surprise at how much fun it could be, with some students noting that it was the only assignment on the course that they found of value. These findings provide evidence of the positive impact the SDM assessments had on the learners and their development as a student. All of this is linked to the goals of active learning and assessment strategy as discussed in the literature and supports better student engagement. The findings, however did suggest problems from the lecturers' perspective in relation to the SDM learning outcomes and the assessment strategy and differences emerged between programmes and the lecturer delivering the module. Some students also reported negative experiences in relation to module content and the assessments. Therefore, it can be argued that the strength of an assessment method lies in collaborating with colleagues in a school, deploying practical and creative approaches and negotiating with students on how the assessment will be delivered and marked.

Moving on to the development of teaching staff, for both institutions in this study there was evidence of reflection and learning as a result of the experience of teaching the SDM and engaging with first year students. This was evident in a broad range of ideas, in particular: *staff development; the impact on teaching practice; the module descriptor; the module name; delivery modes; and institute resources.* A key finding is the emergence of a collaborative culture where lecturers are supporting each other and sharing resources and experiences of teaching the SDM. This finding suggests that assigning time for lecturers to network and share resources with each other can prove very beneficial to the students and rewarding to the lecturers. Furthermore, learning from mistakes and trying new approaches such as team teaching in induction week and front loading material has had an impact on

student engagement during the first few weeks of college in the IoT. This echoes themes in the literature on sharing teaching experiences where thoughtful writing and teaching depend heavily on tacit knowledge (Enakrire and Uloma 2012). Tiwana (2002) defines knowledge as a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, expert insight and grounded intuition that provides an environment and framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. Many researchers describe academic practice partnerships, both formal and informal, as key to sharing knowledge and working with colleagues effectively. However, the key to success in academic practice partnerships is a shared vision and philosophy, according to Erickson and Raines (2011). All of this indicates that teaching the SDM has had a positive experience on the lecturers and has resulted in sharing and increased collaboration as a result of shared goals and an understanding of first year student needs.

4. Conclusions

This study set out to investigate the impact of first year experience initiatives i.e. a Learning With Peers programme (LWP) and a Skills Development Module (SDM) in two higher education institutions in Ireland (an Institute of Technology and a University). This study explored student and staff engagement with these initiatives. It also explored whether these initiatives informed changes in teaching practice and institutional policy. This final section of the paper concludes with the major findings of the study. The conclusions are presented under three headings, which connect to the major themes that emerged in this study and include: *Creating Connections and Student Learning Communities; Teaching and Learning Collaborations; Managing and Resourcing the First Year Experience* (see Figure 3.1).

4.1 Creating Connections and Student Learning Communities

This study found that there are a range of approaches that can impact first year student engagement in their learning and college life. Feedback from the first year students indicates that LWP and the SDM had a social and academic impact on their student experience. In particular first year students noted specific lecturers of the SDM and the LWP student leaders who made the first year experiences worthwhile. LWP impacted the students more on a personal and social level due perhaps to the informal setting and the fact it was led by senior students from the same degree programme. Students made a connection with senior years and gained an understanding on what comes next and how to tackle a range of issues that arise in adjusting to third level. With the SDM, students felt this provided a structured academic development learning environment where they were assessed and gained credits. They also acknowledged that the secondary school Leaving Certificate examination did not prepare them adequately on how to study and learn at third level. This echoes the national debate on issues surrounding the Leaving Certificate examination (Hunt, 2011).

Further connections were formed through participation in the SDM class challenges and through group assignments. The assignments in the SDM played an important role in developing academic skills and connecting this to their course of study. Consequently as first year students make connections early on in the first year, this can impact positively on their involvement and participation

in the initiatives. If students fail to make connections with other aspects of their degree programme, this can have a negative impact on their engagement with the higher education institution.

This study found that students need to be incentivised to participate and engage in first year experience initiatives through either the institution attendance policy, credits and/or through assignments. An assessment for example, needs to be challenging and include many active learning tasks. Students appreciate when there is something interesting to do and when there are many outputs to be gained from tackling an assignment. Therefore, the assessment strategy for the SDM is critical and needs an annual review and evaluation among the teaching teams involved in order to maximise student engagement and support the objectives of the first year experience initiatives.

A further idea that emerged from this study is the impact of creating learning communities among first year student groups. This was particularly evident in the University where students made further connections between LWP and the SDM due to fact the learning group they were assigned for the year was the same for all tutorials, workshops, SDM classes and LWP study sessions. To conclude, lecturers and senior managers of first year experience initiatives need to consider - at the programmatic review and design stages - what connections can be made with other modules, assessments or programmes, as it can be a powerful approach to gain buy-in and commitment from first year students.

