

A Tertiary Programme Partnership

Milestones, achievements, and factors for inclusion in tertiary development

This article outlines the new national tertiary programme and the partnership between the National Tertiary Office, Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board, and Technological University of the Shannon. It highlights some challenges, milestones, and achievements to date, and some factors for consideration in tertiary development, including universal design for learning and recognition of prior learning. Transversal skills and competences are increasingly recognised and coveted in the workplace, and the article concludes with some of their salient features.

Introduction

On 6 December 2022, the then Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), Simon Harris, announced a new policy for the development of a unified tertiary education sector. A new National Tertiary Office (NTO) was soon established within the Higher Education Authority (HEA). Its function was to support arrangements between Education and Training Boards (ETBs), further education and training (FET), and higher education institutions (HEIs), leading to the development of further and higher education degree programmes.

In its first year, or proof-of-concept phase, tertiary degree courses were planned in Business, ICT, Arts, Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction, Health and Welfare across 11 locations, including five HEI-ETB partnerships. With the NTO responsible for coordinating and supporting the development of policy on the initiative, the collaboration between HEIs and ETBs would mean students could start higher-level education in further education and complete their degree in a partner HEI.



Dr Declan Blackett

Regional Tertiary Manager, National Tertiary Office; Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board; and Technological University of the Shannon



Dr Sarah O'Toole

Regional Tertiary Manager, National Tertiary Office; Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board; and Technological University of the Shannon

LCETB–TUS–NTO partnership

Since 2015, Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board (LCETB) and Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest (TUS) have collaborated closely across a range of undertakings. This was strengthened in 2018 and reviewed in 2022. So when the tertiary programme (TP) was set in motion, it continued this collaboration. Key milestones include:

Collaboration in the partnership

- » Memorandum of understanding and joint controller agreement establishing the tertiary partnership between LCETB–TUS and the NTO.
- » Tertiary steering group to lead a strategic process of substantive progress and collaborating in education and training provision across the region.
- » Tertiary working group to operationalise strategic aims and objectives, via a working plan and audit of activities.
- » Courses agreed for progression and a memorandum of agreement and due diligence processes developed.
- » Coordinated with the Quality Assurance Support Service to capture learner and staff experiences of the TP to date.
- » Contributions made to FET quality assurance for planning examinations, internal verification and external authentication, final-year assessments, repeat examinations, and progression to stage 2 of the tertiary degree.

Collaboration across the sector

- » Tertiary data-sharing agreements and GDPR controllers established across the partnerships.
- » NTO and tertiary management meetings held with Department of Education and HEIs, Regional Skills Forum, CORU (the Health and Social Care Professionals Council), and the Health Service Executive, to foster future collaborations.
- » Inputs made to tertiary programme policy: *Tertiary Framework, Communications Strategy, Funding Matrix, Tertiary Risk Registers, and Guidance Toolkit for Schools.*

In September 2023 the first students began the programmes after induction sessions. Programme team interactions and collaborations were encouraged and fostered. In the pilot year, two degree programmes began in Business Studies and Computing. For 2024–2025, three degree courses are in place, with requests for others.

The pilot presented logistical, administrative, and operational challenges. However, it also provided a space for partners to reflect on the challenges and opportunities, including for a more robust TP. A key strength has been the pilot's position as part of a multi-sectoral initiative, informed by inputs and expertise

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from partners the NTO, DFHERIS, HEA, and SOLAS. Evaluations of this phase have informed and will enhance subsequent tertiary developments.

Going forward

Current developments include regional and national efforts to identify and include additional ETB or HEI partners, and new tertiary degree courses. Potential factors for consideration in tertiary development include universal design for learning (UDL), recognition of prior learning (RPL), and transversal skills and competences (TSCs).

Universal design for learning

UDL places students at the centre of educational programmes and makes provision for flexibility in how students are taught and engaged with, how information is provided, and how learners respond to and demonstrate their knowledge and skills (Quirke & McCarthy, 2020, p.3). Through multiple means of engagement, representation, action, and expression, UDL presents opportunities for more inclusive learning. It can support teachers/lecturers to anticipate and support a broader range of students, ensuring that they learn more from college instruction (Scott et al., 2003). UDL underscores a commitment to inclusivity, and, as highlighted in the *National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education* (Banks et al., 2024), incorporating UDL principles in tertiary programmes will enhance not only learning environments but also learning experiences, making them more meaningful, beneficial, and productive.

Recognition of prior learning

As we move towards becoming a lifelong learning society (OECD, 2010), students will increasingly be able to take formal, informal, or non-formal education throughout their lives. Lifelong learning opens 'pathways to enrol in institutions at various levels based on RPL' (Staunton, 2021, p.9). RPL incorporates formal, informal, and non-formal learning and is increasingly used nationally and internationally to evaluate knowledge and skills acquired outside the classroom, for recognising competence against a given set of standards, competencies, or outcomes (ibid., p.6). Even though Ireland is 'without a national policy on RPL from which education providers can draw' (ibid., p.9), as the tertiary programme becomes more embedded in the educational landscape, RPL will have an increasing role in facilitating access and ensuring greater take-up of higher education degrees.

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Transversal skills and competences

TSCs are ‘learned and proven abilities which are commonly seen as necessary or valuable for effective action in virtually any kind of work, learning or life activity’ (Hart et al., 2021, p.5). They are termed so because they are not exclusively related to any particular context – occupation, academic discipline, civic or community engagement group, etc. (ibid.). The literature provides some broad categories of TSCs (Skills and Education Group, 2019; Hart et al., 2021; SOLAS, 2023), including problem-solving, critical and innovative thinking, presentation and communication skills, and teamwork and leadership skills. Also included are self-discipline, enthusiasm, perseverance, self-motivation, tolerance, openness and respect for diversity, intercultural understanding, the ability to locate and access information, and the ability to evaluate media content.

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In Ireland, SOLAS (2023) has highlighted that certain TSCs made up around two-thirds of all the skills and competences mentioned in recent online job adverts. Developing TSCs not only adds to the quality of a course but has enduring benefits for students and society. A main focus of higher education is to enable students to become graduates with the knowledge, skills, and competences for their own enhancement and that of the world (OECD, 2023). This behoves colleges engaged in tertiary programmes to foster more graduate attributes related to TSCs development in their programmes.

Conclusion

Tertiary programmes enable access and widen participation in higher education. They are structured to facilitate seamless progression from FE to HE and enable students to achieve their learning potential. Through FE–HE collaborations, higher-education opportunities are delivered regionally and in local communities. This collaboration also reflects a unified tertiary education sector. Going forward, integrating UDL, RPL, and TSCs development can lay the foundations for more holistic tertiary degree programmes.

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