Building a Student Success Model at GMIT: student centred learning opportunities, employability and the professional development of teaching

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Abstract

GMIT provide a range of student engagement and teaching development opportunities to support retention and to empower learners to be successful at third level and in their future careers. GMIT has faced a number of challenges including: supporting students as they transition into higher education; retaining students on STEM programmes; developing the teaching community; an increasing demand for academic writing and maths support; research and academic integrity; and the need to support students as they transition out of higher education and into employment. In 2015, in response to these challenges, GMIT agreed strategic priorities and assigned resources to develop initiatives across various functions and academic departments.

This paper will present the GMIT student success model that emerged in 2019, following the collaboration of multiple functions and discipline groups. This paper will discuss initiatives in GMIT that enable student success, support student engagement, promote employability and the professional development of teaching in higher education.

Keywords: Student Success; Employability; Student Centred Learning; Health & Wellbeing; Transitions; Teaching Development.

1. Introduction

Student success can mean several things and it can be achieved in many different ways. At its core, is a belief in the capability of higher education, to give each student the support they need to recognise and fulfil their potential (National Forum, 2019). Student success thrives in a higher education institute whose staff, including the academic and professional services community. consider themselves to be enablers of student success. Student success is driven by individuals working in higher education who are committed, enthusiastic, student centred focused and whose work is informed by continuous professional development in teaching and evidence-based research and good practice. In summary, student success is the centre of everything we do in higher education (National Forum, 2019).

GMIT provide a range of student engagement and teaching development opportunities to support retention and to empower learners to be successful at third level and in their future careers. GMIT has faced a number of challenges including: supporting students as they transition into higher education; retaining students on STEM programmes; developing the teaching community; an increasing demand for academic writing and maths support; research and academic integrity; and the need to support students as they transition out of higher education and into employment. In 2015, in response to these challenges, GMIT agreed strategic priorities and assigned resources to develop initiatives across various functions and academic departments.

The student success initiatives developed, focus on teaching enhancement and providing student-centred learning opportunities, to enable students to be successful in GMIT and in their future careers. Student services, the library, teaching and learning, and academic departments have all worked collaboratively to deliver a range of initiatives from pre-entry, first year level to final year, and this has resulted in the emergence of a Student Success Model (see Figure 1). The overall impact of the range of initiatives includes changes to institute policies, an expansion of student support services, a focus on employability skills, new approaches to programme design and evaluation, and a significant increase in the academic community engaging with teaching development courses. In addition, several initiatives have addressed some significant national higher education issues including employability and graduate outcomes, managing diversity and student engagement, retention and the first-year experience.

This paper will present a suite of initiatives available in GMIT that enable student success. It will also highlight student perspectives from a national study and the impact the GMIT initiatives are having on student engagement, employability and the professional development of teaching.

2. GMIT Student Success Initiatives

GMIT provide a range of student engagement and teaching development opportunities to empower learners to be successful at third level and in their future careers. Each initiative develops core skills from the first-year experience to the final year of a programme of study (see Figure 1). The student engagement initiatives are available to all students and they are designed to engage the learner and create a sense of belonging from day one. Students gain an opportunity to develop skills in learning and innovation, creativity, leadership and communication, research integrity, community-based learning and entrepreneurship.

Figure 1. Building a Student Success Model at GMIT Source: Ginty (2019)

The teaching development initiatives are open to all staff and include a suite of postgraduate awards in teaching and learning and a flexible online learning environment supported by a range of practical design workshops. The teaching community gain an opportunity to develop student centred learning strategies, technology enhanced learning skills, programme design approaches, assessment strategies and a teaching portfolio. GMIT recognise that building an enriching student learning experience requires the ongoing development of the teaching community and working with students as partners. GMIT are continuously supporting flexible teaching models to enhance the student experience. In 2020, a postgraduate special purpose award in Digital Teaching & Learning was developed, to build digital capabilities and pedagogic expertise, in order to design, deliver and support flexible, distance and online learners.

The description on the range of student success initiatives presented in Figure 1, includes the following items from 1 to 16:

1. Get Ready Education was designed in 2015 to address the needs of students making the transition from 2nd to 3rd level education. The MOOC was made available to second level students in Ireland from transition year to leaving certificate. The course materials are also embedded in the GMIT first year skills module LIS. The MOOC combines online content with optional teacher led classroom activities, online forums and quizzes. Digital Badges are awarded to participants.

2 & 7. Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) first launched in 2009 and it is designed to help first year students cope better with all these aspects of life at third level. It plays a key role in enhancing the experience of first year and easing the transition to third level. PASS is timetabled in the first semester for one hour per week and is led by student PASS leaders who are trained and engage with the Peer Learning Leadership module (L7, 5 ECTS) and an online learning resource. The impact of PASS is highlighted in Figure 5. Since the introduction of PASS in 2009, over 800 student leaders have led study sessions in GMIT. In 2017, an online course in PASS was introduced to support the training of leaders through a flexible flipped learning approach.

