# Report on “SLD Transitions into College: different voices and different experiences” Conference

Maeve Gallagher (Student Learning Advisor TCD) 30th March 2015

### Background

Student Learning Development (TCD) applied for and was awarded funding (up to €1k) by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning to run an event around the theme of transitions into third level. The conference was held in the Global Room at TCD on the 26th February 2015 and was attended by over 40 people from 8 different third level colleges in Ireland (AIT; DCU; DIT; DKIT; NCI; UCD; TCD and Maynooth University- formerly known as NUIM).

### Main Aims

* To present and learn from programmes from different institutions aimed at helping students to adjust to third level. These included AIT Peer support programme and Maynooth University 4 day orientation programme ‘Launchpad’ for non-traditional students. TCD Student Learning Development (SLD) gave two presentations on:
  + Research project (interim outcomes) on the academic needs of international students in TCD (Irina Dimitriade)
  + SLD approaches to helping students to successfully make the transition (e.g. from secondary school) and become independent learners (Maeve Gallagher)
* To incorporate the student voice into discussions to understand what helped or hindered students in successfully making the transition to third level. Students from Maynooth University and TCD spoke about their experiences and mentors from the TCD S2S programme and the SU Welfare and Education Officers spoke, both from their own experiences and as representatives/advocates of other students.

### Key findings

* Main factors identified which help students to adjust to college included: a sense of belonging and identity; peer-led support; realistic expectations of academic requirements and forms of assessment; timely, relevant and ongoing support; and information both within and beyond the first Semester JF and at all stages of the students’ academic cycle.
* Key barriers included a mismatch between students’ expectations of third level (socially and academically) and previous learning experiences, both as school leavers and mature students. For example, the challenges of moving from classroom/teacher led learning to more independent methods of learning e.g. critical thinking, problem solving and student driven methods of study and enquiry.
* Sample comments included the following: *“Information overload!- I came across the information I got at JF Orientation recently and now that I’m in second year it makes more sense to me”.* Further comments were around addressing issues of social isolation e.g. *“More social activities for mature students and part-time students as well as school leavers please”* and academic challenges e.g. *“I found it difficult academically – I didn’t know what to expect or what was expected from me”.*

### Key recommendations

* Drip feed information at key stages across the students’ academic career as well as providing timely and relevant information through a clear and targeted orientation programme. One suggestion was to provide an online app or resource with a decision tree, giving details on different services and key information which students could access on an ongoing and needs-led basis before and after accepting a place in college ( pre-first year UG) and throughout the whole academic lifecycle.
* Provide a broad range of activities and social events to help students from diverse backgrounds to integrate into college (e.g. mature, part-time and international students). One suggestion included providing lunchtime social events to encourage networking and integration for students who are time poor (e.g. students with families, work or other outside commitments) and for students with low class contact hours and limited opportunities to mix with classmates.
* Include parents in orientation programmes/information days where possible, particularly with non-traditional students. This was found to be particularly successful with the Maynooth University Orientation Launchpad programme for HEAR/DARE students who were often the first members of their family to go to third level.

### Summary and conclusions

The themes which emerged from the conference “Transitions into College: different voices and different experiences” confirm priorities identified at a college level (for example, TCD Strategic Plan 2014-19 initiatives around student engagement, transition, progression, employability and experiences). The topics discussed at the conference also reflect data gathered at a national and international level, for example through the International Student Barometer Survey (ISB) and the Irish Survey for Student Engagement (ISSE) 2014.

The International Student Barometer results for TCD (presented by TCD Global Relations Office on 24th March 2015) indicated that students would like more feedback on their academic performance which was also a theme echoed in the ISSE (which had over 19,800 responses nationally from 30 institutions). Over 77% of students responding to the ISSE questions on Active Learning indicated that they had never/sometimes discussed grades/assignments with teaching staff and tutors. This supports the points raised in the “Transitions into College” conference, namely that students felt there was a lack of clarity in terms of what was expected of them in relation to academic performance.

Student Learning Development work with students through all stages of the academic cycle – from first year undergraduate to final year PhD - providing one to one, group (general and department based study skills workshops) and online support (for example, SLD Blackboard Module: Academic Skills for Successful Learning). Based on our experience (though this has not been quantified or collated), a high number of students in third year undergraduate courses present to SLD looking for guidance with critical thinking, problem solving, independent learning and study strategies, as well as looking for help with academic/thesis writing and oral presentation skills. It appears that third year UG is another critical transition stage in the students’ academic life where students’ become aware that their current study strategies and approach to academic tasks can contribute (both positively and negatively) to their final year grades and future career choices.

Therefore, a suggestion both from the experiences of SLD advisors and from students’ comments from the “Transitions into College” conference, would be to gather more qualitative information in a systematic way to support the existing data gathered through college based and student surveys to find out what students’ needs are at different stages of the academic cycle. This could help college to provide timely and relevant information, support and interventions to help students to adjust to and engage fully in college life (academically and personally) and acquire the relevant skills to contribute to their own personal development, to college and to society.

Given Trinity College’s commitment to helping students to successfully transition and progress through their academic cycle, combined with findings from student surveys (e.g. ISB and ISSE 2014) Student Learning Development has a key role to play in supporting students to successfully make the transition into college and maximise their academic potential throughout the students’ whole academic cycle. We would welcome the opportunity to further discuss or present these findings.