Interim Draft Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy.

January 2016

The strategy for Learning, Teaching and Assessment at St Angela's College Sligo is designed to achieve, on behalf of all students and staff, the highest standard of educational resources for access to knowledge, development of critical thinking, and methods that assure a fair evaluation of success.

I. General Philosophy

St Angela's College Sligo's strategy for learning and teaching will provide an institutional culture which:

- Recognises an academic practice that includes a balance of commitments: to teaching and research; to support for the academic community; to society at large. This institutional culture supports these different dimensions and asserts that their interaction within the College ensures that academic staff and their students succeed in meeting the challenges of an age of rapid change, of technological advancement, and of economic and cultural transformation.

- Works to achieve greater levels of student engagement in the intellectual, cultural and social spheres. To this end, the College favors flexibility of course delivery, modularisation, and the deployment of new technologies to promote rather than erode the intellectual challenge and excitement of a higher education. The College will ensure that these approaches increase and broaden access to higher education.

- Establishes links between academic programmes and research activities, and raises levels of civic awareness and participation within and beyond the campus, in the knowledge that the College can contribute to the personal as well as the intellectual transformation of the individual student.

- Empowers staff and students in the creation and sharing of knowledge, by supporting a strong technological infrastructure, innovative pedagogical approaches, and institutional structures that recognise and reward achievement, foster collegiality, and provide equality of access and opportunity.

- Promotes high quality teaching (encompassing a wide range of practices and methods) and pedagogies which encourage active learning, in which the roles and responsibilities of staff and students are clear. In addition, the traditional contrasts between graduate research and undergraduate study are re-examined in order to achieve for all learners an active intellectual curiosity within shared learning communities.

- Establishes an inclusive campus and out-reach capacity that promotes diversity in the student population, provides opportunities for part-time and mature students as well as those from a full range of cultural, linguistic, educational, and socio-economic backgrounds.

II. Background

This strategy constitutes, for the College as a whole, an agreed framework for learning, teaching and assessment practice. It applies to undergraduate, postgraduate and other programmes which are officially recognised by the College.

Individual Departments will implement this strategy within their own disciplines and may add relevant additional actions.

The strategy consists of a number of key principles and a specified set of goals. It is subject to review and renewal, and the currency of this document is for the period 2016.

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1. Staff Training & Support for Curriculum Development

The College recognises that academic staff and Departments are placed under considerable demands given the rapid pace of change in the wider educational context: national strategies on all aspects of higher education including funding, the structure of the sector, programme delivery and evaluation; the changing student population (mature students, international students, part-time students and those with particular needs); the growth of multi- and inter-disciplinarily, the Bologna process, new technologies and research findings on higher education practice. In order, therefore, to ensure the pursuit of (and the continuation of) excellence in regards to teaching and learning, it is essential that provision is made for staff training and development. To this end, the *Centre for Excellence in Learning & Teaching* (CELT) NUI Galway, plays a vital role.

Actions

(A1.1) The *Professional Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching & Learning in Higher Education (CELT, NUI Galway)* will be made available to all academic staff free of charge and will be offered in as flexible a manner as is practicable.

(A1.2) The *Postgraduate Diploma* and *MA in Academic Practice, NUI Galway* will similarly be available to those academic staff who wish to pursue such topics and training to a higher level, providing opportunities for small scale, individual research on aspects of higher education policy and practice.

(A1.3) CELT will provide Seminar, Workshop and Conference series with contributions from visiting external facilitators/presenters that focus on aspects of curriculum development, teaching methods, student learning, assessment and higher education policy.

(A1.4) The College will provide appropriate resources to support and sustain staff development in this area and will seek additional resources where available, targeted to priority areas identified in this document and to the College's strategic plan and national strategy.

(A1.5) Human Resources and other appropriate offices will ensure that those in the role of Head of Department will be provided with appropriate professional development opportunities and support.

(A1.6) Programme Boards (where appropriate) will ensure that part-time teaching assistants and similar categories of staff will be provided with training in tutoring, demonstrating or other relevant skills and that, where such training is available, those staff are required to avail of it.

(A1.7) Moodle and other online technologies will be used to provide access to training materials and resources for curriculum development

2. Bologna, the National Qualifications Framework and the European Credit Transfer (and Accumulation) System (ECTS)

The overall aim of the Bologna process is to create greater transparency across different educational systems and structures and promote student mobility. It is designed to make international exchange, cooperation and mobility easier and more flexible.

In pursuit of the development of the *European Higher Education Area*, Ireland has endorsed the Bologna Declaration and subsequent communiqués around the issue of the development of a transparent, transferable and interchangeable system of credits for educational programmes.[1] In addition, Ireland now has in place a National Framework of Qualifications within which modules and programmes are placed in a 10 level scale.

Bologna Cycles & the National Framework for Qualifications

The Bologna framework groups qualifications into three "cycles". These are best described by considering the types of award available in Ireland as in the table below[2].

