ConnectED Evaluation Report

Summary

Full Title	ConnectED - Connecting Advisory Supports for Students in the School of Education
Date of Evaluation	June 2022
Evaluator	Dr Emma Farrell
Independent?	Yes
Type of report	Funding evaluation report
Project aim	The aims of this project are: 1. to ensure all students and staff associated with the UCD initial teacher education (ITE) programmes can fully engage with the many student advising services the School of Education offers including: tutor supports; cooperating teachers in placement schools; accessing bespoke student support services; pastoral care; support for engaging with relevant professional bodies (Teaching Council, PDST, Industry, etc.); and connecting with and harnessing the potential of our alumni. 2. that the advising services positively affect the student experience; 3. to develop School capacity to review and improve our student advice initiatives.
Objectives	To realise these aims, the primary objective of this project is to formalise, and bring coherence to, the student advising services provided in ITE.
Evaluation Methodology	1. Review of project digital hub and documentation 2. Key informant interviews with project staff and students
Evaluation Summary	1. The project fulfils its aim of ensuring that all students and staff associated with the UCD initial teacher education (ITE) programmes can fully engage with the many student advising services available within the School of Education 2. Project strengths include it's clear, accessible and informative digital hub; staff and student buy-in: and its potential to build connection and community amongst the school's ever-expanding network of students, alumni, partners and staff. 3. Digital hub updates and maintenance and mission creep were identified as potential threats to the ongoing realisation and success of the project.

Introduction and Background

The ConnectED - Connecting Advisory Supports for Students in the School of Education - project, developed with financial support from UCD's Academic Advising Working Group, was introduced in the School of Education during the 2021/2022 academic year. The project's objective is to ensure all students and staff associated with the UCD initial teacher education (ITE) programmes can fully engage with the many student advising services the School of Education offers.

Also known as the academic advising project, ConnectED was developed in response to the identified need for centralised and formalised provision of academic advice to UCD School of Education's undergraduate and taught graduate ITE students. In responding to this need, the ConnectED project seeks to ensure that all students are provided with high-quality academic support and advice through a proactive academic partnership between faculty and students.

This evaluation aims to assess and make recommendations on:
- Project results - the degree to which the project has realised its initial aims and
- The strengths, weakness, opportunities and/or threats that promote or constrain this realisation.

Evaluation methodology

1 Review of documents
The evaluation encompassed a thorough review of project documentation including: ConnectED digital hub (https://educonnect.ie): ConnectED project proposal and plan: Review of Academic Advising in Comparator Institutions; 'Academic Advising: A Literature Review' (Jennings, 2021) and; Academic Advising Mid-Term review (Farrell, R., 2022).

2 Staff interviews
Online interviews were conducted with two academic advising staff members between the 8th and 17th of June 2022. These interviews were transcribed and analysed and anonymised quotations from these interviews are drawn upon in the results section below.

3 Student focus group
One online focus group was carried out with (n=2) students on the Professional Masters in Education (PME) programme. These students were class representatives and at the graduating end of their PME degree. As such they were in a position to comment on academic advising before the ConnectED project was introduced and how the student experience has changed as a result of the project. This focus group was transcribed, analysed and anonymised quotations from the student focus group are presented in the results section below.

Limitations to evaluation methodology
Two limiting factors must be noted in the presentation of this evaluation. First, the main output of the ConnectED project, the digital, had not reached its full operational capacity at the time of evaluation and, second, the convenience sample of n=4 limits the representativeness of its findings. With these limitations in mind, it is recommended a larger, survey-style, evaluation be considered for the 2022-2023 academic year when the full scope and capacity of ConnectED can be assessed.

Results, analysis and discussion

Evaluation results are presented below in correspondence with the aims of the ConnectED project.

Aim 1: Academic Advising Engagement

Aim 1: to ensure all students and staff associated with the UCD initial teacher education (ITE) programmes can fully engage with the many student advising services the School of Education offers including: tutor supports; cooperating teachers in placement schools; accessing bespoke student support services; pastoral care; support for engaging with relevant professional bodies (Teaching Council, PDST, Industry, etc.); and connecting with and harnessing the potential of our alumni.

In line with the project's aim, interviews with students and staff indicate that the ConnectED digital hub has contributed to improvements in student engagement with the range of academic advising options and supports in the School of Education.

"*I would definitely say that it's a more comprehensive overview of all the supports that are there*" - PME Student

"*The students are definitely more aware that there are a lot of supports there*". - Staff member

"*[students] were often unaware of what was going on in UCD, they were often unaware of what was going on the PME, the breadth of the programme, the different modules and who were involved in the modules and how they all linked together. Who was who and what was going on.*" - Staff member

"*You get lots of emails from [the programme director] and that's great, but [...] for the students it's kind of useful that there's something that helps you see the experience from a different launching pad. And [see it] clearly.*" - PME student

There was recognition, too, of the potential for the digital hub to act as a resource to those surrounding and supporting the student teacher e.g. cooperating teachers, tutors and partner schools:

"*I understood anyways what it's trying to do is also to bridge the gap a bit more between the ITE provider and partner, schools and cooperating teachers, who often might not have a good overview of what the PME is actually about and what the students have to do. Because they might have gone through the HDip or, you know, have done in 20 years ago, so that, so in that sense it's also hugely valuable to external actors to the PME, not only current students.*" PME student

This student quotation highlights one area of confusion that arose during the focus group and staff interviews - the project's target group. Participants, at various points during the interviews, referenced a variety of target groups or 'users' including: current PME students, cooperating teachers, partner schools, tutors, UCD School of Education staff, alumni and "outsiders" as one student put it.

