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Students in Action: A destination based learning Approach to Student Engagement

Ruth Craggs
Technological University Dublin, ruth.craggs@tudublin.ie

Catherine Gorman
Technological University Dublin, catherine.gorman@tudublin.ie

Kevin A. Griffin
Technological University Dublin, kevin.griffin@tudublin.ie

Ziene Mottiar
Technological University Dublin, ziene.mottiar@tudublin.ie

Bernadette Quinn
Technological University Dublin, bernadette.quinn@tudublin.ie

See next page for additional authors

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STUDENTS IN ACTION: A DESTINATION-BASED LEARNING APPROACH TO STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Ruth Craggs, *Dublin Institute of Technology*
Ruth.craggs@dit.ie

Catherine Gorman, *Dublin Institute of Technology*
Catherine.gorman@dit.ie

Kevin Griffin, *Dublin Institute of Technology*
Kevin.griffin@dit.ie

Ziene Mottiar, *Dublin Institute of Technology*
Ziene.mottiar@dit.ie

Bernadette Quinn, *Dublin Institute of Technology*
Bernadette.quinn@dit.ie

Theresa Ryan, *Dublin Institute of Technology*
Theresa.ryan@dit.ie

Abstract

Cognisant of the importance of student engagement in education being an international concern, this chapter outlines a project to enhance student engagement undertaken at the Dublin Institute of Technology in Ireland. The 'Students in Action Project' involved students from a range of programmes and modules in the School of Hospitality and Tourism working with the local community and businesses of two tourism destinations: Slane, Co. Meath and Drogheda, Co. Louth in Ireland. The aim was to involve students in an active collaborative learning environment using a destination-based approach to define the parameters of engagement and collaboration and identify ways in which tourism and hospitality within the destination could be enhanced. In contrast to many previous studies on student engagement, the destination-based approach takes a more holistic view by including local industry, industry groups as well as civic and broader community members as key components of the destination. This chapter outlines the motivations underpinning the project, the process involved, and reflects on the benefits, limitations and lessons learnt. Outcomes beyond those

intended arose from engaging with stakeholders outside the educational institution. The project has been a steep learning-curve for all, and on-going planning, negotiation and reflection are essential to the process. Fundamentally, all participants – staff, students and destination stakeholders - agreed that the rich outputs justified the effort involved.
Key Words: engagement, tourism destinations, pedagogy, 'real-world', partnership, reciprocal

1. Introduction

The question of how to engage students is at the centre of mainstream education discussion and debate (Zyngier, 2008). This is largely underpinned by the perception that engagement has declined (Barnett & Coate, 2005) despite the fact that it is '... a key factor for learning and personal development' (Salaber, 2014, p. 115). Knowing how students engage in learning practices plays a key role in managing and developing third level education (Coates, 2007), and thus, engagement has been identified in the literature as a key area of research (Blasco-Arcas et al., 2013). This chapter responds to the need to develop such knowledge, by documenting the development and application of a project undertaken to enhance student engagement through the 'Students in Action Project' in the Dublin Institute of Technology in Ireland. Cognisant of Kuh *et al*'s (2007) claim that student engagement involves 'participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom', the project, involved students across a number of programmes and modules in the School of Hospitality and Tourism working with the local community and businesses of Slane, Co. Meath and Drogheda, Co. Louth (in the 2012-13 and 2013-14 academic years respectively) in Ireland. The overall aim of the project was to involve students in an active collaborative learning environment with each destination, to identify ways in which tourism and hospitality could be enhanced. This would be achieved by engaging students in a multi-faceted project that would empower them to the benefit of the destination and of all members of the community.

This chapter outlines the motivation for undertaking the project, the process involved, the outcomes as well as benefits, in addition to the limitations and lessons learnt in undertaking such a project from the perspective of the academics involved. With specific regard to tourism destinations, it also challenges the current definitions of engagement to include the inseparable links that must be explored between industry, civic and wider community elements in order to develop a tourism experience within a destination. The project differs from many previous studies on student-community engagement, taking a more inclusive approach to 'community' by including local industry, industry groups as well as broader community members when identifying the key components of a destination. This is in keeping with the *National Strategy for Higher Education in Ireland* which includes business, the wider education system, and the community and voluntary sector' in their definition of community (Hunt, 2011).

The publication in January 2011 of a *National Strategy for Higher Education 2030* (Hunt, 2011) in the Republic of Ireland was greeted by many academics sceptically, with public commentators 'cherry-picking' their least favourite recommendation / issue or topic of conversation to vilify. Doran (2011) focuses on the possible reintroduction of third-level fees while Education Matters (2011) raises a range of issues such as proposed mergers of educational institutions and a variety of finance related sections of the report. The letters pages of the *Irish Times*, which is often viewed as a useful litmus test for intellectual debate in the country focused on issues such as 'Shifting education costs onto students' and 'Getting more out of lecturers'. At the time of its publication, therefore, the media focus was firmly on the less palatable aspects of this report and thus, many ignored the useful and interesting insights offered.