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was launched in 2003 (having been established in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act of 1999). It consists of 10 levels (see diagram) and is aligned with Bologna. Guidelines and policy recommendations for the College sector have been developed in a collaborative project between the IUA and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.[3]

Bologna Cycle	*Award·type*	*Irish level*
Short Cycle (within the first cycle)	Higher Certificate	6
First Cycle	Ordinary Bachelor Degree	7
	Honours Bachelor Degree	8
	Higher Diploma	8
Second Cycle	Masters Degree	9
	Postgraduate Diploma	9
Third Cycle	Doctorate	10

AWARDS IN THE FRAMEWORK

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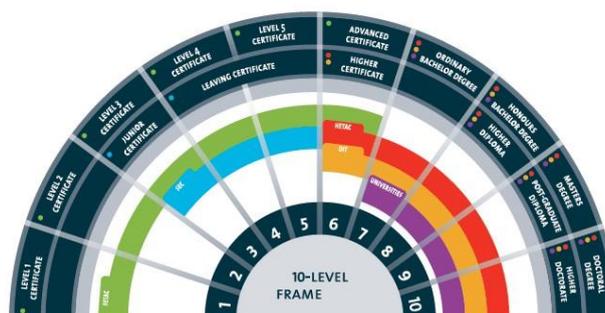
[1] Details in the forthcoming Bologna Handbook (2008), but the basic principles are now well established.

[2] "Verification of alignment of national framework with overarching framework", B. Maguire, L. Purser, National Stakeholder Workshop, Oct 2006 http://www.nqai.ie/docs/international/MAGURE-BRYAN.ppt

ECTS

All modules in St Angela's College Sligo are specified in terms of ECTS.

*"The European credit transfer and accumulation system is a student-centred system based on the **student workload required to achieve the objectives of a programme**, objectives preferably specified in terms of the **learning outcomes and competences** to be acquired."[4]*

The key features of ECTS are as follows[5].

- "ECTS is based on the principle that **60 credits measure the workload of a fulltime student during one academic year**.

- Credits in ECTS can only be obtained after successful completion of the work required and appropriate assessment of the learning outcomes achieved.

- Learning outcomes are sets of competences, expressing what the student will know, understand or be able to do after completion of a process of learning, long or short.

- Student workload in ECTS consists of the time required **to complete all planned learning activities such as attending lectures, seminars, independent and private study, preparation of projects, examinations, and so forth**.

- Credits are allocated to all educational components of a study programme (such as modules, courses, placements, dissertation work, etc.) and reflect the quantity of work each component requires to achieve its specific objectives or learning outcomes in relation to the total quantity of work necessary to complete a full year of study successfully. [6]"

Based on the length of the academic year in Irish universities, modules in St Angela's College Sligo are designed on the basis that *one credit corresponds to around 20-25 hours of student effort*.[7]

Diploma Supplement

The Diploma Supplement (DS) is a document attached to a degree certificate/award which aims to improve international 'transparency' and at facilitating the academic and professional recognition of qualifications (diplomas, degrees, certificates etc.). It is designed to provide a description of the nature, level, context, content and status of the studies that were successfully completed by the individual named on the original qualification to which this supplement is appended. It is intended as a flexible non-prescriptive tool which is designed to save time, money and workload and which is adaptable to local/national requirements. The DS contains details of the specific modules undertaken by students and therefore offers a richer description than the simple award certificate/ diploma.[8]

All students graduating from undergraduate programmes offered by St Angela's College, Sligo will be provided with a Diploma Supplement that provides a more detailed description of modules taken and other relevant information.

Revised College regulations, course structures, module descriptors and Marks & Standards are being developed as part of a simplification process. All programmes should be compliant with these new regulations and structures once they are formally approved and in place.

Actions

(A2.1) Each programme will be subject to the oversight of the appropriate Programme Board of the Department in which it is taught. All programmes and awards in the College are required to comply with the Bologna Framework, the NFQ and the College Marks & Standards.

(A2.2) All programmes and modules should be described in terms of Learning Outcomes, ECTS, and, where an award is issued (i.e. a degree, diploma, certificate, etc) it should be located on the NFQ.

(A2.3) All students and staff should be clear as to the workload associated with ECTS weightings and this should be communicated through all available appropriate channels. It is particularly important to clarify to students the expectations required of them in terms of individual effort beyond simple class contact time or assessment requirements.

(A2.4) It is the responsibility of the Programme Board to ensure that appropriate programme specifications and module descriptors are readily available.

(A2.5) The standard minimum size of modules on offer should be 5 ECTS, with integer multiples thereof permitted.

(A2.6) Departments will ensure that there is consistency and comparability in total workload across all modules that have the same ECTS weightings.

(A2.7) All students taking modules that have the same learning outcomes and assessment requirements should be treated as a single cohort in terms of the award of ECTS.

(A2.8) Departments will be responsible for localised policy decisions regarding practical aspects of module and course delivery regarding contact time, resource allocations, assessment regulations, standards and grading, etc. However, such decisions must be compatible with the strategy outlined in this document and College regulations.

