



Surviving First Year: Peer-led University Transition Programme

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Introduction and Context

This case study analyses a student engagement initiative that took place in MTU Kerry with undergraduate Health Sport and Exercise Science (HSES) students. The initiative, titled “Surviving First Year – Bootcamp” explored the challenges associated with the transition from second level education to university. It consisted of a series of 6, 45-minute health and wellness workshops. These workshops were delivered by 4th year HSES students to 1st year HSES students. Workshop content was based on 4th year student experiences over the 3 years of their studies & input from the 1st year students as to what is currently challenging and relevant for them. The series of workshops concluded with a workshop by consultant psychologist and public figure Louize Carroll on “The Art of Coping”.

The workshops form part of the 1st year module, Health and Wellbeing, as well as, the 4th year module Adult Learning. This project simultaneously addresses the challenges of the significant transition from second level education to university and exposes students to a health and wellbeing intervention in action, bringing the health and wellbeing curriculum to life. The workshops provide 4th year students with an experiential learning opportunity linked to their module: Adult Learning, it allows them to put adult learning theory into practice and forms the basis of their continuous assessment strategy.

The project has broader impacts within the department in the areas of experiential learning, peer teaching and learning, mentorship and student retention. This project resulted in the development of 3 MTU endorsed digital badges; a participatory facilitation badge, a junior facilitation badge and a senior facilitation badge, all of which are accessible to HSES students. The badges are designed to align with the current curriculum so students have ample opportunities throughout their studies to earn these digital badges.

Research and Development

Reviewing research on second level students' transitions to university, Ryder et al. (2017 p.184) found that “peer tutors have a critical role in the support of a first-year student’s learning and the transition into higher education” stating how experienced students act as guides and role models. This informed the peer learning approach taken to the programme delivery. Further to this, Mehan and Howells (2018) identify the need for students to cultivate a sense of belonging in the first few months of university. It was anticipated that the delivery of the programme in the form of small workshops would create a sense of community within the classroom, thereby cultivating an informal but safe, engaging space for students to open up and discuss relevant issues and challenges. Nelson and Kift (2005) suggest that a transitional pedagogy needs to link to students' lived experience and be embedded into the curriculum. Both studies influenced the period at which the “Surviving First Year” programme was implemented and how it was implemented. This programme was embedded in both the 1st year and 4th year curriculums, equipping both groups of students with essential skill sets needed for university and beyond.

Actions Taken During the Project

In week 3 of the term 1st year students were asked to give some information regarding the challenges they have faced to date at university. Most students reported they were undecided or hadn't faced challenges so far. For those who did report challenges some common themes emerged regarding time management, academic studies and balancing studying and socialising.