Hunt (2011, p. 21) identifies 'engagement with the wider society' as one of its 26 key recommendations for future college and university education in Ireland, stating, 'Engagement with the wider community must become more firmly embedded in the mission of higher education institutions'. To achieve this, higher education institutions will need to take the following actions:

- Encourage greater inward and outward mobility of staff and students between higher education institutions, business, industry, the professions and wider community.
- Respond positively to the continuing professional development needs of the wider community to develop and deliver appropriate modules and programmes in a flexible and responsive way.
- Recognise civic engagement of their students through programme accreditation, where appropriate.
- Put in place structures and procedures that welcome and encourage the involvement of the wider community in a range of activities, including programme design and revision.

While the national strategy mentioned above raises a range of discussions and objectives for the future, the pedagogical focus of many Institutions is on the simple challenge of attracting and retaining students, therefore, much of the academic research being undertaken focuses on the areas of student experience and retention. In this context, a 2012 UK report on *Student Engagement and Belonging* (Thomas, 2012, p. 1) challenges institutions to reprioritize and consider looking at:

> how the curriculum might be reorganised to provide for sustained engagement between teachers and students; how teaching can be organized to create student learning communities; and how to convey the message to students that they belong.

This is based on the belief that a student's sense of belonging is central to their level of engagement in third level education, and according to Thomas (2014) this sense of belonging is best cultivated, not by support services, campus facilities or student fora, but directly in the academic sphere. Thus, the challenge for academics is to develop a curriculum which develops staff-student-community engagement, not just for ethical and civic reasons, but also to provide a better educational experience and thereby, to ultimately retain students.

Students today need to continually develop their capacity to communicate effectively with others, to support the learning of others, to work across cultures and institutions, and to operate in complex inter-connected environments. Thus, building on this project each year using a different destination enables the authors to contribute to building an evidence-based framework that higher education institutions can use to inform decision-making during the development of such flexible experiential learning opportunities, involving co-creation in its many guises. In this regard, understanding the factors that drive successful student engagement and co-creation is currently an under-explored pedagogic field to which this project can make an important contribution.

At the outset it is important to define the term 'destination'. This is because experience to date has thrown up many complexities in engaging with people on the ground within specific destinations. Trying to apply a destination based learning approach in tourism studies means endeavouring to engage with a wide array of very different actors in a way that challenges the singularity implied by the use of the term destination. The supply side of a tourism destination comprises of assets, amenities and accessibility (Burkart and Medlik, 1981: 45; Holloway 1994:6-9; Lohmann and Beer, 2013:86). These elements include aspects such as history and culture, accommodation and services, and infrastructure and transportation. However, in order to provide an experience for the visitor, a destination is also about a series of

interactions and inter- and intra-relationships between the place and stakeholders and between stakeholders themselves. It may exhibit a number of characteristics of industrial districts (Hjalager, 2000), territorial and social capital may be considered, or it may be considered as a Tourism Local Innovation System – TLIS (Prat, Guia and Molina, 2008). Destinations are made up of governments, businesses and communities embedded in varying degrees with the tangible place and intangibly with each other. However, despite this multitude of manifestations, the 'tourism destination' provides a learning space for students within which to apply, create, develop, challenge explore and disseminate their knowledge.

2. Literature review

Universities, since their foundation, have been inextricably linked to society and have played a key role within it (Boland, 2011: 102). More recently, this role has come under scrutiny and the range of expectations which society has of higher education has expanded and diversified (Boland, 2011). Powell and Clark (2012) note that a 2011 report by the EU Committee on the Regions outlines that 'the gap between the latest research knowledge and real life practice is huge'. Thus, it is important that universities understand how the work they undertake can be turned into sustainable products and processes which are 'useful' to broader society. Indeed developing an outward facing, dynamic and two way exchange with the world beyond the academy is being encouraged by a host of external policy drivers but also by the values of many in the sector, both staff and students, who believe that universities are there to 'make a difference' and to transform individuals' lives (Owen & Hill, 2011: 3).

A greater emphasis, therefore, on engagement with wider society has for some years now been a key objective of many higher education institutes and authorities. This is evident in such reports as the Kellogg Commission's *Returning to our Roots: the Engaged Institution*, published in 1999 in the US, which argued that 'it is time to go beyond outreach and service to

. . . “engagement” (1999: 9). Similarly the 1997 *Dearing Report* in the UK argues that institutions need to ‘turn to active and systematic engagement’ (NCIHE, 1997). While students may have traditionally been seen as passive participants, the issue of student engagement is receiving increasing attention and has been linked to academic achievement, lower levels of student attrition, retention, motivation as well as overall institutional success (Beer et al., 2010). Defined by Coates (2007, p. 122) as “active and collaborative learning; participation in challenging academic activities; formative communication with academic staff; involvement in enriching educational experiences; and feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities”, engagement is positively linked with student learning (Zyngier, 2008), as well as a host of desired outcomes, including high grades, student satisfaction, and perseverance (Beer et al., 2010).

