

The Development of Life Skills Programmes for New Entrants to Higher Education

Aidan Healy, Royal College of Surgeons, Ireland, aidanhealy@rcsi.ie
Sibeal Carolan, RCSI Institute of Leadership, Ireland, scarolan@rcsi.ie

In 2011, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) published 'The Hunt Report', which is the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 in Ireland (DES, 2011). The report states that a positive first-year experience is "*crucial to achieving the goals of higher education*" and that failure by institutions to address the challenges faced by new entrants to higher education results in "*personal and system-wide implications*" (DES, 2011, p. 56). According to a more recent report by the Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA), such implications can include high drop-out and failure rates, high levels of stress and anxiety, and/or lack of social integration on campus (HEA, 2014a).

In the 2014 Irish Survey of Student Engagement (HEA, 2014b), it was reported that a significant percentage of first-year undergraduates felt they were not receiving the appropriate levels of support from their institutions to help them achieve academically (n=31%), cope with balancing the other responsibilities (e.g. family, work) in their lives (n=70%), or interact with their fellow students (n=59%). The Hunt report recommends that undergraduate programmes in Ireland must place more emphasis on "*key generic skills that all students need to acquire*" (DES, 2011 p. 57), to assist them in coping with the challenges of studying in higher education and preparing for future employment. These include "*core skills such as quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, communication skills and team-working skills*" (p. 35). Indeed the Irish Government's Innovation Taskforce (2010) emphasised that these generic skills are "*much sought after by employers [...] for their contribution to a more flexible and multi-skilled person*" (p. 31).

In response to these challenges, the development of life skills programmes, defined by the World Health Organisation as "*abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life*" (WHO, 1999, p. 6) are now becoming a part of many college transition programmes in Ireland. Life skills programmes involve "*participatory teaching and learning methods, and experiential and activity-centred pedagogy*" (UNICEF, 2012, p. 25) and allow for small group experiences "*where a level of intimacy and trust can develop*" (Mannix-McNamara & Geary, 2011, p. 60). This model of interactive learning acknowledges students' individual experiences and the differences between them. Therefore, the facilitation (rather than didactic teaching) of such groups involves flexibility, engagement, and reflection on the facilitator's part.

A number of institutions have recently developed life skills programmes, with new initiatives introduced in recent years at University College Cork (O' Rourke et al., 2011), the University of Limerick (Mannix-McNamara & Geary, 2011), Mary Immaculate College (O' Sullivan, 2013) and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (Healy, 2015). Topics covered include Academic Success (e.g. time management, study skills), Personal Well-Being (e.g. stress management, promotion of positive health behaviours), and Interpersonal Communication (e.g. conflict resolution, fundamentals of communication skills). Evaluation and student feedback has indicated that well-designed life skills programmes have a positive influence on student social and academic integration, which in turn affects students' mental health and educational attainments. A Life Skills programme is therefore a catalyst, precipitating a change that will help students participate, and ideally thrive, in their new academic environments.

References

- Department of Education and Skills. (2011). *National strategy for higher education to 2030: Report of the strategy group*. Dublin, Ireland: Author.
- Healy, A. J. (2015). *An organisational development project proposal to implement a life skills programme in a health sciences college*. (Unpublished Masters Thesis). Dublin, Ireland: RCSI Institute of Leadership.
- Higher Education Authority. (2014a). *A study of progression in Irish higher education institutions 2010/2011 to 2011/12*. Dublin, Ireland: Author.
- Higher Education Authority. (2014b). *The Irish survey of student engagement: Results from 2014*. Dublin, Ireland: Author.
- Innovation Taskforce. (2010). *Innovation Ireland: Report of the innovation taskforce*. Dublin, Ireland: Government Publications Office.
- Mannix-McNamara, P., & Geary, T. (2011). *Social and personal learning (lifeskills) in higher education*. London, UK: Lambert Academic Publishing.
- O' Rourke, M., Hammond, S., O' Sullivan, D. Staunton, C., Murphy, M., Prendergast, P., & Moriarty, P. (2011). Unlocking Potential: A lifeskill baseline study. In *Engaging Minds: Proceedings of National Academy's Fifth Annual Conference* (pp. 73-74). Dublin, Ireland: NAIRTL.
- O' Sullivan, C. (2013). The contribution of a life skills programme to the personal and professional development of pre-service teachers. Paper presented at the *Confederation of Student Services in Ireland (CSSI) Annual Conference*. Dublin, Ireland: CSSI.
- UNICEF. (2012). *Global evaluation of life skills education programmes: Final report*. New York, NY: UNICEF.