

**Title:**                   **How cross-institutional collaboration can support first year transition: evaluating a key first year initiative**

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### **Session Learning Outcomes**

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

- Relate to the context of the higher education landscape in Ireland.
- Understand the University of Limerick's (UL) approach to cross-institutional student engagement.
- Critique the key output from collaborative transition initiatives delivered by the Student Engagement & Success Unit (UL).
- Analyse the evaluation data from this collaborative transition initiative.
- Apply the lessons learned from the evaluation data to inform mainstreaming student engagement activities.

### **Session Outline**

Higher education policy in Ireland sets out that “A positive first-year student experience is crucial to achieving the goals of higher education; failure to address the challenges encountered by students in their first year contributes to high drop-out and failure rates...” (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p. 56). In this context, the University of Limerick (UL) formed a ‘virtual’ and nationally unique Student Engagement and Success (SES) Unit in 2015. The ‘virtual’ unit comprises of three positions across three university divisions; Student Affairs Division, the Library, and the Centre for Teaching and Learning. One of the most established initiatives of the Unit has been the development of a transition module<sup>1</sup> offered over the first two weeks of the first semester. The rationale for this module was driven by research and the national context. Content development was informed by the benefits of developing “a sense of belonging”, “finding friends”, “feeling confident” and “feeling a part of your course and the institution” (Thomas, 2012, p. 1). The development of this transition resource is an acknowledgement of “the importance of this key period in a student’s academic life, as those who have difficulties with the transition may perform poorly and/or disengage at an early stage (Gibney et al., 2011)...(National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2015, p. 16). In the academic year 2018/2019, 801 responses were gathered from first year students evaluating the transition module. The evaluation has ethical approval, evaluations were

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<sup>1</sup> The module is not independently accredited.

collected in-class, and is comprised of quantitative and qualitative questions shown below. The quantitative questions ask students if the session was helpful to their transition into third level and if the information was beneficial as a UL student. It also asks whether the sessions have provided a better understanding of the university and whether students would like more information. The qualitative questions ask what more students need to know about the university, and what the most useful and least relevant components of the session are. The resulting analysis and insights from this data will be shared.

### Session Activities and Approximate Timings

Minutes	Item
0:00-2:00m	Welcome and introduction.
2:01-4:00m	Question 1: How many people present are directly involved in cross-institutional student engagement activity? (Hand-raising response) Question 2: How many people present are aware of cross-institutional student engagement activity in your HEI? (Hand-raising response)
4:01-7:00m	Introduce the context of the higher education landscape in Ireland.
7:01-12:00m	Describe the SES Unit, its formation, and outputs to date including the transition module.
12:01-20:00m	Share the analysis of the transition module evaluation.
20:01-23:00m	Discuss future SES Unit plans.
23:00-40:00m	Group discussion: Divide audience into 5/6 participant groups. Groups will decide what medium they will provide responses through, either online ( <a href="https://www.polleverywhere.com">https://www.polleverywhere.com</a> ) or written responses on flipchart paper in the room.  Question: How does this compare with your institution's approach to student engagement? Sub questions for consideration: Who is primarily involved in student engagement activities? Is there any cross-institutional collaboration? If not, where would you like to see cross-institutional collaboration?
40:01-45:00	Feedback and wrap-up

### References

Department of Education and Skills (2011) *National strategy for higher education to 2030*, Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. Available at:

<http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/National-Strategy-for-Higher-Education-2030.pdf>  
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. Available at <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/NF-2015-Why-Students-Leave-Findings-from-Qualitative-Research-into-Student-Non-Completion-in-Higher-Education-in-Ireland.pdf> (Accessed 23 Nov 2018).

Thomas, L (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme*. Available at [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/what\\_works\\_final\\_report.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/what_works_final_report.pdf) (Accessed 23 Nov 2018).