4.2 Teaching and Learning Collaborations

A wide range of experiences was shared by the lecturers as a result of their engagement with the first year initiatives. One of the main impacts on the lecturers teaching the SDM is the emergence of a collaborative culture and the sharing of resources - this was particularly strong in the Institute of Technology. Due to the active nature of the module, lecturers were keen to learn how their colleagues approached topics such as time management, plagiarism and discovering learning styles. In the University, staff agreed to form a connection between LWP and the SDM from the beginning through a credit participation incentive scheme and this resulted in a higher student attendance rate in the LWP sessions.

Most lecturers agreed that active learning teaching skills and placing the right teachers with first year groups were crucial to engaging students. In fact, many suggested that all lecturers should experience the challenge of teaching first years the SDM, as it would help lecturers understand first year students better and influence their own personal development as a higher education teacher.

Other considerations that emerged from the lecturers' experience of teaching the SDM included issues with the module descriptor (see Appendix 7). In particular, in the IoT the module name, assessments and learning outcomes came under scrutiny. In addition, lecturers felt there were inconsistencies in relation to the teaching approaches. In the University, it was more about the need to deploy a wider range of active learning techniques in the lecture theatre environment and designing a training programme for the post graduate students to support delivery of the SDM workshop classes.

To conclude, creating and sustaining 'first year experience teacher learning communities' presents obvious benefits to higher education institutions. Such communities can provide a regular forum for colleagues to share issues, challenges, resources and their teaching experiences. This approach can have a real impact on engaging first year students. However, there are a number of issues lecturers' face which can prevent this from happening due to the current economic pressures on higher education institutions and the changing landscape in higher education in Ireland.

4.3 Managing and Resourcing the First Year Experience

This study found that the first year experience features explicitly in a range of policies, committees, strategic plans and the learning and teaching strategies in both institutions. Since the implementation of the first year experience initiatives such as LWP and the SDM, strong statements form part of the strategic plans and there is greater emphasis now placed on the first year experience for discussion on learning and teaching committees. There seems to be a mismatch, however between what the senior managers say they are doing for the first year experience and what the lecturers say is actually happening on the ground. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that the higher education managers have great aspirations, ambitions and ideas for supporting and driving the first year experience agenda across the organisation. However, with not enough resources allocated to support the FYE effectively this could result in first year students disengaging from their programme.

Both lecturers and managers allude to the area of ownership and responsibility of the FYE. For example, in the University, the manager noted that each College in the University is responsible for managing the first year experience and they are supported by the University VP for the Student Experience. On the other hand, in the IoT there seems to be no defined role that directly manages the overall Student Experience for the Institute. Good structures were reported on that support the LWP programme across the IoT however, there seems to be no central management of the SDM. There is a view from management they are connected and they form the FYE for the IoT but they are not connected in the eyes of the students or the lecturers involved. For both initiatives to be successful and meet long term goals on retention they need to work in tandem. In order to achieve in a higher education institution, a dedicated resource/office for the 'student experience' needs to be established that manages the academic and social development of the students in first year and beyond, supports teaching staff collaboration initiatives and drives this forward.

With regard to policies and procedures, a new retention policy is now in place (published in 2016) in the IoT as a result of the first year experiences initiatives outlined in this study. This is a positive outcome. For staff to buy into a retention policy in any higher education institution they need to be assured that it is not a list of aspirational statements. A retention policy needs to set targets and key performance indicators and all of this needs to be backed up by an implementation and resourcing plan.

Taking a long term view of supporting the first year experience in higher education, institutions need to understand how to manage retention effectively. Designing and implementing attendance policies is one output that seems to be impacting the first year students' engagement with their programme

in the University. Resourcing and supporting the first year experience however, seems to be an ongoing problem in the current economic climate and reduced investment in higher education. With forecasts estimating 300% growth in higher education participation globally by 2030, institutions need to plan for and build on the resources required to support and retain students at third level. Without adequate resource planning today, the problems will only multiply in the future and may reach a point where the FYE initiatives are abandoned to the detriment of the student experience. Therefore, the key goals of higher education institution senior managers need to involve creating the right structures to support the FYE by:

- appointing institution leaders to manage and co-ordinate the entire first year student experience that connects LWP, SDM and other initiatives that emerge;
- assigning school ownership and responsibility for FYE initiatives;
- implementing an attendance policy and monitoring impacts;
- setting annual targets and regularly reviewing the institutions committees that support the FYE;
- establishing student learning communities that link to all modules on the students' degree programme;
- reviewing the SDM assessment strategy and creating connections with LWP and other student engagement incentives;
- establishing an institution marketing communications group to promote FYE initiatives to first year students;
- supporting 'a FYE teaching collaboration group' and a mid-semester event that enables lecturers and LWP student leaders to share resources and showcase experiences.
- working with LWP student leaders and the Students' Union as partners in the development and review of first year experience academic and social initiatives.