According to Mayer et al. (2009) students learn better when they engage in appropriate cognitive processes, so their engagement is in fact an important explanatory variable of their success. Ahlfeldt, Mehta and Sellnow (2005) highlight the importance of developing engagement not only for student motivation but also to increase the richness of the student’s learning environment that leads to better student performance. Downes (2011) explains that students should have the opportunity to practice leadership, gain knowledge, and be autonomous. Students should be provided with ways to get social attention and with opportunities to play and compete with each other. However, he claims, this is not enough; students should have the opportunity to make connections to deep philosophical issues, to obey moral codes, improve society and have connections to past and upcoming generations (Downes, 2011) . Owen & Hill (2011, p. 3) claim that students are in fact seeking educational experiences that are socially engaged and prepare them for the challenges that they will encounter. However, they have also perceived a whole host of other outcomes many of which might not be assessed as part of the course. These outcomes could include learning:

- how to extract meaning from experience;
- ways to apply academic knowledge to real world problems;
- about a specific community, population, geography;
- about expectations, quality, negotiation, client relationships;
- about self, society and context;
- about collaborative working.

(Owen & Hill, 2011, p. 5).

Salaber (2014) acknowledges that students can be engaged at different levels, for example, with the teacher, faculty or university, with other students, and with their own learning (active learning) and student engagement with others (collaboration). Similarly Ruhanen et al (2013) show how immersion as an intern in a destination can aid engagement and real life experience.

In summary, engagement is the amalgamation of a number of distinct elements including active learning, collaborative learning, participation, communication among teachers and students and students feeling legitimated and supported. One of the most beneficial methods of active learning is collaborative learning, which occurs when students work together in small groups toward a common goal, creating meaning, exploring a topic or improving skills (Prince, 2004).

The *Students in Action Initiative* project explores many aspects of student engagement as discussed above, and applies these through collaboration with the stakeholders within a tourism destination. This engagement includes *both* the business and wider communities in a destination-based, active learning environment. The project exhibits collaboration on a number of levels; between lecturers (planning stage), between lecturers and the destination

(planning stage), between students and the destination (process stage), between students themselves (process stage) and finally between all stakeholders involved (feedback and evaluation stages).

3. Case Study "Students in Action"

3.1 Objectives of the project

In the context of the broad issues discussed above, this project was formulated as a means of tackling issues related to students and the sometimes perceived disconnect between them, academia, industry and community. The idea of the project therefore was to provide students with real life experiences as part of their studies, whereby they would be given the opportunity to contribute to a particular destination and community by developing ideas and engaging in assignment based applied and academic research. In so doing it was hoped that they would be more engaged in modules, direct their own learning and create a lasting impression in terms of the experience. The project also aimed to develop both discipline specific and transferable skills.

While heretofore, many individual lecturers, through their modules, had been engaging in field trips on an annual basis, the uniqueness of this project was focusing the attention of an entire department on a single destination each year. To date, this has generated positive impacts in terms of lecturer and student collaboration and it has also provided substantial benefit for the target community and destination. From the destination and its stakeholders' point of view the *'Students in Action'* project has provided them with an invaluable 'Generation Y' perspective of their area and product, offering ideas and comments on a variety of different aspects of tourism in the area.

From an eductator's perspectove, being involved in a particular destination has given staff and researchers a greater insight into current issues. It has provided access to and contact with key decision makers in the destination, and this in turn leads into research activity. Another advantage has been colleagues undertaking team teaching and project planning as they developed itineraries and resources to suit a wide variety of students and modules. Furthermore, this project has given very tangible opportunities for students and staff to contribute to development and planning in the destinations and thereby, has facilitated new learning methods and levels of engagement for students.

The key objectives of the project are:

- Using a number of modules, to offer support to a tourism destination, its stakeholders and related organisations over the course of an academic year in the form of focused project work and research.
- To provide students with 'real life' experience to enhance their educational experience and skills development.
- To provide a more integrated approach to module assessment across programmes
- To provide an opportunity for lecturing staff to enhance their knowledge and aid the development of new teaching materials and techniques.

3.2 Site Selection

At the time of writing, this project has been delivered twice; the first pilot version took place from September 2012-June 2013, and the second iteration from September 2013-June 2014. A further roll-out, building on this experience has been planned for the 2014-2015 academic year. In year one, personal connection between a lecturer and a key stakeholder provided the impetus for considering the commencement of a project in the pilot destination – Slane in County Meath. This is a small manorial village on the banks of the river Boyne, located 48km

northwest of Dublin City in County Meath. The town has an active community tourism forum and is often associated with the internationally renowned Slane Castle festival venue. The following year, building on the learning experiences from year one, Drogheda, in County Louth, 50km north of Dublin was chosen as the target destination. Drogheda, which has a population of 38,000 people, is located at the mouth of the River Boyne, was a significant port, and is the administrative centre for County Louth. A number of colleagues had personal contacts in Drogheda which facilitated its selection as destination of choice.

Both destinations are located to the north of Dublin City (see Figure 1), and are situated at different points on the River Boyne in a very touristic area of Ireland. The sites were chosen due to their proximity to Dublin and the Dublin Institute of Technology and in both instances a wide range of issues relating to tourism and hospitality are evident on the ground, thus providing a rich foundation for student assignments and experiences.