3. The First 5 Weeks is a five-week programme (set up in 2016) to help first-year students settle into college life and to make the transition to third-level education easier, whether they have come directly from secondary school or have been out of education for some time. In addition, the Schools Liaison Office and Access Office have set up an ATS initiative (Attract, Transition & Succeed) for incoming students to GMIT to help them choose the right course. The ATS initiative covers a Collaborative Innovative Strengths Profiling Programme of development (SPMD) for second level students, highlighting the importance of identifying their strengths when choosing a third level course. The programme involves input from key

influencers, online assessments, the SELF model of exploration, the Strengths Wheel, group activities and a panel GMIT student speakers.

4. Learning and Innovation Skills (LIS) is an academic skills development module (first introduced in 2009 and updated in 2016) and it is available to all first-year students (2,000) annually. This is an active learning module that is contextualised for each discipline area and its aim is to ease the transition to third level and gain the skills to be successful on a course. This module is all about learning actively, developing creativity and being innovative.

5. Thrive Volunteering Programme is the GMIT President's Award for Volunteering and it was established in 2019 to celebrate civic engagement by students and staff in Galway, Mayo, Letterfrack and Mountbellew campuses. Student volunteers who complete a required number of hours, qualify for the President's award.

6. Drop in Before you Drop out is a stay on course initiative (set up in 2017) and it operates as a career clinic service that helps students understand their exam results, recommends who to talk to and what to ask, undertakes online profile assessments (if required) to assist students understand their personality type, interests and motivators and how this self-awareness helps them to decide on suitable courses and career choice. The clinic also guides students on various course pathways available and if they are unsure about the course they are on, guidance is provided on switching and the implications of changing course direction.

8 & 9. GMIT Step Forward – NStEP Student Engagement Programme (first introduced in GMIT 2011 and revised in 2017) was inspired by the Scottish Universities student leadership initiative Sparqs (http://www.sparqs.ac.uk). This initiative now forms part of the National Student Engagement Programme. Student class representatives are trained on how to engage with the various forums, programme boards and committees in GMIT. The initiative aims to support student engagement in the quality of the learning experience.

10. The Academic Writing Centre (established in 2016) enable students to fulfil their potential in the academic writing tasks which are part of their course work. The Centre offers focused academic writing tuition to students of the Institute at all levels, in all years (including postgraduate), and across all disciplines. The tuition available takes the form of pre-bookable, thirty-minute, one-to-one sessions, directed by individual student need.

11. The Maths Learning Centre (MLC) was established in 2015 as a School of Engineering student success initiative. The centre operates a drop-in centre for students. The aim of the MLC is to encourage students to take responsibility for the development of their own maths capabilities. Students are encouraged to take their maths problems to the MLC for the tutors to work through with them.

12. The Healthy Campus is an initiative promoting health and wellbeing in GMIT. There are a range of activities open to students and staff from Marchathons, Mental Health Groups to

the Staff and Student Choir and lots more. The initiative launched in 2018 and it is having a positive impact on students and staff.

13. A Community Engagement module and assessment opportunities are available to students from first year to final year. Community Engagement/Service Learning encourages students to explore societal issues, both inside and outside the classroom. Students learn by actively engaging with communities including non-profit organisations, charities, community associations or organisations with a focus on social responsibility. In 2020/21, an online version of this module will be developed for GMIT students, to enable wider access to the module and learning experience across all campuses.

14 & 15. Entrepreneurship and developing portfolios forms part of several academic programmes in GMIT across five campuses. Students gain an opportunity to create a business idea, collaborate with industry and the GMIT Innovation Hub, develop a business plan and pitch for funding to bring their business idea to the next level, post their undergraduate degree. Portfolios form the capstone assessment of many programmes in GMIT. They provide an opportunity for students to showcase their learning journey at third level and tangible evidence on their academic achievements, as well as their participation in community learning projects.

16. The Next Step – Employability Toolkit (the module was first introduced in 2015 and the online employability toolkit in 2019/20) aims to support students as they transition out of GMIT. Students develop both professionally and personally and are equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to enable them to plan for and achieve their career goals. Students analyse an occupation and industry sector and devise a career strategy. They also undertake a skills audit, complete a personality assessment, prepare a CV, develop an elevator pitch, prepare for interviews and develop a LinkedIn profile.