Therefore in order to support the first year experience in higher education, the allocation of the right resources and an annual implementation and review plan are critical to sustaining initiatives such as LWP and the SDM and others long term.

Overall this study has contributed to the body of knowledge on supporting the first year experience in higher education. Firstly, first year students' value teachers that connect with them and they also need to be able to connect pieces of their learning and experiences together in order to drive engagement and participation in their degree programme. Secondly, this study has provided insight into the lecturers' experiences of teaching the SDM and how this has informed their perceptions of first year students and influenced changes to the module going forward to further enhance student engagement. Finally, this study has highlighted a lack of understanding that can exist at the senior management level in higher education institutions on what it really takes from an operational perspective to resource and support first year experience initiatives effectively. This seems to be a critical requirement from the lecturers' perspective, as without commitment from the managers' to

resource first year experience initiatives effectively, staff and students will eventually lose interest and may disengage.

References:

Alters, B. J. and C. E. Nelson (2002). "Perspective: Teaching Evolution in Higher Education." Evolution 56(10): 1891-1901.

Biggs, J. (2001). "The reflective institution: Assuring and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning." Higher Education 41(3): 221-238.

Biggs, J. and C. Tang (2007). Teaching for quality learning at university: what the student does, McGraw-Hill.

Biggs, J. and C. Tang (2011). Teaching for Quality Learning at University. McGraw-Hill.

Brownlee, J., N. Purdie, et al. (2003). "An Investigation of Student Teachers' Knowledge about Their Own Learning." Higher Education 45(1): 109-125.

Brownlee, J., S. Walker, et al. (2009). "The first year university experience: using personal epistemology to understand effective learning and teaching in higher education." Higher Education 58(5): 599-618.

Couchman, J. A. (2008). "Who am I now? Accommodating New Higher Education Diversity in Supplemental Instruction." Journal of Peer Learning Vol.1 (Issue 1, Article 10).

Couchman, J. J., M. V. C. Coutinho, et al. (2009). "Metacognition is prior." Behavioral and Brain Sciences 32(02): 142-142.

Crehan, M. (2013), "The Lived Experience of Transition to Higher Education: A Phenomenological Analysis of Educational Decision Making and Acclimatisation to the First Year of Study". Doctor of Education thesis, Trinity College Library, Dublin.

Enakrire, R. T. and N. G. Uloma (2012). "The Effect of Tacit Knowledge for Effective Teaching and Learning Processes among Lecturers at the Delta State University, Abraka." Library Philosophy & Practice: 1-9.

Erickson, J. M. and D. M. Raines (2011). "Expanding an Academic–Practice Partnership." Journal of Professional Nursing 27(6): 71-75.

Ginty, C. and N. Harding (2013). A First Year Experience learning support package that promotes student engagement and eases the transition to third level education. Proceedings from the Transitions Conference 2013, IoTI, Dept. of Education & Skills, Dublin.

Gipps, C., McCallum, B., & Hargreaves, E. (2000). What makes a good primary school teacher? London: Routledge Falmer.

Goodenow, C. (1993a). "The psychological sense of school membership among adolescents: Scale development and educational correlates." Psychology in the Schools. 30 (1) pp. 70–90.

Goodenow, C. (1993b). "Classroom belonging among early adolescent students: Relationships to motivation and achievement." Journal of Early Adolescence. 13 (1) pp. 21–43

Holton, D. A. (2001). The teaching and learning of mathematics at university level: an ICMI study, Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Hunt, C. (2011). National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030. HEA, Ireland.

Jamelske, E. (2009). "Measuring the impact of a university first-year experience program on student GPA and retention." Higher Education 57(3): 373-391.

Krause, U. M. (2007). Feedback und kooperatives Lernen, Waxmann Verlag.

Kuh, G. D. (1993). "In Their Own Words: What Students Learn outside the Classroom." American Educational Research Journal 30(2): 277-304.

