Emergency Pivot to online Academic Learning Support: Crisis or Opportunity?

Deirdre Casey

Cork Institute of Technology, MarieD.Casey@cit.ie

Abstract.

The abrupt closure of Irish Higher Education institutes due to the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a fundamental rethink of how Academic support operates. In Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) a rapid emergency pivot was made to online provision. This pivot will allow CIT Academic Learning Centre to continue providing students with academic support and reassurance. It will also make the service robust to any future closures. The challenge of COVID-19 has presented obstacles, but also opportunities for change.

Keywords: Academic Support, Learning Development, Remote working, Emergency online pivot.

The Academic Learning Centre (ALC) has been supporting student learning and success in Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) for the past 15 years. In March 2020 Irish schools and Higher Education institutes were abruptly closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This forced a rethink of how the ALC could operate remotely. A rapid emergency pivot was made to online provision for the remainder of semester 2. Lessons learned from this were consolidated and built upon throughout the annual summer programme in July. This experience of using online platforms will help the service to withstand any future restrictions or closures. The crisis has opened up previously unexplored opportunities for the programme to develop and improve.

The remainder of this rapid response paper is organised as follows. Firstly, we describe the context pre-COVID. We then discuss how the service pivoted online and the lessons learned from this experience. Finally, we draw our conclusions about the impact this experience will have on future provision of the service.

The ALC has operated since September 2005. Over the years the range of subjects supported has varied and grown, but the model of provision has remained constant. It initially offered drop-in support in four subjects: Mathematics, Physics, Programming and Electronics. The service

did not focus on struggling students but was aimed at supporting the success of all students. Most of the tutors were full-time lecturers in their subject areas. Hours were allocated from their teaching schedule to work within the ALC. In the early weeks of 2020, the ALC was running supports in Mathematics and Statistics, Mechanics and Thermofluids, Programming, Networking, Accounting, Economics, Physics and Chemistry. There were 40 hours per week of face to face support being provided across two campuses by 15 lecturers. Then, on 12th March 2020, Leo Varadkar announced that all schools and colleges in the Republic of Ireland would close. The whole model of learning support needed to change very quickly.

CIT had one reading week from 16th to 20th March and from the following Monday, 23rd March, fully online provision needed to be up and running. To reassure students that the service was still available, a 'remote ALC' timetable webpage was immediately set up. Details about provision were added as they developed. Initially it was unclear what type of support should be offered. The informal nature of the drop-in support was highly valued by lecturers, but it was difficult to see how this could be replicated online. Although now ubiquitous, Zoom and Microsoft teams were unfamiliar technologies to many at that time. Following discussions with lecturers a variety of supports were offered to students over the first few weeks. Some lecturers recommended good online resources through the ALC website. Others supported students via email. Some trialled live one-to-one or drop-in Zoom meetings. Over time, trends started to emerge around which types of support students preferred and sought out.

The students' preferences about types and times of supports were surprising. The initial feeling was that email support would be the most accessible and popular. It was assumed that students would be reluctant to join one-to-one Zoom calls with lecturers. The reverse turned out to be true. The live Zoom sessions appeared to be popular with students and uptake on email support was very poor. Evening hours were well attended showing there was demand among students for increased flexibility.

Lessons had been learned during that period of emergency provision which needed to be made explicit and shared between the lecturers involved in the service. There was a brief reflection period between the end of semester 2 and the beginning of the summer programme. This time was utilised to consider how the emergency provision had gone and how these experiences could inform the summer programme. A Zoom meeting of the lecturers was held. Breakout room discussions took place about ways to improve provision of online service. There were several points of consensus arising from these discussions. The lecturers felt the students liked the live

sessions and were reassured by talking to an 'actual person'. There was general agreement on the importance of achieving the 'human' element of the service. The lecturers really liked when students turned on their cameras so that they could see non-verbal cues. If lecturers turned on their own camera, they found students were more likely to reciprocate. Providing students with some record of live sessions was very popular. Some lecturers recommended recording the sessions as videos for the students or sending on snapshots of any notes made. Online drop-in sessions had proved difficult and most lecturers preferred to prearrange particular times for each student to join the Zoom link. Encouraging students to send their questions in advance of any online sessions emerged as proposed best practice. These discussions fed into the planning for the upcoming summer programme.

Online provision continued for the annual summer programme from 13th July to 6th August. There was some continuity of lecturing staff as well as some new faces. Learning from the inputs of staff and students on semester 2 provision, attempts were made to consolidate and improve the service. New systems were put in place for tracking attendance and frequently asked questions. Regular feedback was collected from lecturers about how they felt things were going. The booking system was also simplified so that it was more user friendly for students.

The challenge of COVID-19 has presented an opportunity for change. The ALC had operated in much the same way since its inception 15 years ago. The recent crisis precipitated a fundamental rethink of the service. The lessons learned might otherwise have taken another decade to learn. It is now difficult to envisage the ALC ever reverting to a purely face to face service. Recent disruptions in schools and colleges may have created gaps in student knowledge. Academic support may become even more important than ever for the coming years. Having a robust online service will allow us to continue to respond to students' needs for academic support regardless of future restrictions.