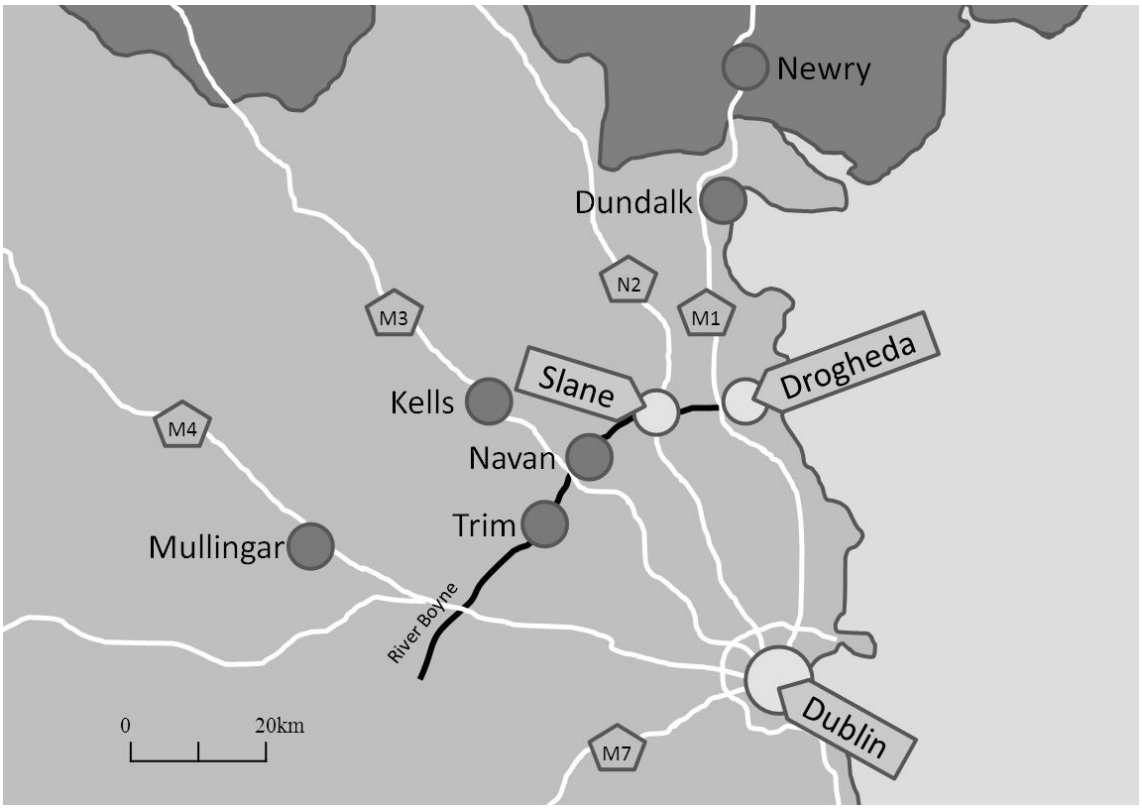

Figure 1. Location of Slane and Drogheda vis-a-vis Dublin

Reflecting on the site selection and with a view to identifying any future destination suitable to create the learning environment for the students, a number of considerations must be taken into account. These range from the logistics of transporting a large number of students and the related importance of proximity to DIT; the explicit and implicit touristic fabric of the destination and crucially; a willingness from the industry and community on the ground to work with both students and lecturers. These are all considered key to the successful implementation of the project. A further consideration, to simplify co-ordination between the student/staff and industry/community stakeholders is the clear identification of a project co-ordinator (a position which should revolve annually) to act as a point of contact for everyone engaged in the project each year.

3.3 Managing the Project

The following section outlines the basic steps undertaken in managing this project, and draws on the experience of both project iterations. An initial set of meetings were undertaken including face to face, telephone, email and skype communications with a variety of stakeholders in the chosen destination. This was an important element from the outset as it established key points of contact with the main players in order to facilitate a line of clear communication.

At school level the staff involved in planning the project sought expressions of interest from their fellow lecturers in line with the needs of the destination as expressed by the business and community contacts. Module content, expected student learning outcomes and relevancy were explored in light of the destination needs with a view to complementing all stakeholder requirements. This process was negotiated in a variety of ways, firstly, with the core team

outlining the project at a school meeting and subsequently engaging with colleagues on a case by case basis when seen relevant for the project. An example of some of the modules that were connected to the project are presented in Figure 2.

