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# From librarian to lecturer:

experiences of introducing an accredited information literacy module to a part-time undergraduate degree



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## INTRODUCTION

This article describes the design and delivery of an accredited module in information literacy to part-time adult students on a BA degree in local and community studies, offered by the department of adult and community education of the National University of Ireland (NUI) at both its Maynooth and Kilkenny campuses.

Following brief background information about the degree, we explain why an independent module was considered desirable and present the desired learning outcomes, giving brief details of content, method of delivery, marking system and student feedback. The article concludes with a reflection on our experience.

## BACKGROUND TO THE PROGRAMME

The BA in local and community studies is a part-time modular degree programme. Modules are delivered in the evening and on occasion as one-week summer schools. Modules come in two varieties: a 5-credit module involving 24 contact hours and a 10-credit module involving 48 contact hours. In order to attain an honours BA degree, a student must obtain 180 credits, with a diploma being offered on obtaining 90 credits.

The degree offers two strands of study – a local studies strand and a community studies strand.

On completion of four introductory modules, students decide whether to major in local or community studies. This decision affects their subsequent choice of modules. There are some modules open to both strands throughout the programme.

#### WHY AN ACCREDITED MODULE IN INFORMATION LITERACY?

Providing training in information literacy within this formal degree programme presented challenges not experienced in the traditional linear undergraduate degree programme, where there is a continuum from year to year and information literacy can be embedded progressively into each year of the programme. The structure of this degree, where students select from a choice of over 40 modules across the social sciences, means that any attempt to embed information literacy into a particular module will disenfranchise students not taking that particular module. Following consultation with the department of adult and community education, it was agreed that a fully accredited standalone information literacy module was needed.

Many of the students are in full-time employment and/or have other significant commitments. In order to be classed as mature they have to be aged 23 or over by 1 January in the year of admission. The age range is from the late-twenties through and past retirement age. In the box below are some comments that give a profile of the rich variety of students the course attracts.

Teresa Mullen, the chair of Kilkenny Co. Council, mother of seven, grandmother and BA (community studies) graduate in 2002, comments:

'It was the first opening I got in my life back into education ... I had left school at thirteen ... if it hadn't been here in Kilkenny I wouldn't be part of it, it was that simple. And it all started from there ... elected to the County Council, Chairperson ... sure, if I had seen it on TV five years ago I would have said it was a daft script!'

Willie Smyth, a farmer from County Tipperary, enrolled for the part-time BA in local studies at Kilkenny in 1998, graduating in 2002. He is currently completing his doctorate with the department of history at NUI Maynooth: 'Having completed my degree, on an impulse I applied to the University to do a Masters in modern history and was later upgraded to a PhD ... The experience is certainly one to be

savoured but should come with a warning – it's addictive.'

Pat Tynan graduated with a BA in local studies in 2002, took the higher diploma in education at the main campus in Maynooth, and now teaches full-time in addition to his other interests:

'The BA offered by the NUIM Kilkenny Campus offered me the opportunity to achieve a degree. For one who did not have the opportunity to go on to University this course opened a door that had seemed to be permanently closed ... So for me the course was very successful and has offered me exciting, challenging and rewarding new career opportunities.'

Students come to either the Kilkenny or the Maynooth campus to attend lectures. Outside lecture time, they spend little time on campus, most living significant distances from their place of study. Thus, they need a way to use library resources without having to physically come to the library. Alongside this, a number of the students have not been in formal education for a significant amount of time or indeed may have had little access to formal education. Developments such as e-books and e-journals and the technologies to access these resources are generally unfamiliar to them.

While students undertake a basic IT module in their first semester (or get an exemption through passing a competency test) this focuses on basic Word and Excel skills rather than on information literacy. As part of the common study skills programme offered to new students, workshops giving a basic introduction to the library and its resources are provided. However, this is at a very introductory level and focuses on using the library catalogue and gaining familiarity with the physical layout of the library. Students, particularly those at more advanced stages in their courses, need a much higher level of information literacy skills. Following consultation with the department of adult and community education, a module was designed and presented to Academic Council, where it was approved.

It was agreed that the focus of the module should be on electronic resources, thus addressing the issue of students being unable to visit the library in person.

## THE MODULE

The module aims to:

- teach students how to find and evaluate information sources via a range of electronic tools, including library catalogues, electronic journals, electronic books, databases and the internet
- teach students how to design effective search strategies
- provide training on the skill of compiling an annotated bibliography, including correct citation, writing a short abstract and structuring a bibliography
- provide an introduction to the Moodle virtual learning environment
- increase students' awareness of electronic information sources
- provide information skills for lifelong learning.