(A2.9) The College has a formal policy and set of procedures regarding Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) which enable applicants for programmes to seek recognition of previous study or professional experience. Programmes may permit RPL credit to be considered provided that the procedures followed are compliant with this policy and Marks & Standards.

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[4] "European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (Key Features)", European Commission, 2004. Also available online at: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/publ/pdf/ects/en.pdf , where the credits/hours are derived on the basis of the' academic year'.

[5] ibid

[6] "The performance of the student is documented by a local/national grade. It is good practice to add an *ECTS grade*, in particular in the case of credit transfer *the ECTS grading scale ranks the students on a statistical basis*."

[7] Some Colleges may make a specific stipulation within this range.

[8] This is adapted from the official European Commission site for the Diploma Supplement.http://ec.europa.eu./education/policies/rec_qual/recognition/diploma_en.htm

3. Learning Outcomes

"Learning outcomes are sets of competences, expressing what the student will know, understand or be able to do after completion of a process of learning, long or short."[10]

"An *intended learning outcome* is a concise description of what a student will have learnt at the end of some learning process. One of the main advantages to stating the intended learning outcomes … from a course of study is the way in which this allows one explicitly to consider the ways in which the **goals for student learning are constructively aligned with both the methods used for teaching and supporting learning and the assessment** on the programme."[11]

"Learning outcomes focus on **what the student has achieved** rather than merely focusing on the content of what has been taught.

Learning outcomes focus on **what the student can demonstrate** at the end of a learning activity."[12]

Learning outcomes are now the *de facto* standard (and Bologna-compliant) means of describing courses and modules at many levels of education; a reflection of the shift from a content centered approach to one which overtly recognises that the **student is responsible for his/her own learning and has to be able to demonstrate attainment of key competencies and knowledge before being judged to have successfully completed a programme of learning**.

There has, however, been some considerable debate[13] about learning outcomes and, in particular, their traditional association with behaviorists learning models and training programmes. This concern is recognised and it is important that their educational value and underlying principles of clarity, transparency and comparability are not lost in overly detailed and mechanistic implementations, or indeed in the use of vague and over-general descriptions.

Learning outcomes, used appropriately, provide a powerful approach to course design, helping to identify the most effective teaching and assessment methods. Learning outcomes, teaching & learning approaches and assessment methods should be "constructively aligned"[14] in order to achieve maximum benefit. Increasingly, the match between specified outcomes and assessment is subject to scrutiny through quality review and professional accreditation bodies and is also an aspect of the Bologna framework.

Programme Outcomes are more general statements used to refer to the overall attributes, skills and knowledge of graduates of a given programme. In essence they provide a means of demonstrating the integration of the various modules, components, ethos and personal development that will arise from successful participation in the programme. Many professional accreditation schemes require clearly defined Programme Outcomes, often pre-specified by that body. It is also often useful to consider intermediate outcomes describing the capabilities of successful students at key stages in a degree programme, such as, for example, at the end of first year (see Section 6), providing clear indicators as to what skills and knowledge such students should now be capable of demonstrating.[15]

Actions

(A3.1) All programmes offered by St Angela's College Sligo require to have an associated set of Programme Learning Outcomes.

(A3.2) All modules are required to have a specified set of Learning Outcomes, which fulfil the purposes outlined above (i.e. that they provide a means of describing what the student will have learnt by the successful completion of the module).

(A3.3) Staff will be provided with guidance and advice on writing effective Learning Outcomes and Programme Outcomes via CELT and other sources.

(A3.4) Programme Boards will consider the extent and effectiveness to which learning outcomes are being employed in curricular development and course provision and also ensure that over-assessment of students is avoided.

(A3.5) Departments and Course Coordinators will examine the extent to which the Learning Outcomes are being achieved when reviewing courses, assessment and student performance

(A3.6) Learning Outcomes at both the programme and module level should be used as the basis on which decisions are made regarding: (a) approaches to teaching & learning, and (b) the selection of assessment methods.

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[10] "European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (Key Features)", European Commission, 2004. Also available online at: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/publ/pdf/ects/en.pdf

[11] College of Manchester, "Guide to Writing Aims and Intended Learning Outcomes", 2004. Available online at http://www.campus.manchester.ac.uk/medialibrary/tlao/MAP/writing-aims-and-intended-learning-outcomes.pdf

[12] "Writing and Using Learning Outcomes: A Practical Guide", D. Kennedy, UCC & NAIRTL, 2007

[13] "Update on the Issues and Applications of Learning Outcomes Associated with the Bologna Process." S. Adams, Bologna Seminar, Edinburgh, 2008. Available online athttp://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/BolognaSeminars/documents/Edinburgh/Edinburgh_Feb08_Adams.pdf

[14] Biggs, John (1999) 'What the Student Does: teaching for enhanced learning', Higher Education Research & Development, 18:1, 57 - 75

[15] For example, amongst the key skills students should develop is the ability to write in the language and according to the norms of the particular discipline which they are stud

4. Approaches to Teaching & Learning

"…*teaching for understanding*…..helping students become aware of their current conceptions…; highlighting inconsistencies in learners' conceptions and their consequences in real situations; focusing on central issues that are most problematic for students; finding ways of integrating 'knowing how' with 'knowing what'…"[16]