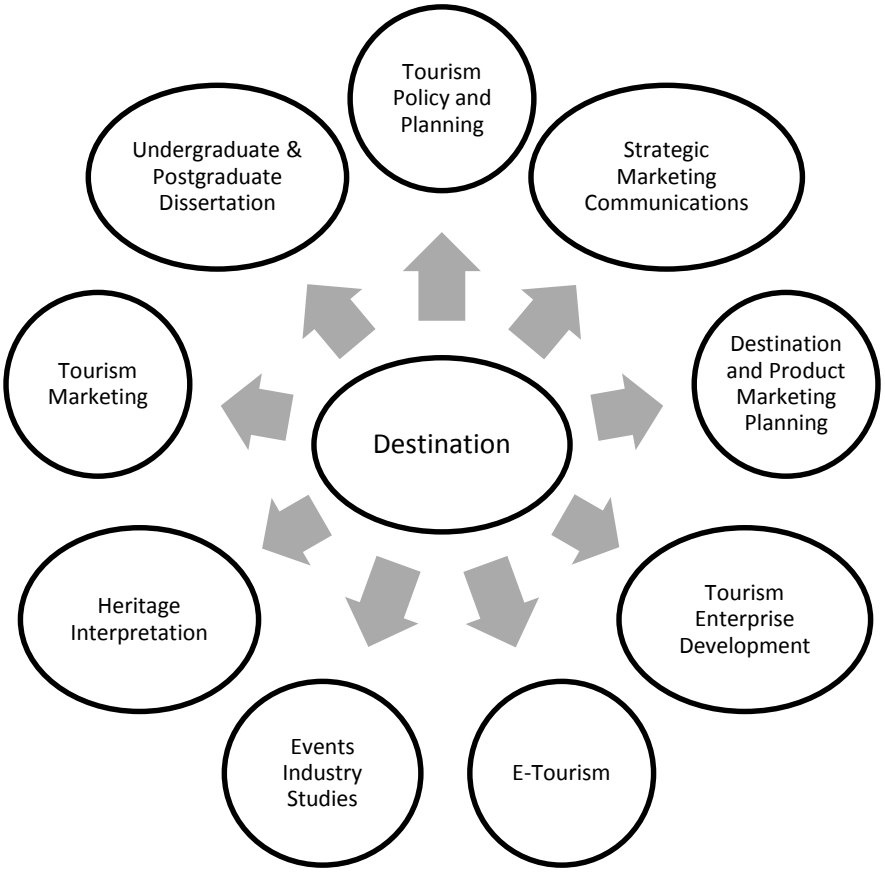

Figure 2. Sample of Modules of relevance to the destinations under investigation

Once a decision was made (by the core team and the destination stakeholders) regarding the inclusion of the most appropriate modules in the project, project refinement was undertaken with a view to developing a final proposal to be agreed by all involved, and ready to be actioned at the commencement of Semester One. At the outset, it was decided that one module each year would specifically address the needs of the community, and thus would explicitly be linked to the Institute's 'Students Learning with Communities' civic engagement initiative. While all other modules may implicitly involve civic and community engagement, their main focus would be to consider the overall tourism needs of the destination. A site visit

was organised in each Semester with a focus, programme and content pertinent to the different programme groups, the academic timetable and module needs.

As Semester One commenced, students taking the modules associated with the programme were briefed on the assignment. The students came from a number of different programmes and so each module had a different cohort of students. Explanation regarding the programme of work, useful theoretical and industry material links relevant to both the module content and the destination were made available through various channels of communication both web and non-web. The students were instructed on the importance of gaining experience by applying their knowledge to a 'real-life 'situation where they would make a difference. Clear emphasis was placed on the importance of their individual and group input into the process of executing their assignment(s).

The site visit was developed through a collaborative approach employed by the lecturing staff, industry and the local community. Content varied according to knowledge requirements; however the format generally involved the provision of short talks and presentations by a number of tourism and hospitality related stakeholders followed by visits to sites relevant to the overall project and also tailored to the individual modules. These included visits / meetings with accommodation providers, tourist office staff, craft centres, galleries, heritage sites, food providers to name but a few. To prepare for their visit, students undertook pre-visit activities in the classroom, such as discussion and question preparation relating to the site visit and their own particular assessment focus.

It is also considered important that during the site visit students were provided with free time during which they are encouraged to wander and explore the destination, to get a 'feel' for the

place and to engage with local people. Figures 3 & 4 illustrate some of the local engagement undertaken as part of the programme itinerary during site visits.

Figure 3. Fieldtrip to Slane, discussing challenges such as traffic management with local tourism representative

Figure 4. Fieldtrip to Drogheda, discussing heritage conservation and related issues with local tourism representative

On completion of the site visit, students guided by lectures, continued to reflect on and engage with the destination in a variety of ways (see Figure 5). For many this simply involved submitting their assignments on the due date, others began their dissertations using the destinations for data collection etc, others undertook additional fieldwork, and a number of modules required visits to the class by individual destination stakeholders. Submission of materials / outputs usually took place towards the end of the first semester. A brief feedback to the destination took place post-marking whereby key points and recommendations arising from the student findings and outcomes of their work were presented.

