

Neville McClenaghan outlines how Ulster University, in partnership with the Institute of Technology Sligo, has established a new suite of innovative online undergraduate programmes.

In a rapidly-changing world, it is imperative we seek to utilise the latest thinking, research, and technologies to support our work-based learning, CPD, and progressive evolution of our profession. This has been a strong ethos of biomedical sciences at Ulster University over many years – we were one of the first to offer an IBMS-accredited/approved co-terminus undergraduate degree programme, an online/blended-learning Graduate Certificate in Biomedical Science, and our popular distance-learning PgD/MSc Biomedical Science programme. Each has served an important role in supporting biomedical scientists, and has helped to play our part in ensuring the visibility and prestige of UK biomedical science nationally and globally.

Partnership

We are delighted to have been invited to share some thoughts and experiences with regards to our latest programme developments, which we believe help us improve our reach and impact through innovative online undergraduate programmes supporting career progression in the healthcare, pharmaceutical and bioscience industries. Since the late 1990s, Ulster's School of Biomedical Sciences has been pioneering distance- and blended-learning

HOW TO... CREATE PATHWAYS THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

approaches, tools, and technologies to help support educational and career development of biomedical scientists in the UK, Ireland, and beyond.

The author of *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott, famously said that “it takes two flints to make a fire”, and this cross-border partnership between the School of Biomedical Sciences at Ulster University and the Faculty of Science at Institute of Technology (IT) Sligo – the largest provider of online higher education programmes in Ireland – draws on core strengths from both institutions, paving the way for the first online IBMS-accredited full undergraduate degree in biomedical science.

Mutual benefit

It has also been said that “fortune favours the brave, but chance favours the smart”,

and the concept of embarking on a bold cross-jurisdictional enterprise, inherently based on smart collaborative working, with a passion to innovate, really captures the origins and ethos of the Ulster-IT Sligo collaboration. The genesis of this collaboration began through Professor Jacqueline McCormack (then Associate Head of School of Biomedical Sciences at Ulster) being invited by Dr Jeremy Bird (Head of Faculty of Science at IT Sligo) to serve on the Panel of an IT Sligo Programmatic Review. Through this academic engagement and follow-up discussions, it became evident that the quite separate evolution of expertise in online learning at both Ulster and IT Sligo could converge with a fusion between the clinical and industrial skillsets of two independent staff teams.

From the outset, the success of any

such venture lies in the establishment of mutual benefit and respect between teams, most of which is, of course, inherently dependent on the people involved. With that in mind, we had the good fortune to have both academic synergy and a very natural forging of excellent interpersonal relationships between Ulster and IT Sligo teams.

The value of a shared vision and mission and necessary camaraderie between our teams cannot be understated, proving critical to overcome bureaucratic and other inherent hurdles needing to be properly understood and addressed. As with any partnership, a key consideration is whether the will of the two teams is matched and complemented by that of the two providers. For example, overcoming the complexities of marrying up UK Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS) with the Irish/EU European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) for modules offered by Ulster and IT Sligo, respectively in a manner to satisfy both institutions was a considerable achievement. This has allowed the development of awards from both educational systems facilitating exits through different levels of attainment.

Responding to need

Successful establishment of any academic programme relies on sensitivity and responsiveness to the needs of students, professions, and employers.

Given that our suite of novel online undergraduate programmes was targeted solely at those in employment, the expectations of students undertaking part-time study, and their motivation/drive would, from the outset, be understandably different than entrants from school to full-time undergraduate programmes. Also, given the differences in mode of delivery, whilst learning outcomes, quality, and standards

“The value of a shared vision and mission and necessary camaraderie between our teams cannot be understated”

must be equivalent, there were naturally going to be different expectations with regards to how students engage with learning through a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

The learning models include a mix of live (synchronous) online evening lectures, non-live (asynchronous) online lectures, discussion boards, and other online learning tools and material, together with practical work undertaken remotely coupled with periodic intensive on-campus practical workshops.

Keeping momentum


The merits of online learning are well described – including accessibility, helping address socioeconomic disadvantage, plus overcoming geographical and other barriers. However, offering this type of flexible learning and ease of access for students requires particular resources, skills, attitudes, and approaches from staff designing and delivering such programmes of study.

Supporting online learners requires a different infrastructure and outlook to that needed for traditional on-campus programme delivery, and the dedicated team of staff comprising Ulster University eLearning Support Unit (eLSU) plays a pivotal role in fielding and

managing a spectrum of student enquiries. Our eLSU is vital to support academics, eTutors, and others contributing to teaching and learning delivery and assessment, and so it was imperative appropriate resourcing was in place from the outset.

In this joint degree provision, it was critical to establish up-front agreement on programme design and structure, the academic syllabus, modular content, and overall/devolved responsibilities of Ulster and IT Sligo Teams. In all this, it was important to keep momentum, maintaining robust communication channels, with regular meetings of staff, whilst ensuring benchmarking against professional standards, and a strong focus on student, institutional, professional body, and employer needs. With the course documents in place, and post-programme validation (including endorsement by professional bodies), the next consideration was marketing, importantly providing clarity to prospective students on entry requirements and expectations.

Delivery

While successful online programme delivery has been underpinned by committed teams at Ulster and IT Sligo, it would be remiss not to particularly acknowledge the efforts of the two Course Directors, namely Peter Mitchell (Ulster) and Dr Stephen Daly (IT Sligo), engaging in a wide range of core activities from recruitment through to graduation – their dedication and day-to-day leadership and management is admirable and essential to the success of our exciting joint venture. 

Neville McClenaghan is a Professor and Fellow of the IBMS