"It is how lecturing is used – the underlying approach adopted – that determines its effectiveness. Lectures can be a particularly useful way to introduce a new topic and provide an overview of the relation between topics. Moreover, a College teacher should be capable of using lectures to inspire his or her students through linking personal insights from research and the excitement of scholarship to the process of learning."[17]

"What is the difference between a curriculum that teaches what is known and one that teaches how to come to know? Knowledge, even academic knowledge, is not adequately represented as propositional statements but has a historicity that incorporates individuals' previous experiences, their perceptions of the immediate situation, their intentions, and their experiences of discovery, of recognized tensions, of uncertainties, of ambiguities still unresolved. It comes closer to scholarship as learning…..College teachers have to renew and develop their model of the learning process well beyond the traditional transmission model."[18]

One of the major advantages of having clearly-articulated Learning Outcomes is that they provide an opportunity to re-examine the selection of teaching methods used in any given module or programme. There has been, in recent times, considerable growth in the diversity of teaching and learning methods to which students are exposed. However, traditional expository lectures still dominate much of higher education. Whilst such can, in some cases, be effective learning experiences[19] and a cost-effective means of addressing large enrolment classes, over-reliance on traditional 'delivery of content' can militate against student engagement and motivation. Further, the impact of a large lecture load within a tight timescale is often also problematic for lecturing staff.

There is merit in ensuring that students are exposed to a range of teaching and learning methods across their programme of study. A defining characteristic of a 'higher education' should be one in which learner autonomy and responsibility are encouraged and rewarded.[20] Many examples exist of teaching and learning methods that are particularly well suited for third and fourth level programmes. Such, for example, may include: Problem (or enquiry) Based Learning, Project Work (both group and individual); 'Conference courses', e-Learning; Laboratory and Field Work; Clinical and Practical Skills workshops; work placement and internships; participative large class meetings (i.e. lectures with opportunities for discussion and activity); learning communities and study teams; service learning and civic engagement. Staff training and development, as well as collegial sharing of experience are vital catalysts for curricular design and reform, providing opportunities to explore alternative approaches to teaching and raise the quality of traditional approaches.

The increasing range of technologies available to support learning will not, by itself, necessarily tackle the problem if they are merely used as an additional means of content delivery, but will be effective if systematically integrated within a blended learning experience or used, perhaps, to free up time within lectures and classes to allow for a more communicative and participative approach; to provide opportunities for extended online communication and collaboration; or to facilitate creativity and foster critical research and exploration.

Actions

(A4.1) Departments, Course Coordinators and module leaders[21] will select appropriate methods of teaching and promoting student learning based on the specified Learning Outcomes and link these also with approaches to assessment. While pragmatic considerations and resource constraints will influence the final choice of methods, it will be stated at programme or module level what the methods are that should best be used in addressing the intended learning outcomes and in promoting greater student engagement and responsibility for learning.

(A4.2) The Programme Board of each Department will undertake general surveys/audits of the range of teaching methods in use across the Department's programmes with a view to identifying potential areas for development and, where necessary, training and resource requirements. Heads of Department will ensure that such information is appropriately collated and discussed within each Department.

(A4.3) Programmes Boards will consider the effectiveness of the range of teaching and learning methods deployed in programmes.

(A4.4) Curriculum design and review should consider the totality of the student learning experience on the module or programme under consideration and identify how the different blend of teaching methods and technologies serves the overall aims and intended outcomes.

(A4.5) All subject disciplines can benefit from the use of a range of new technologies to support student learning. Furthermore, many technologies have the potential of 'freeing up' class contact time for more interactive and participative encounters. Training and advice on the range of available technologies will be provided by CELT, NUI Galway and consultations with individual Departments will be possible.

(A4.6) The Moodle e-Learning system will be provided and supported by the College ICT Department. This system will be available for all modules and courses and to all registered students.

(A4.7) New and emerging technologies will be explored by the ICT Department, St Angel's College and suggestions from academic staff, Departments will be welcomed and can be discussed at the Teaching & Learning Committee.

(A4.8) Increasing numbers of programmes are now available from the College in 'blended learning' online/distance learning modes. Course Coordinators and teams should take care to ensure that the mix of teaching and assessment methods on such programmes are well suited to these modes, teaching staff are appropriately trained and that students are sufficiently supported to succeed in such a context.

(A4.9) The College will continuously improve the physical teaching and learning environment in terms of upgrading of campus accommodation, including new building and refurbishment of existing venues. It will ensure that the design of new buildings takes cognisance of good practice in the design (and equipping) of teaching and learning spaces.

(A4.10) The wider 'learning infrastructure' which includes library facilities, teaching venues, and computing & network access will be resourced appropriately in order to ensure that St Angela's College Sligo provides a level of support that is at least commensurate with the standards of other Irish universities but which aspires beyond this.

[16] "Learning to Teach in Higher Education", P. Ramsden, 2nd Edn, Routledge Falmer, London, 2003, p 146.