3. Student Perspectives in Ireland on Student Success

In 2018, the National Forum for the enhancement of teaching and learning in Ireland undertook a student success study and collected data from 1,041 Irish higher education students. Responses were reviewed and coded into themes listed in students' understandings of student success. Where a respondent listed more than one factor, multiple themes were coded and included in the analysis. Figure 2 represents the key categories that emerged from the data analysis. Five themes were identified that enable student success including: *Engagement and Student Partnership; Professional Development and the Centrality of Staff Who Teach; Evidence-based Decision-making; Supporting Transitions and Cultivating Belonging; and Assessment and Feedback*. Responses from this study are consistent with other research studies on student success and engagement (O'Shea & Delahunty 2018; Kuh, et al., 2008), with a focus on degree completion, academic achievement and employability.

Health and wellbeing and the teaching experience are also placed as a high priority to enable student success.
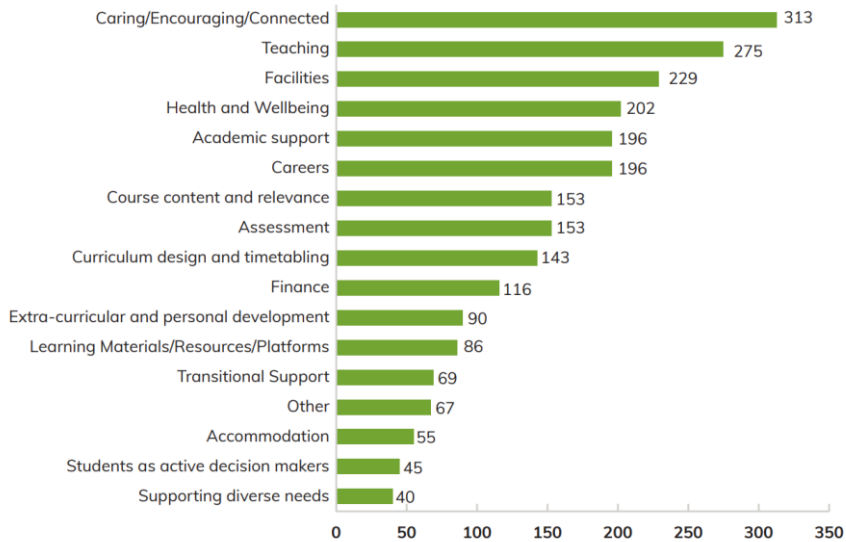

Figure 2: Student responses on institutional priorities for student success.
Source: National Forum (2019).

The GMIT Student Success initiatives align well with the national and international themes that enable student success in higher education institutes (see Figure 3).

National & International Themes to Enable Student Success	Relevant GMIT Student Success Initiatives
Engagement and Student Partnership	PASS Programme, NStEP, Entrepreneurship, Portfolios, Community Engagement. Healthy Campus, Academic Writing and Maths Centre.
Professional Development and the Centrality of Staff Who Teach	Teaching & Learning CPD Courses, Postgraduate Programmes & Teaching Resources.
Evidence-based Decision-making	Enabling Policies and Procedures at GMIT.
Supporting Transitions and Cultivating Belonging	PASS, LIS, Healthy Campus, First Five Weeks, Next Step, Employability Model. Academic Writing & Maths Centre.
Assessment and Feedback.	LIS, Community Engagement, Teaching Development, Portfolios, Entrepreneurship, Academic Writing & Maths Centre.

Figure 3. GMIT Student Success Initiatives Aligned with National and International Student Success Themes.

4. Impact of GMIT Student Success Initiatives

The initiatives in place (see Figure 1 and 3) have addressed national higher education issues under several Higher Education Authority (HEA) Ireland System Objectives including skills and employability, the first-year experience, graduate outcomes, managing diversity and student engagement, and this has resulted in significant improvements and increased student and staff engagement in the following areas:

- At an institutional level, outcomes have informed the **development of new policies and the review of existing institute policies and procedures** e.g. GMIT Retention Policy, LTA Strategy, RPL Policy, Online Learning Policy, External Examining and many more (see https://www.gmit.ie/general/quality-assurance-framework and https://www.gmit.ie/sites/default/files/public/general/docs/gmitltastrategicobjectiv es20192023lowres-2.pdf).

- **There has been an expansion of student support services available including:** The First 5 Weeks programme; Career Planning Clinics; Drop in before you Drop out clinics; GMIT Maths Learning Centre; Academic Writing Centre; the Healthy Campus initiative.

- **Each year 2,000 first year students undertake a module called Learning and Innovation Skills (LIS)**, providing students with a foundation in a wide range of skills to support their engagement with their programme of study. There is evidence students' greatly benefit from this mandatory module and it has an impact on their learning and development, as they progress into year two and beyond.