"*The value of the PME and also would be much more prominent. At the moment, because if you go on to the UCD website and look at the PME, you don't get all that information you don't*

know that you can take all these brilliant programmes, like the philosophy for children or all the technology based modules that were offered, so I think that that would also improve the value of the programme to outsiders, to somebody who might be interested in it." - PME student

"*Anything that can help people to say in contact with the teaching community is good and this truly allows for that*" - PME student

"*If it is an advisory hub, I think there needs to be clarity about what is meant by advisory. Is it advisory in its narrow sense? Or is it an information providing hub? I think there needs to be clarity around that.*" - Staff member

On the whole however, participants reported that the ConnectED project successfully addresses its aim of ensuring that all students and staff associated with UCD ITE programmes are aware of, and can engage with, the many student advising services the school has to offer.

"*I think it just provides a very good overview of what's there.*" - PME student

Aim 2: Positively affect student experience

The second aim of the ConnectED project was to increase the potential for the advising services to positively affect student experience. The primary positive effect related to the increased awareness and availability of information, as described above:

"*It might take away from the sense of being a bit lost.*" - PME student

In speaking about the worked examples of assessments available on the digital hub, one staff member described how being able to access these examples was reassuring for students who might be struggling with the pressure and uncertainty surrounding academic standards:

"*To me that's a very important support, because that can relax the students. Sometimes their anxiousness is about their ability to be able to meet the demands of the academic side of the programme. They get very anxious about that. I think the more we can do to support them, and give them examples of different types of assessment, the better [for the student]*" - Staff member

While students' feedback was primarily positive, they also cautioned the potential for "information overload":

"*At the same time I think we should be cognisant not to have an information overload so I think it's a difficult [line] between just enough and not too much so that it doesn't become overwhelming*" - PME student

There was also a recognition that the hub would have to be continuously updated to that it is "live" and relevant.

"*There has to be a sense that it is interactive, that it is live in some way, and there's someone [updating it]*" - Staff member

On the whole however, all participants felt that the ConnectED project has a positive impact on student experience.

> "*You know that saying 'you can be what you can see'? We have a wide variety of alumni, and very recent graduates, working in schools and experiencing the same struggles as our current students have. And now, they [current students] can see the leadership roles they have taken on in schools, like, in a very short period of time. [Some have] actually got publications out with faculty. That is massive. For [current students] to see that that's a possibility when they're doing their dissertations...that is massive.*" - Staff member

Strengths, Weaknesses, Challenges, Threats (SCOT) Analysis

The second aim of this evaluation was to assess the strengths, weakness, opportunities and/or threats that promote or constrain the realisation and sustainability of the project's aims.

Based on the review of project documents, staff interviews and student focus group, a number of strengths were identified. These included the necessity and convenience of a centralised information 'hub' for students and staff associated with UCD's School of Education initial teacher education programmes; the layout and accessibility of the digital platform; the potential for the project to build and foster connection and community between students, alumni, cooperating teachers, partner schools and UCD staff; the opportunity to share information and increase awareness of the range of different offerings associated with the PME programme (such as the extra-curricular courses and CPD options); and the positive impact of the project on student and staff engagement with academic advising in UCD.

Strengths	Challenges
- Centralised information - Accessible - Builds connection and community - Promotes knowledge and awareness of PME - Improves student and staff engagement with academic advising in UCD.	Digital Hub updates and maintenance
Opportunities	Threats
Opportunity to expand network with each graduating PME group (and their cooperating teachers/schools)	Mission creep

No significant weaknesses were identified and the potential for the network of students, alumni, cooperating teachers, tutors and staff to expand over the coming years was identified as a significant opportunity. Two threats were isolated. The first relates to the need for regular updates and maintenance to the digital hub in order for it to remain relevant to the needs of students. As one staff member highlighted, in order for the digital hub to be effective "there has to be a sense that it

is interactive". Regular updating and maintenance of the hub represents a time and financial demand that warrants consideration. Secondly, this evaluation identified the potential for 'mission creep' as the project gradually and incrementally expands beyond the scope of its initial aim to act as an academic advisory support and resource for current students. Mission creep is understandable given the initial success of, and enthusiasm for, the project but presents a threat as the project attempts to meet the needs of a wider group of stakeholders (alumni, cooperating teachers, tutors, and "outsiders" as one student put it) with an initial and limited resource.

Conclusions and recommendations

This evaluation sought to assess and make recommendations on (1) the degree to which the ConnectED project realised its aims and (2) the strengths, weakness, opportunities and/or threats that promote or constrain this realisation. The evaluation was carried out in June 2022 at the end of the project first year.

Feedback from students and staff, and analysis of the projects digital hub and key documents, supports the conclusion that the project has successfully realised its core aims and presents a number of significant strengths and opportunities. This evaluation also highlighted two potential threats to the ongoing success of the project and suggests that these can only be determined in the full realisation of the project over the coming years. As such, the sole recommendation of this evaluation is that a broader, survey-style, evaluation be considered for the 2022-2023 academic year when the full scope, capacity and user experience of the ConnectED digital hub can be assessed.