[17] *ibid*, p 148.

[18] "Rethinking Teaching for the Knowledge Society", D. Laurillard, *Educause Review*, Jan/Feb, 2002, pp 16-25

[19] "The Lecturer's Toolkit", P. Race, 2002, Kogan Page, London, pp 104-139.

[20] Indeed, it has been argued that the ambiguous phrase "student-centred" would be more aptly phrased as "learning centred".

[21] ie the staff member responsible for the design and implementation of a given module

5. Assessment

"assessment has three purposes. Firstly, assessment is designed to support and thus enhance learning. Secondly, it provides certification for progress or transfer, and thirdly, it is a form of accountability (quality assurance) for stakeholders."[22]

"Over the last decade many of us have seen our assessment workload grow dramatically, as we work with increasing numbers of students who are ever more diverse. Consequently, the time we have available to devote to assessing each student has fallen. Even those methods and approaches which used to work satisfactorily with relatively small numbers of students are now labouring as we try to extend them to a mass higher education context. It is therefore **more important than ever to review the way we design and implement our assessment**."[23]

Assessment should be valid, reliable, fair, transparent and authentic. In the context of Learning Outcomes, assessment tasks (and marking criteria) should enable students to demonstrate their achievement of these outcomes and facilitate robust decisions. Within each programme, therefore, a range of assessment instruments should be used without over-reliance on a single approach (such as the traditional unseen written examination papers). Further, programmes need to avoid 'over-assessment' of students and maximize the opportunity for students to learn from previous assessments (as is agreed to be one of the educational purposes of assessment).[24]

Research shows that *formative* assessment is educationally powerful.[25] Departments and Programme Boards will work to ensure that each programme provides students with sufficient opportunity for such formative feedback. Each programme will measure the degree to which students do engage with such support when it is available. *Integrative assessment*[26] strategies can be developed which attempt to tackle this issue within the context of a range of academic disciplines and modular programmes.

Actions

(A5.1) Assessment tasks will be based upon the intended learning outcomes of modules and programmes, and will provide students with an opportunity to demonstrate their level of achievement of these outcomes[27].

(A5.2) Students will acquire (over the course of their particular programme of study) experience of a range of assessment methods, and not exclusively traditional unseen written examinations for all their modules on any particular programme.

(A5.3) The amount, type and timing of assessment will be designed to facilitate student learning and intellectual engagement. Over-assessment and similar coursework deadlines for multiple modules are counter-productive in this regard. Coordination of assessment tasks should be carried out at the programme (or year) level to facilitate this requirement.

(A5.4) Programme Boards will ensure that there is an appropriate (and coherent) mix of assessment tasks undertaken by students on each programme and that the overall amount of assessment is not excessive. Excluding the exceptions referred to in (A2.5), a formal written examination may only be used for modules of not less than 5 ECTS.

(A5.5) Programme Boards will monitor grading of assessments and the level of consistency or variation of performance across modules and may make recommendations to address any such issues as may arise.

(A5.6) Students will be provided (where possible and appropriate) with opportunities for formative assessment, and with a strategy for balancing formative and summative assessment may be built around a process of *integrative* assessment.

(A5.7) Marking and feedback to students will be timely and when used formatively should include pointers for future improvement.

(A5.8) Assignments submitted for credit should be designed to ensure that the principles of academic integrity (e.g. proper referencing of source materials, the avoidance of plagiarism) are maintained and that students are fully aware of appropriate practice in this regard.[28]

(A5.9) Opportunities for peer-assessment and self-assessment (to enable students to make judgements about their own level of progress) will be made available where possible and appropriate.

(A5.10) Programme Boards / Course Coordinators and module leaders should take care to ensure that any forms of online assessment are sufficiently secure, robust and reliable to maintain confidence in the grading of individual students and the integrity of the module/programme.

(A5.11) Students will be notified in good time of the nature, format and grading criteria of assessment tasks.

(A5.12) The workload associated with grading and assessing students will also be addressed by managing alternative, efficient approaches (in some cases, for example, through the use of technology, or increased use of self and peer assessment). Workload models for academic staff planning will take account of marking and grading of student assignments and examinations, and seek to ensure that there is a realistic and sustainable distribution of activity and responsibility.

(A5.13) Suspected breaches of the disciplinary code, examination security, plagiarism or other aspects related to academic honesty will be formally pursued following the relevant regulatory framework.

(A5.14) Programme Boards (through Course Coordinators) will periodically review the extent to which the assessment methods used are effective at demonstrating achievement of the learning outcomes and to ensure their level of validity and reliability.

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[22] "Developing a variety of assessment methods, including self and peer assessment – an overview" D. Lines, Assessment Workshop 4, Enhancement Themes., 2004.
http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/documents/assessment/Assessment_Workshop_4FINAL.pdf

[23] "The Lecturer's Toolkit" P. Race, 2nd Edn, Kogan Page, London, 2002.

