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Using Hybrid Development Platforms for Easy Design of Mobile APPS to Improve the Orientation Experience of First Year Higher Education Students at DIT.

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Smartphone usage by students has increased rapidly over the last number of years, and there is evidence to indicate that students are using their smartphones more in higher educational environments.

However, creating mobile applications tailored to the needs of any particular cohort of students can be an expensive and time-consuming endeavour for any organisation. In addition, it normally involves substantial technological expertise.

At the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), we created two bespoke mobile applications tailored to improve the orientation experience for two different groups of students. "*DIT GetSmart!*" was designed and built to address the information needs of first-year students undertaking programmes in the DIT's School of Hospitality Management & Tourism. "*Prep4DIT*" was a second mobile application created to enhance the orientation experience of students starting out on the DIT's Access & International Foundation Programme.

The aim of both apps was to engage and orientate first-year students to their programme before and after they arrived on campus, and to provide practical orientation information such as college and campus maps, lecturer contact details, timetables, tutorials and social media links. Both apps were released on Apple's App Store and Google's Play Store in 2015 and 2016 for download by all new students.

To design and produce two mobile apps in a short period of time with limited resources, we utilised an online 'hybrid app development' platform. These environments provide a low-cost model requiring little or no programming skill to create and deploy quality mobile applications on Android and Apple smartphones and tablets in just a matter of weeks. Hybrid development platforms greatly simplify the app-building process, and put within the reach of education organisations the ability to engage with students through mobile apps without substantial financial investment or technical coding skills.

Keywords: Mobile Apps, Hybrid Platforms, Orientation, Higher Education, Retention