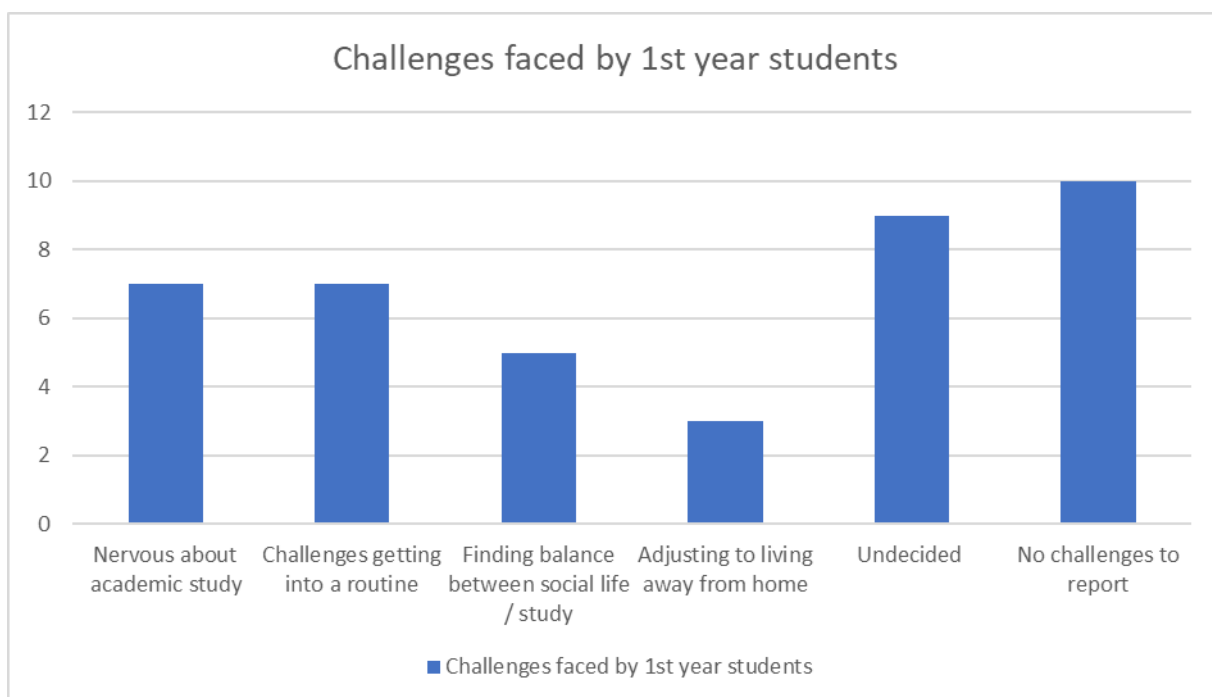


Figure 1.1 Challenges Faced

Further data was gathered via an anonymous online voting poll, it was felt the anonymity might allow students to engage with more sensitive topics, however, as shown in an excerpt of their answers in figure 1.2, students relayed apprehension around the development of academic skills.

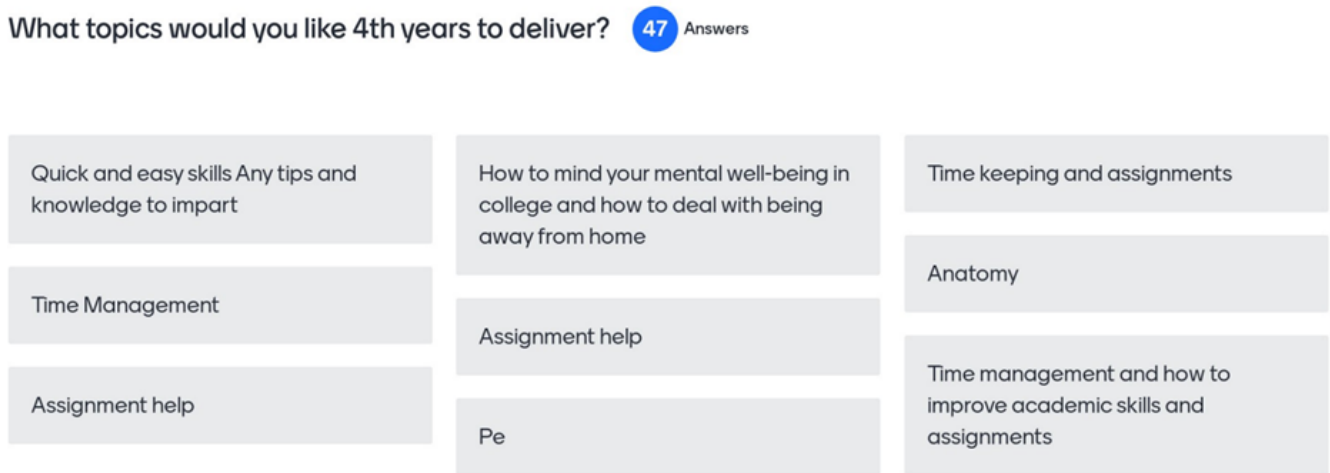


Figure 1.2 Workshop Topics

This data was used to inform 4th year students about the topics they would prepare for the workshops. Time management was included, sleep hygiene was explored to help students adjust to new routines, study schedules and CA tips. Other topics included healthy eating on a budget, personal safety on nights out, drug and alcohol awareness. The workshops were planned by 4th year students using a lesson plan template they had been provided with featuring an introductory activity, a main theme and an evaluative activity. Students worked in groups of 3 for the design and delivery of the programme. 1st year students were grouped into small groups of 16 so that the workshops became a safe space for dialogical sharing and learning. Accordingly, each cohort of 1st year students remained with the same 4th year students for the duration of the programme. It was hoped that 4th year students would develop a mentor-like relationship with 1st year students.

As this programme was built into the 4th year curriculum as an assessment method for the Adult Learning module, throughout the programme, 4th year students were observed by either a lecturer or their peers. Reflective feedback sessions were completed at the end of each workshop, they could then adjust their workshops for the following week based on the reflections, discussion and feedback provided. It also gave them a chance to debrief on any issues or challenges they may have encountered in a collaborative, supportive environment. This enabled them to identify potential solutions and come up with strategies to address them, building critical thinking and problem-solving skills. It also provided an opportunity to celebrate successes and recognize the progress they had made. This in turn helped them build self-efficacy, stay motivated, learn and grow as facilitators.