- There have been **significant improvements in first-year student progression rates** moving from 71% in 2014 to 79% in 2017 (i.e. First year progression is based on the HEA definition i.e. the presence of students on March 1st who were registered as full-time, new first time in year 1 on March 1st the previous year). In 2017/2018 GMIT achieved 80% retention (i.e. retention is students passing plus those allowed progress and carry as a percentage of students registered on the programme).

- With regards to **employability,** in 2018/19 GMIT recorded 93% of graduates were either in full time employment or in further study, on the completion of studies at GMIT.

- The Healthy Campus initiative has driven the **development of a Healthy Campus Action Plan,** which reflects locally identified needs and national health priorities for the purpose of promoting health and wellbeing throughout the Institute's strategic objectives. Notable actions implemented from 2019-2020 include: the introduction of a Clean Air Policy in three GMIT Campuses (e.g. smoke-free/vape-

free); a Nutrition Traffic Light System to foods prepared on campus; and hosting a healthy themed week during GMIT's #First5weeks induction programme.

- Engagement with industry **and an increased focus on employability** has resulted in developing a GMIT Employability Model and Statement (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: GMIT Employability Model. Source: GMIT (2019).

- There is strong evidence that the **Student Success initiatives have supported a culture of teaching and learning enhancement in GMIT.** This is demonstrated in the academic community's engagement with teaching development courses and specialist workshops including: the postgraduate, Certificate, Diploma and MA in Teaching and Learning (T&L), with over 120 staff engaging in one level 9 module or more since launching the L9, T&L suite of modules in 2017. In addition, over 400 staff in GMIT and partner higher education institutes have engaged with the online teaching and learning platform. www.cpdlearnonline.ie suite of short CPD courses and resources since launching in 2017. A study on the impact of CPD in earning and teaching is currently underway with GMIT Teaching and Learning Office and the findings will be published in 2020/21.

- There has been **increased collaborations** between faculty, students, the library, student services, research, careers function, the student's union and the teaching and

learning office in developing student success. All work groups established include members from multiple disciplines and student leader representatives.

- The development and enhancement of extra curriculum opportunities available to students has increased**.** The student **PASS study sessions** have grown from an offering of just three programmes in 2009 (see Figure 2) to 40 programmes in 2019, offering weekly one-hour sessions to first year students**. The Learning and Innovations Skills module** is available to all first-year students and a full suite of student engagement offerings covering academic and social needs is now supporting students as they transition into and out of higher education.
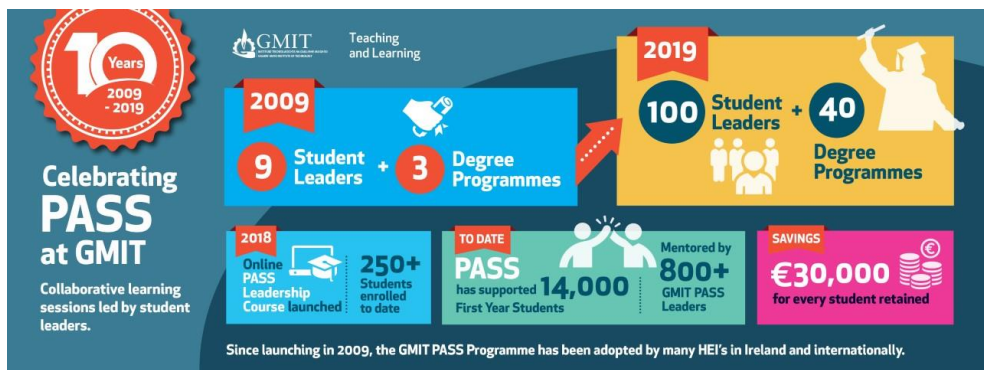

Figure 5: The Peer Learning Programme, weekly PASS study sessions for 1st year students + a student leadership programme for senior year students. Source: Ginty (2019).

- **GMIT has been recognised for several** awards in teaching and learning excellence including the National Forum DELTA Award scheme and the National Education Awards see https://www.gmit.ie/about/teaching-and-learning-project/teaching-and-learning-awards).

- A significant number of **conference and invited presentations** to other HEI's in Ireland and internationally have been delivered, about the range of student success initiatives showcased in Figure 1. In addition, several of the student engagement initiatives have been adopted by other HEI's in Ireland and internationally.

- **GMIT ISSE National Student Engagement** figures continue to rate equal or above the national average in Student/Faculty Interactions (2018 Indices 16.8 GMIT – all THEI's 15.4), Quality of Interactions (2018 Indices 40.0 – all THEI's 39.7) and Effective Teaching Practice (2018 Indices 35 – All THEI's 35).

For further information on the GMIT Student Success Model presented in this paper contact Dr. Carina Ginty, GMIT Teaching and Learning Office, ***carina.ginty@gmit.ie***

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