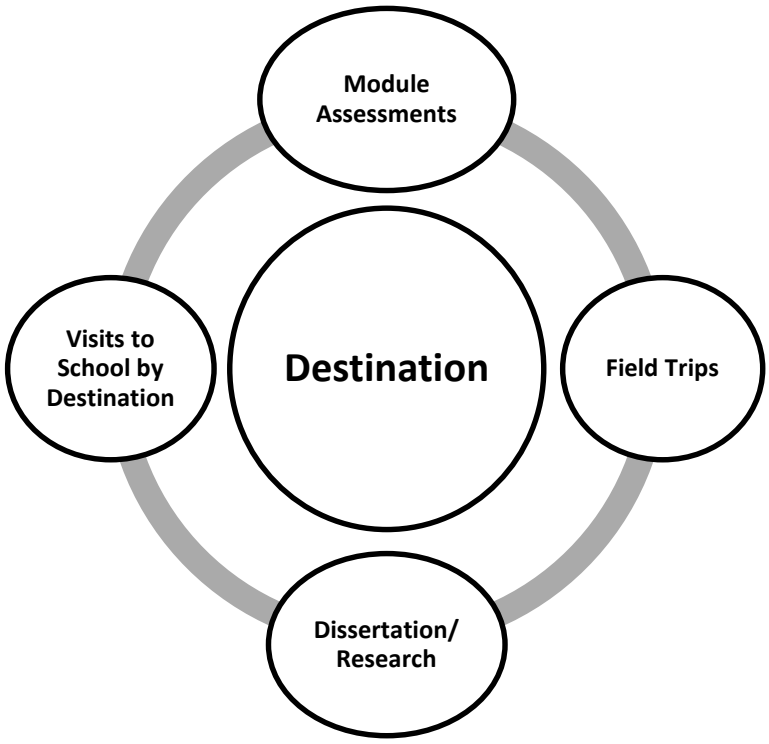

Figure 5. Examples of Engagement

The process was repeated in the second semester with further fieldtrips taking place, relating to another set of modules being organised. On completion of the marking of semester two assessments, an event was organised at the destination bringing together all those involved with a view to disseminating module outputs and provoking discussion.

3.4 Feedback and Evaluation

The key rationale for undertaking a closing event is three-fold. The primary reason is to present the students' findings to the destination using different types of media; poster presentations, executive reports, CDs and oral presentations (see Figure 6 for examples of posters). Ideally, the students should lead this process, though the scheduling of an event that does not clash with preparation for exams and year-end has proved to be challenging. While staff members presented the findings to the stakeholders in the first year, in year 2 of the project, a number of highly motivated students participated fully in the feedback event. The second reason for a feedback event is to gather the tourism, business and community stakeholders together at an event in order to highlight the project outcomes and bring the process to a conclusion. An interesting venue (a mill Year 1; an art gallery Year 2) and refreshments have proved to motivate interest and attendance. Finally the event highlights participation in the project by DIT staff and students and disseminates project findings to wider audiences through the use of promotion in local media.

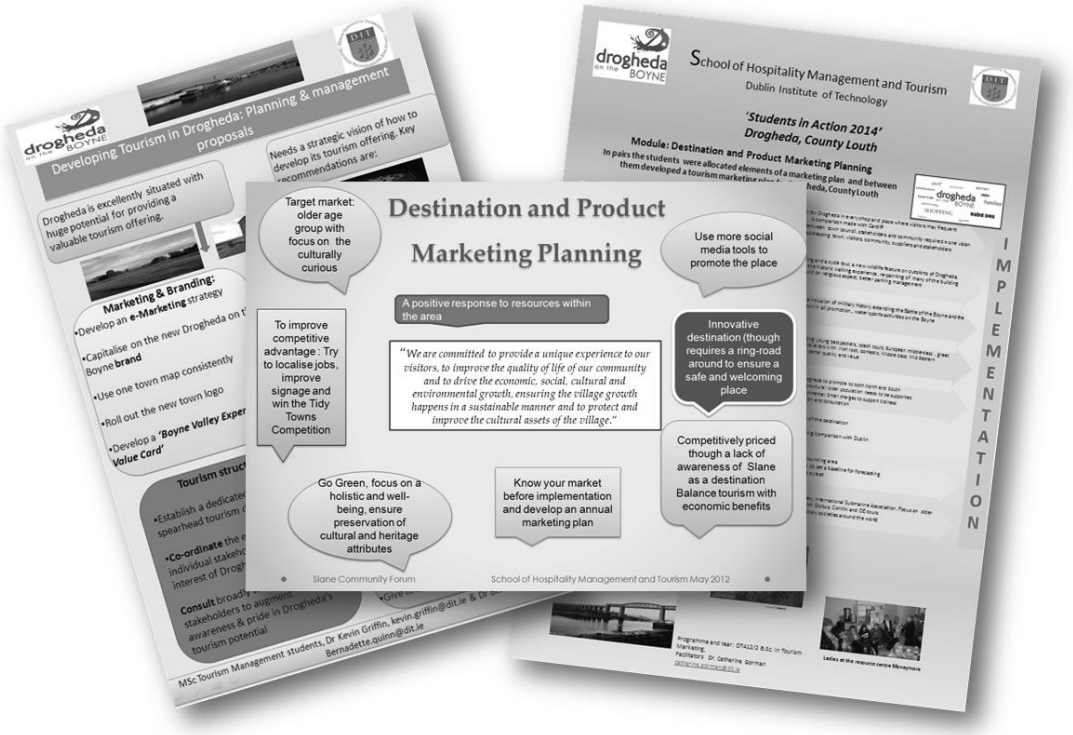

Figure 6 : Examples of student posters illustrating findings

An individual evaluation process takes place with the students on completion of each module through Institutional quality assurance measures. In all instances, more extensive feedback on this destination-centric approach to assessment has been sought from students in both verbal and written from at the end of the process. Evaluation, both face-to-face and written was also sought from the destination stakeholders with a view to building on the experience and addressing challenges encountered along the way. Thirdly, in both iterations the various staff members involved in the project undertook a post-project group debrief session to identify the key learnings from the project, what should be changed and what worked really well.