[24] Adapted from College of Manchester, Assessment Principles
http://www.campus.manchester.ac.uk/tlso/map/teachinglearningassessment/assessment/sectiona-principles/

[25] Nicol D and Macfarlane-Dick D (2006) *"Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice", Studies in Higher Education*, 31.2, pp 199-218

[26]Enhancement Themes: Integrative Assessment
http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/IntegrativeAssessment/themes.asp
Approaches include using 'feedforward', cumulative and progressive assessments, for example.

[27] Practical approaches to achieving such 'constructive alignment' can include, for example, the use of a grid to [28] Good practice which Departments may consider applying to their programmes, includes signed statements of originality or similar formal agreement

6. Student Engagement & the First Year Experience

"Much of the research carried out on transition to the first year has been driven by issues of student retention and withdrawal. This, in turn, is linked to the impact on the teaching and learning experience of a mass Higher Education system and the growing diversity of the student population. … Approaches to supporting transition are linked to improving preparedness for Higher Education; easing integration into the College environment, both academically and socially; and encouraging the development of the autonomous learner. By shifting the focus of transition **from the issue of student retention and withdrawal** to one of **supporting the engagement and empowerment of all learners**, successful transition will be measured not simply in terms of whether students continue on their programmes but, in doing so, are provided with **the opportunity to achieve their full potential."**[29]

"A positive first-year student experience is crucial to achieving the goals of higher education…..

…While the first-year curriculum should continue to provide foundational subject material to be built on in later years, it must do more than that. It should serve as 'a foundation of learning activities entailing more inquiry-based formats and engendering employability and lifelong learning outcomes.' [B. Johnston (2010): The First Year at College: Teaching Students in Transition (Open College Press), p31.] "[30]

There is considerable current attention at a national level in reforming the first-year experience of undergraduate students in order to ensure a smoother transition to higher education and that such students are put on a sure footing with regards to their approaches to study and ability to monitor and improve their own individual performance as active learners.

A number of academic skills services (e.g. Academic Writing Centre), online resources, special initiatives and formal courses will make up a broad ecosystem of supports for students **throughout their programmes of study.** The primary goal of these is to encourage active learning, build student confidence and, in association with their core discipline based modules, encourage optimum levels of intellectual engagement so that each student has the potential to flourish academically.

Successful transition to College also encompasses the social dimension, and students are encouraged to participate in clubs and societies, take part in volunteering or other aspects of civic and social engagement.

Actions

(A6.1) Departments should prioritise actions that seek to improve the first-year experience for undergraduate students in terms of learning, adaptation to the College environment and academic supports.

(A6.2) Departments will develop realistic procedures for the monitoring of student attendance at classes which (i) facilitate the identification of students failing to engage with the programme and (ii) allow the estimation of overall student attendance as one measure of student participation.

(A6.3) Programmes will make explicit to students the expectations required of them in order to successfully engage with their programmes of study, including preparation for, attendance and participation in class.

(A6.4) Programme Boards, Course Coordinators and individual staff will endeavor to implement teaching and assessment methods that promote active learning, self-directed study and peer-assisted learning (as described in other sections of this strategy). The broader conception of a module as spanning all student effort including that beyond scheduled classes should be reiterated.

(A6.5) All Departments shall have in place policies and actions to maximize student retention on programmes and to facilitate the transition to higher education in the first year[31]. Coordination of such policies and the sharing of experience is important, and collaboration across Departments, the Office of the Registrar, the Teaching and Learning Committee and the Students' Union will be encouraged.

(A6.6) The College will ensure that Departments have the resources to provide adequate levels of student learning support, for traditional and non-traditional students alike (including those with particular needs), and facilitate the development of coherent, well-managed induction programmes.

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[29] "First Year Experience Quality Enhancement Theme – Practice-Focused Development Project", *Interim Report*, 2007, R. Whittaker, QAA Scotland

[30] "National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030", Report of the Strategy Group, Department of Education & Skills,
January 2011

7. Feedback, Evaluation & Review

"Evaluation is an analytical process that is intrinsic to good teaching."[32]

"Evaluation is better if it is a cooperative but rigorous activity that permits teachers to learn from each other in a spirit of peer review and continuous enquiry."[33]

"In contemporary higher education, the regular evaluation of courses and teaching is widely seen both as a necessary component of quality **assurance** and quality **enhancement** (QAA 2003), and as **an integral part of good professional practice** (Hounsell 2003). It provides an indispensable feedback loop (Hounsell et al 2006b), alerting course teams and individual lecturers and tutors to those aspects of teaching, learning and assessment which are functioning well, and those where expectations of students and of staff have not yet been adequately met. For teaching staff in particular, it can also provide a second pair of eyes and ears, throwing light on how **a course is perceived and experienced by the students** at whom it is aimed. This is especially necessary given research evidence on the disparities between staff and student perceptions of what is ostensibly a common experience (see, for example, Stefani et al 1997; MacLellan 2001;
Williams 2005; Carless 2006; Crook et al 2006)."[34]

"…it is recommended that **systematic evaluations of all courses be introduced immediately**. However, these evaluations must be kept confidential and not made public. The deans and department heads should assume the responsibility for the follow-up of course evaluations. **Students should be informed of actions taken** as a result of the evaluations..."[35]