## LEARNING METHOD

The module is run over 24 hours, of which 18 are evening-class contact. Classes are delivered in 3-hour blocks, the first part being a lecture. This is followed by a practical session where students get an opportunity, through Moodle quizzes, to put into practice what they have just learned.

Six of the module hours are carried out online, where students complete and submit assignments remotely via Moodle.

## ASSIGNMENT

As with all the modules on this degree programme, there is no formal examination. Rather students are asked to compile an annotated bibliography on their thesis topic or another topic agreed with the librarian. This should:

- be on a specific rather than a general topic
- have some Irish context
- include a comprehensive introduction covering topics such as the reason for the choice of subject, the scope of the bibliography and the range of electronic resources consulted
- have a minimum of 25 items listed
- follow the Harvard or the Irish Historical citation style
- have annotations (abstracts) of approximately four lines
- give some indication of the resources consulted to identify items included.

The breakdown of marks is 80% assigned to the bibliography, 10% for quizzes carried out in Moodle and 10% for a review of a database of the student's choice.

## CHANGES/DEVELOPMENTS

The module, which first ran in 2004, has proved very popular with students, particularly those in the final stages of their degree programme who are preparing their minor thesis. Approximately 60 people have completed the module to date. Initially the module was offered to students in the final stages of the BA, but it is now being offered to those at less advanced stages. Feedback from students indicated that they would benefit by undertaking this module earlier in their course of study. In this way they could apply the skills acquired to other modules in their course.

Building on student and librarian experience/ feedback, it has been modified/ developed in a number of ways.

More support is provided to the students, through the provision of lecture presentations, direct links to the library catalogue, databases and other e-content via Moodle. Developments in Irish databases, including the acquisition of *Irish Newspapers Online* and the development of the *Irish History Online* website, have meant that the range of electronic sources available to those who do local studies rather than community studies has increased significantly. The initial lack of electronic resources for the former group had led them to perceive themselves as disadvantaged.

The introduction and development of e-books – many of which are relevant to both strands of the programme – has necessitated new input into the module.

## EVALUATION

Standard departmental evaluation forms are completed by students and returned to the course administrator. Overall, student feedback is very positive and helps feed into the further development of the module.

In the box below are some comments from students' evaluation forms.

*This module opened up a whole world of information that I was not aware of.*

*The sharing of views and the practical hands-on experience was excellent.*

*What I've learned about finding information will help me in my life outside college.*

*The information gained was not so dense as to leave one mind-boggled!*

Feedback from the external examiner, an academic from the United Kingdom, is also very positive and encouraging. He perceives the module as an exciting new development in this undergraduate programme.

We ourselves would like to evaluate how effectively we are using technology, particularly the Moodle virtual learning environment (VLE), and have asked the university's education technologist to assist us in this before we next deliver the module.

#### **LIBRARIANS' EXPERIENCE AND REFLECTION**

While both of us have had experience of delivering information literacy sessions, we found that the experience of designing and delivering an accredited module presented challenges we had not encountered in situations where there is no formal accreditation. One challenge is to make academics and others aware of the difference between information and IT skills. The fact that one of us is a member of the course board for the programme helped in this.

Another challenge is navigating new relationships. Now instead of being the helpful librarian at the end of the telephone/e-mail or engaged in the reference query, we are lecturers and examiners imposing deadlines and standards. We ourselves have had to acquire new knowledge about how the academic system works, including marking/grading systems, exam boards, external examiners, repeat submissions and so forth. Part of the process is providing individual feedback on results. We both have had to deal with disappointed students who questioned the fairness of their marks. We quickly became aware that marking systems need to be very explicit and the process completely transparent. While an external examiner reviews the marks, we are ultimately responsible and accountable. In effect we moved from being

librarians to becoming lecturers, examiners, mentors and advisors without the real knowledge of where to draw the line in each role.

Increasingly working in a Moodle environment, students expect to have virtually 24-hour contact with us, anticipating instant feedback on their queries, which are submitted either via e-mail or through the moodle forum. We have had to deal with and manage these expectations.

The marking/grading system in place in the university is, in our opinion, somewhat vague and possibly open to interpretation. Perhaps it is designed for a more standard essay/examination type of environment. For this particular module we feel that a more explicit marking structure, allocating specific marks to each section of the bibliography and with deductions for incorrect or absent elements of citations, would provide a useful tool when correcting students' assignments. This would also provide the students with a clear indication of where they have lost marks and why. We hope to have this marking structure in place before the module is next presented.

#### **CONCLUSION**

This module is still in its early stages of development. It will continue to be adapted as new electronic resources are developed, and as new needs emerge from student feedback. Our own professional and personal development in the role of librarian/lecturer will no doubt also inform the development of what we see as a very exciting and innovative module.