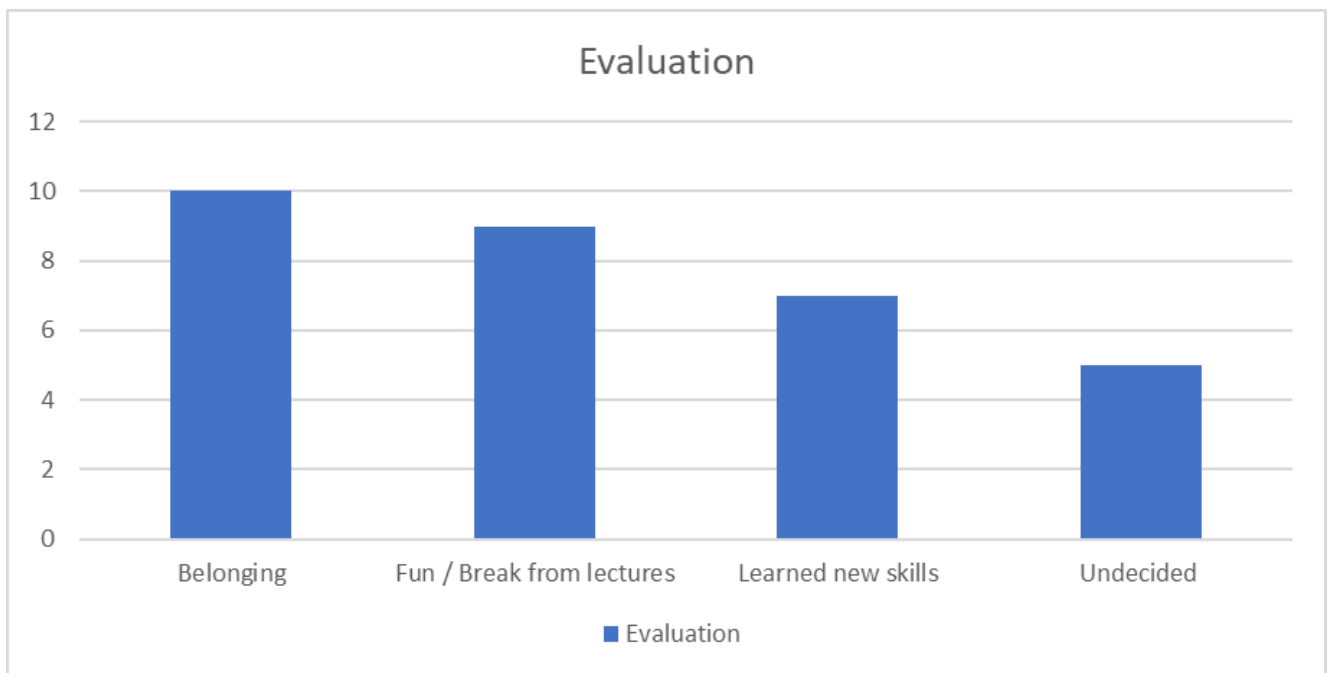


Figure 1.3 Evaluation

First year students embarked on the programme as participants. Following the implementation of the programme, 1st year students were asked to evaluate their experience of the programme, themes identified can be seen in Figure 1.3. It appeared that 1st year students were happy to have a relaxed, informal, non-assessed learning experience built into their timetable. Reporting that the sessions were fun and felt like a break from lectures. While many viewed it as fun, others also explicitly stated they had gained some new skills from the programme. The most common theme was a sense of belonging. Some of the student comments included in this category were:

“It was good meeting people that have done the same course as me and I felt understood.”

1st Year Student A

“Everyone had to get involved and got to know each other.”

1st Year Student B

“Made it easier to connect with and talk to fellow students.”

1st Year Student C

Cornell University defines belonging as; “the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group” further stating how a genuine sense of belonging contributes to engagement and performance. Key words such as connect, understood and the indication of beginning to know each other informed the thematic grouping of the data.

Reflections on Engagement

Upon verbal discussion with both 1st and 4th year students and the lecturers involved in the programme, the following reflections were generated; The peer learning approach was positively regarded by both groups of students and added relevance to the programme, influencing social learning and confidence building. The workshop style worked well. Active learning strategies were responded to positively and valued highly by 1st year students.

While the topics were of relevance it was observed and reflected upon by 4th year students that 1st year students seemed to have a lot of knowledge already about the topics. In the future it may be worthwhile exploring the topics in relation to higher order thought processing through the introduction of problem-based learning, scaffolding knowledge acquisition with practical application. Case work and scenario-based problem solving may work well and bring the relevance of topics like drugs, alcohol and personal safety to a higher level of engagement and meaning.

While the concluding workshop delivered by a guest lecturer was well received, some verbal comments were made, suggesting a more practical final workshop might be useful. With this in mind, the possibility of a wellbeing day, with various practical workshops for students to engage with could be explored as a future consideration

The digital badges developed during this programme will be implemented in the beginning of the next academic year and it is anticipated that they will be a positive addition to the programme.

The strong trend of first year student apprehension around academic skill development is something that is worthy of further investigation. Incorporating appropriate supports into the first-year curriculum without adding further pressure is a possible future action to be explored.

Supporting Evidence and References

Cornell University: Accessed 25/05/2023 <https://diversity.cornell.edu/belonging/sense-belonging>

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