Evaluation based on feedback and other evidence is an essential component of professional reflection practice and provides benefit to students, teaching staff, course teams and the institution. A variety of methods can be used to obtain feedback and assist evaluation of teaching student learning. Amongst these are:

- Student feedback questionnaires
- The Grouped Student Evaluation scheme
- Peer observation and review
- The compilation of individual Teaching Portfolios
- Analysis of student performance and levels of engagement
- Online tracking and activity monitoring
- Class Representatives, Staff-student liaison groups and Course Committees
- Focus groups

All of these are in use to varying extents within St Angela's College, Sligo. However, it is important to ensure that evaluation processes are coherent and that "the methods we use should be formally linked to the central idea of improving student learning."[36]

Actions

(A7.1) Departments will implement a framework for the systematic evaluation of all courses that they offer. This framework will utilise a range of methods and will facilitate the rapid identification of critical issues with regard to student progress and course delivery. This will include feedback questionnaires on modules and courses at an appropriate and practicable frequency.

(A7.2) Individual academic staff will avail routinely of opportunities to obtain feedback on their teaching and monitoring student progress, exploiting, for example, technologies such as Moodle.

(A7.3) Students are expected to cooperate fully in evaluations of courses and teaching by completing feedback forms, participating in Staff-Student Liaison meetings, nominating student representatives, etc.

(A7.4) Students should be informed of actions taken as a result of evaluation of courses and modules. Where possible, and appropriate, feedback and response will be undertaken quickly and in time to address any critical issues.

(A7.5) Evaluation of courses will include periodic reviews of approaches to assessment, range of teaching methods and the extent to which Learning Outcomes at the programme and module level are being achieved.

(A7.6) Grouped Student Evaluation, Peer Review (based on the Partnerships for Learning & Teaching protocol) and other related approaches should be used by academic staff to obtain a wider range of types of feedback than that afforded simply by standardised student questionnaires.

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[32] "Learning to Teach in Higher Education", P. Ramsden, 2nd Edn, Routledge Falmer, London, 2003, p 209

[33] *ibid,* p 226

[34] "Integrative Assessment Guide #1: Monitoring Students' Experiences of Assessment", QAA Scotland, 2007,
 http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/documents/IntegrativeAssessment/IAMonitoring.pdf

[35] "Quality Review of the National College of Ireland, Galway" European College Association, 2004.

8. Research-Teaching Linkages

"Research and teaching are essential and **intertwined characteristics of a University** which can be advanced from two perspectives:
- that of the students acquiring a 'higher education', and
- that of the work of academic staff employed in higher education…

International experience suggests that there are various ways in which the students' learning experience can be effectively enhanced – ranging from **vicarious exposure** to the current research of their teachers through to **the immediate impact of being researchers** (broadly defined) in their own right….

It is becoming clearer that those students who are not learning in an HE environment that is informed by research, and in which it is not possible to access research-related resources, are at a disadvantage compared to those that are."[37]

"We are convinced that 're-shaping' or 're-inventing' our disciplines and departments in a way that focuses more on the teaching-research nexus **can aid students' learning, their pride in their discipline and department, staff morale, and the overall effectiveness of the department and the institution**. ….we are convinced from the research evidence and our own experience that **these links have to be created**. The nexus does not necessarily occur naturally……In creating the link, or rather links, **departments and the disciplinary groups within them have key roles to play**."[38]

The contemporary definition of a College is an organisation which engages both in teaching *and* research. However, much research has demonstrated that in practice there is often a separation between these two roles both structurally at the level of institutional policy and in the nature of individual academic practice. Developing stronger linkages between teaching and research needs to be done proactively, but such endeavour offers an opportunity to re-examine issues of student engagement, academic creativity, the fostering of a spirit of enquiry and the sense of intellectual achievement.

Jenkins, Healy and Zetter (2007) make a number of recommendations for linking teaching and research, as well as providing numerous examples of such initiatives in other universities. Specific suggestions include: (1) Develop students' understanding of the role of research in their disciplines; (2) Develop students' abilities to carry out research;(3) Progressively develop students' understanding; (4) Manage students' experience of research.

The National Strategy for Higher Education, building on the work of NAIRTL (National Academy for the Integration of Research, Teaching & Learning), emphasises the importance of ensuring adequate student opportunities for engaging with research during their undergraduate years and clarifies the distinctions between teaching and learning which is:
(1) *Research-led*;
(2) *Research oriented*;
(3) *Research-based*; and
(4) *Research-informed*.[39]

Actions

(A8.1) All undergraduate and postgraduate programmes offered by the College will provide students with opportunities to be made aware of and explore current research issues in the discipline.

(A8.2) Departments, and course teams will adopt, and appropriately adapt, the recommendations of Jenkins, Healy & Zetter (listed above) to link teaching and research within their academic discipline area.

(A8.3) Research groups, centres and units NUI Galway will collaborate with appropriate academic units to identify ways in which their work can be better communicated within undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and to explore potential projects and initiatives that will provide students with opportunities to experience research activity and skills.