Kuh, G. D. (1995). "The Other Curriculum: Out-of-Class Experiences Associated with Student Learning and Personal Development." The Journal of Higher Education 66(2): 123-155.

Kuh, G. D. (2001). "Assessing What Really Matters to Student Learning: Inside the National Survey of Student Engagement." Change 33(3): 10-66.

Kuh, G. D. (2003). "What We're Learning About Student Engagement from NSSE: Benchmarks for Effective Educational Practices." Change 35(2): 24-32.

Kuh, G. D. (2009). "What Student Affairs Professionals Need to Know about Student Engagement. " Journal of College Student Development. 50 (6): pp. 683–706.

MacVaugh, J. and M. Norton (2012). "Introducing sustainability into business education contexts using active learning." International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education 13(1): 72-87.

MacVaugh, J. a. N., M. (2011). "Introducing sustainability into business education contexts using active learning." Higher Education Policy 24: 439-457.

Morosanu, L., K. Handley, et al. (2010). "Seeking support: researching first-year students' experiences of coping with academic life." Higher Education Research & Development 29(6): 665-678.

Nestel, D. and J. Kidd (2005). "Peer assisted learning in patient-centred interviewing: the impact on student tutors." Medical Teacher 27(5): 439-444.

O'Farrell, C. (2006) Enhancing Student Learning through Assessment, A Toolkit Approach. [Online]. Dublin: Dublin Institute of Technology, Available at http://www.tcd.ie/CAPSL/staff/learning-teaching/assessment/. [Accessed July 2013].

Pascarella, E. T., and Terenzini, P. T. (1991). "How college affects students, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco." US.

Pascarella, E. T., and Terenzini, P. T. (2005). "How college affects students (Vol. 2): A third decade of research. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Pascarella, E. T., C. T. Pierson, et al. (2004). "First-Generation College Students: Additional Evidence on College Experiences and Outcomes." The Journal of Higher Education 75(3): 249-284.

Pascarella, E. T. and P. T. Terenzini (1976). "Informal Interaction with Faculty and Freshman Ratings of Academic and Non-Academic Experience of College." The Journal of Educational Research 70(1): 35-41.

Pascarella, E. T. and P. T. Terenzini (1978). "Student-Faculty Informal Relationships and Freshman Year Educational Outcomes." The Journal of Educational Research 71(4): 183-189.

Pascarella, E. T. and P. T. Terenzini (1979). "Interaction Effects in Spady and Tinto's Conceptual Models of College Attrition." Sociology of Education 52(4): 197-210.

Pascarella, E. T., P. T. Terenzini, et al. (1986). "Orientation to College and Freshman Year Persistence/Withdrawal Decisions." The Journal of Higher Education 57(2): 155-175.

Pike, G. R. and G. D. Kuh (2005). "First and Second-Generation College Students: A Comparison of Their Engagement and Intellectual Development." The Journal of Higher Education 76(3): 276-300.

Pike, G. R. and G. D. Kuh (2005). "A Typology of Student Engagement for American Colleges and Universities." Research in Higher Education 46(2): 185-209.

Pliner, S. M. and J. R. Johnson (2004). "Historical, Theoretical, and Foundational Principles of Universal Instructional Design in Higher Education." Equity & Excellence in Education 37(2): 105-113.

Reason, R., P. Terenzini, et al. (2006). "First Things First: Developing Academic Competence in the First Year of College." Research in Higher Education 47(2): 149-175.

Ritter, K. W., N. K. U. N. Department, et al. (2008). The benefits of a peer-based mentor/tutor program for undergraduate students in a four-year traditional baccalaureate in nursing program, Northern Kentucky University.

Schrader, P. G. and S. W. Brown (2008). "Evaluating the First Year Experience: Students' Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviors." Journal of Advanced Academics 19(2): 310-343.

Seel, N. M. (2011). Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning. Springer.

Thomas, L. (2012). What Works? Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change. UK, PHF, HEFCE, HEA, Action on Access.

Tiwana, A. (2002). The knowledge management toolkit: practical techniques for building a knowledge management system. Prentice Hall.

Topping, K. J. (2005). "Trends in peer learning." Educational Psychology 25(6), 631-645.

Topping, K. J. and S. W. Ehly (1998). Peer-assisted learning, L. Erlbaum Associates.

Tuckman, B. W. and D. M. Monetti (2010). Educational Psychology, Cengage Learning.

Yorke, M. and B. Longden (2004). Retention and student success in higher education, Society for Research into Higher Education.