4. Findings and Outcomes

Whilst the literature acknowledges the benefits of student engagement projects, less is known about the challenges and impacts of such projects in terms of both operation and outcomes. Thus, this section explores the benefits and challenges experienced by staff, students and community who engaged with this DIT '*Students in Action'* project.

4.1 Benefits

Student engagement projects and research can help students to deepen their understanding of course content and enable them to integrate knowledge and theory with practice. Indeed, some DIT students reported that they remembered material better through the use of such an approach and that it aided their understanding of course content. Additionally, students expressed that they enjoyed applying what they learnt in class to a real issue/community problem. This is echoed in the literature where previous studies found that student-community engagement projects positively contributed to student learning, i.e. increased understanding of course concepts and theory (Kuh, 1993; McKenna and Rizzo, 1999; Ward and

Wolf-Wedal, 2000) and stimulated student interest in the subject content (Eyler and Giles, 1999). Other benefits for students include the development of transferable skills and the application of various types of skills, for example, critical thinking, reflective practice and problem solving. This is particularly pertinent for final year UG students and PG students, where the project or research may require higher level thinking. Alternatively, for first year UG students, community engagement projects and research can provide a good introduction to a topic or issue, motivate students and enhance their skills in working collaboratively. Finally, engagement projects provide enjoyable experiences for students beyond the classroom and an alternative assessment to a typical essay, report or group project.

Community benefits include collaborative learning with students, improved relationships with the college, the opportunity to educate future professionals about community needs, knowledge exchange and a useable end-product for the community, i.e. research reports, idea generation and problem solving. Community stakeholders have been found to value the enthusiasm, expertise and ideas of students and they explicitly identify the benefits they gain from the project outputs. Furthermore, community stakeholders can help throughout the project in a dynamic way, developing project and assessment ideas with academic staff to create a useable end-product for their community and gain increased access to college resources.

Finally, student-community engagement projects facilitate a process whereby lecturers and their Institution can more easily partner with community organisations and build lasting ties between the College and communities. For example, this approach can be a catalyst for long-term research and scholarly work by dissertation students and staff. Projects also have the potential to engage students of all learning styles and levels (undergraduate and graduate), and thus can positively impact the curriculum, providing opportunities for renewing teaching

and research and can increase access to community partners as co-teachers and guest lecturers. This can include subsequent access to the community for site visits and field-trips. Additionally, the benefits for the school and institution can include an enhanced profile and public image due to positive media attention during and on completion of the project. Conclusively, projects can lead to new ideas and methods for programme and module design and engagement between students and communities can lead to community development and ongoing research.

4.2 Challenges

Despite the benefits for students, communities and staff, there are limitations and challenges associated with engagement projects such as this. Firstly, the destination stakeholders can have high or unrealistic expectations of student output, particularly in terms of the breadth and depth of what can be achieved within the timescale of the project (typically single semester modules, with the project running over one or two semesters). Linked to this, stakeholders may see the college or school as the elevated location where high level knowledge lies and depending on the depth of knowledge required or requested, the reality of this will vary. For example, first year learning project outcomes will differ from that of graduate students. Therefore, it is imperative that these expectations are managed in the early stages of an engagement project. Agreement must be reached between the project team and the destination on issues such as realistic outputs and the fact that the quality of student work may vary between different year groups, modules and students.

A fundamental challenge for a project which requires this level of commitment is finding the ideal community partners and groups for collaboration. For example, for the '*Students in Action'* project, we needed to find suitable destinations and communities with a variety of different stakeholders who wanted to work with students and where there was scope for

collaboration and engagement, i.e. challenging questions, issues and problems for student projects.

The third main challenge is to match course content with the project. Students need to gain the skills and experiences necessary to fulfil their modular and programmatic learning outcomes while also addressing the issue that will satisfy the project objectives. Thus, course content may need to be expanded to support the students' projects. Related to this is the need for greater oversight by staff so that the quality of student work is sufficiently high and support is provided to students to think critically and solve problems. Finally, whilst student-engagement projects can develop student skills, some projects may require skills where students have limited proficiency or are not yet fully prepared to manage, and this can seriously impact on their ability to deliver outputs which will be useful for the destination.

Two final challenges involve funding and timetabling. Firstly, projects of this nature may require funding, for example to facilitate student fieldtrips to the community. Thus, applications for funding need to be made prior to, or in the early stages of the process. Timescales regarding the integration of fieldtrips, assessments and feedback sessions into the project need to be considered carefully, with considerable planning required from all staff members to facilitate full engagement in the project.

5. Learning and Future Directions

As stated at the outset, to date, the *Students in Action* project has been deployed in two different destinations, it is therefore still at an early stage in its development and the process has involved quite a steep learning curve for the lecturing team concerned. While key areas of learning are still emerging, three of the main factors of consideration are discussed below.