(A8.4) Academic staff should consider opportunities within their teaching and research to develop student learning experiences that fit a number of the 4 categories of research-teaching link and also be encouraged to consider opportunities in which they can undertake scholarship of teaching & learning within (or beyond) their disciplinary context.

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[37] UK Research Forum (2004) "The relationship between research and teaching in institutions of higher education." Available online at
http://www.dfes.gov.uk/hegateway/uploads/forum's_advice_to_ministers_on_teaching_and_research[1].pdf

[38] "Linking teaching and research in disciplines and departments", A. Jenkins, M. Healey, R. Zetter, Higher EducationAcademy (2007).
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/LinkingTeachingAndResearch_April07.pdf

[39] "National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030", Report of the Strategy Group, Department of Education & Skills, January 2011, pp 53-54

9. Civic Engagement

"Democracy has to be born anew in every generation and education is its midwife"[40]

"Service learning is… an academic strategy that seeks to engage students in activities that enhance academic learning, civic responsibility and the skills of citizenship, while also enhancing community capacity through service."[41]

A core aspect of St Angela's College Sligo's Strategic Plan and institutional ethos is that of 'civic engagement' by which is meant a range of activities, attitudes and aspirations designed to reinvigorate the relationship between academe and the wider social and civic context. In practical terms this has come to include student volunteering (largely through the popular ALIVE programme) and 'service learning.' Participation in either of these domains (ie within or beyond the curriculum) is highly beneficial to students in terms of their own personal and intellectual development. Service learning, however,is also a valuable means of teaching subject discipline specific content, skills and attitudes and its strength lies in its rootedness in the particularities of the subject domain as well as in the opportunity to develop partnerships with community and other appropriate organisations.

Actions

(A9.1) All Departments will examine the opportunity for greater civic engagement in the programmes that they offer, identifying specific courses and/or modules which may benefit from this approach. Guidance and support will be available from specialist staff in CKI and CELT, NUI Galway.

(A9.2) Course Coordinators and module leaders who wish to integrate aspects of service learning into their teaching will be provided with training, support materials and access to a practitioners' network via CKI and CELT, NUI Galway.

(A9.3) Students will be strongly encouraged to consider active participation in voluntary activity through the ALIVE programme (or other means) and to participate in clubs and societies and to see such experiences as being part of the wider learning experience.

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[40] J. Dewey (1907), in "Understanding John Dewey: Nature and Cooperative Intelligence," J. Campbell, 1995, Open Court
Publishing, Il.

[41] "Institutionalising Service-Learning in Higher Education: Issues and Strategies for Chief Academic Officers", A. Furco
& B. Holland, in *Public Work and the Academy*, M. Langseth & W. M. Plater (eds), 2004, Anker Publishing, Boston

10. Postgraduate Research Programmes

Whilst this strategy applies to both undergraduate and postgraduate courses, there are distinctive aspects of postgraduate research programmes that are more fully addressed in the College's "Guidelines for Research Degree Programmes" and other regulations and policies regarding supervisory arrangements, the structure and standards of dissertations and theses, ethical considerations in the design and implementation of research projects, etc.

The College Registrar also liaises with the Research Office, Colleges, CELT, graduate Departments, individual research groups and centres on aspects of training for both students and supervisors.

Actions

(A10.1) The College Registrar will collate information regarding the provision of training programmes and workshops for postgraduate research students and ensure that such information is widely circulated in order to encourage students (and supervisors) to avail of these opportunities.

(A10.2) Training, mentoring and support for research student supervisors will be available as a key aspect of the College Research Strategy to meet its aim to substantially increase the number of successful MPhil/PhD graduates in the coming years.

(A10.4) The current College Guidelines for Research Degree Programmes will be subject to ongoing review by the College Registrar and amendments made as required.

(A10.5) Research students will be encouraged to participate as fully as possible in evaluation, consultations and in committees on which they are represented.

10. Institutional Partnerships, Sectoral Initiatives and Internationalisation

The Irish higher education landscape is currently in a period of significant change, with policy being built largely on the basis of the recent National Strategy for Higher Education and other government priorities such as strategies for innovation and economic recovery. It is clear then that rapid change may require to be implemented at institutional and sectoral levels and this may impact aspects of learning, teaching and assessment covered by this document or in associated areas.

The Teaching & Learning Committee, which informs the Academic Council, is an appropriate forum for the discussion of many such issues at the level of implementation in programmes, since its role also incorporates monitoring the progress of the TLA strategy and liaising between Departments and Colleges.

Amongst recent and ongoing developments with implications for teaching learning and assessment are:

- The Academic Simplification Process and its revision of College Regulations and Marks & Standards

It will be appropriate to incorporate the relevant outcomes from these initiatives into future versions of this Strategy document, but in the interim period it may also be necessary to introduce new policies and practices which complement and build upon this document.

The underlying principles described in Section 1, will still represent the core values and ethos of the institution and new programmes, structures or policy arising from these recent initiatives should align with this core philosophy of learning in higher education.