5.1 Achieving reciprocal learning

This project began with the aim of producing mutually beneficial exchanges between each of the three partners involved: the lecturing team, students and industry/community (See Figure 7). While this seems to be self-evident in theory, in practise, achieving reciprocity is quite difficult. The learning generated thus far has not been equal, in addition, not all of it was anticipated. The team soon came to realise that the potential for reciprocal learning lies not only between the three stakeholders – lecturers, students and communities, but that it also lies *within* all three groups. This stems from the fact that all three groups are heterogeneous in nature, something that had been insufficiently appreciated at the outset.

Reciprocity in engaged community learning is about differentiating between what is being done by students and lecturers 'in' or ' to' the community, with that which involves mutually beneficial collaboration and includes a degree of reflection by all participants (Saltmarsh et al. 2009). Taking the team of lecturers as an example, there was much to be learned from working collaboratively together. The team of lecturers involved had not worked as a team before and because of the project, communication has increased between the team. However, their involvement in the project stemmed from a variety of reasons including a belief in the pedagogic value of fieldwork, an interest in strengthening the ties between teaching and research, a belief that tourism education should be more closely aligned to the tourism industry, a desire to develop a more integrated approach to module assessment across educational programmes and within particular student cohorts as well as, an interest in community learning. While negotiating a pathway through these different motivations, different teaching styles and different team-working skills was a challenge, there was much to be learned from each other.

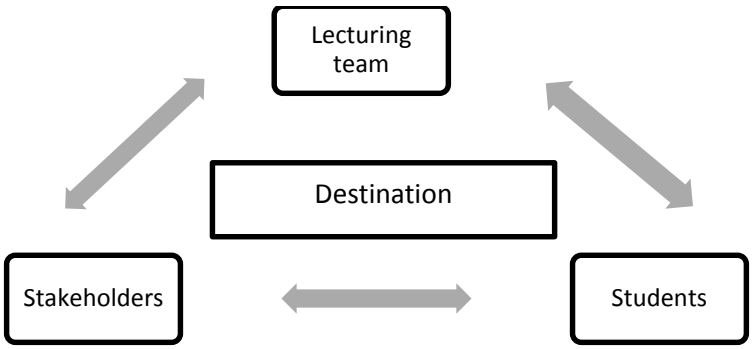

Figure 7. Reciprocal Learning

5.2 A framework for learning

In both years of the project to date, the team is satisfied that the students involved acquired substantial learning in line with the benefits of student engagement discussed earlier. However, the student cohort involved was quite heterogeneous and the learning acquired was uneven. Students came to the project through different modules (e.g. Tourism Enterprise Development, E-Tourism, Tourism Policy & Planning and Destination Marketing – See Figure 2). This worked very well in terms of delivering learning outcomes for the stakeholders at each destination. The students devised destination plans, generated ideas for new products, made suggestions to enhance marketing plans etc. all of which complemented the holistic output being produced for the destination. However, the extent to which this holistic aspect has helped the students to develop their understanding of particular aspects and complexity of tourism is an issue that needs further investigation. The students involved in the project also differed in their programme level, ranging as they did from first year undergraduates to postgraduates. Undoubtedly all students acquired some learning but it was difficult to devise a learning format such that all levels of students benefited appropriately. This is an issue that needs more careful consideration in future.

A key aim from the outset was to devise a project that would bring students into close contact with the actuality of the 'real world'. However, learning how to negotiate those realities takes

time. As already mentioned, one challenge was managing community expectations. In the first year, at the pilot stage of the project this task was particularly challenging because of a prior relationship that existed between some of the lecturing team and individual community members. This created a degree of familiarity which resulted in some degree of difficulty at the outset when drawing boundaries. In the second year, the lecturing team worked though the local Chamber of Commerce. While this represented tourism interests, (the specific focus of the project) it had a much broader remit and thus, functioned as something of a mediator, filtering overly narrow perspectives and brokering an arrangement that accommodated a multitude of interests though mainly from a business perspective. Working through a number of mediators one who was a graduate of the college and therefore familiar with the educational requirements while also being attuned to the politics of local places proved to be very useful. This approach is being built into future projects.

5.3 Expression of Need

The team approached the project with a range of assumptions that turned out to be somewhat misguided. They failed to appreciate, in the first instance, the lack of unity of purpose among stakeholders at the chosen destination. For example, a starting premise was that people on the ground would inform the team (through dialogue) as to the issues and concerns that they would like students to address. This did occur within the context of some modules, however, overall the assumption that destination stakeholders can agree on a range of concerns proved not necessarily to be the case.

6. Conclusion

Through the implementation of *Students in Action*, the project team learned that outcomes beyond those intended can arise from engaging with stakeholders outside the educational institution. The project provided useful networking opportunities for all parties concerned,

resulting in a range of tangible and intangible outcomes. This in turn created opportunities to learn how to work with stakeholders in tourism destinations on matters such as negotiating and agreeing targets and objectives. The project presented opportunities to raise the profile of our students, programmes, and institution in a very positive way and in both Slane and Drogheda, the project attracted media coverage. To date the project has been a steep learning curve for all involved. Planning, negotiation and reflection need to be key parts of the process, but all participants – staff, students and community stakeholders – agree unanimously that the rich project outputs justify the effort involved.

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