

5.4 The Learning Environment at ICD

ICD's learning environment planning takes direction from research into teaching and learning. The goal of ICD's learning environment planning, resourcing and management is to provide students with the best possible platform to stimulate learning both hard (e.g. subject area knowledge) and soft skills. This follows increasing employer advice (e.g. from businesses ICD consults when devising and improving programmes) and empirical evidence regarding business school teaching, skills-learning, and graduate employability. The latter indicates that "business schools across Europe need to make sure business graduates are equipped with more than *hard* business-focused skills and competencies....an ability to utilise *softer* business-related skills and abilities are also vital" (Andrews & Higson 2008 p. 420). The following lists the eleven soft skills, identified in a review of the literature (Andrews & Higson 2008), which ICD focuses on helping learners to develop:

- Professionalism
- Reliability
- The ability to cope with uncertainty
- The ability to work under pressure
- The ability to plan and think strategically
- The capability to communicate and interact with others, either in teams or through networking
- Good written and verbal communication skills
- Information and Communication Technology Skills
- Creativity and self-confidence
- Good self-management and time-management skills
- A willingness to learn and accept responsibility

The learning environment at ICD helps students to gain and improve soft skills (above) and hard skills, specifically to achieve programme-level and module-level learning outcomes. The learning environment at ICD can be broken down into the following elements (more detail on each is provided below):

- City-centre location
- Small-class sizes
- Technology-enhanced learning facilities

- Highly accessible lecturing staff and a focus on the benefits of face-to-face meeting attendance
- Peer-learning through comprehensive contact-hours
- Focus on peer-working and team-working
- Facilities for collaborative working
- Flip (flipped)-classroom and learning off-campus
- A focus on formative feedback
- Focus on and facilities for multiple diverse assessment methods
- Respect-based and equality focused cultural environment

Alongside each element of the ICD learning environment (outlined below) are the key soft skills (from above) that each element is focused on developing with each learner.

- **City-centre location:** A location on the intersection between South Great George's Street and Dame Street means that learners can access ICD easily through all public transport infrastructure; Dublin Bus stops, Luas stops, DART stops, Irish Rail Stations, and Bus Eireann stops are within minutes.
- **Small-class sizes:** traditional classroom-based learning situations at ICD strategically maintain low student-teacher ratios (typically no more than 40 students in a lecture cohort and no more than 20 students in a tutorial cohort) to maximise the possibility for individual learners to feel engaged in the learning experience and to foster student engagement in peer-learning through discussions with classmates and lecturers. Vast lecture theatres with hundreds of students are not part of the learning experience at ICD. This choice is based on evidence-based empirical research studies which indicate that "there is an inverse relationship between class size and student learning as measured by test scores and self-reports" (Karakaya, Ainscough, and Chopoorian 2001 p. 86).

Soft-skill(s) developed (including but not limited to):

- The capability to communicate and interact with others, either in teams or through networking

- **Technology-enhanced learning facilities:** including smart boards in class rooms, access to ICD Moodle's online learning environment (Virtual Learning Environment [VLE]), two full computer rooms with printing facilities, and a dedicated library resource centre with access to the full suite of Microsoft Office applications, online research facilities and journal

repositories. Increased integration of Moodle into the learner's life is an objective currently being pursued at ICD; Moodle discussion groups and Wiki's are being used increasingly on modules, particularly for the purposes of peer-learning and formative lecturer feedback. The rationale behind increasing (where beneficial) the usage of Moodle discussion groups and Wiki's lies in its ability to increase student participation in study outside of routine contact hours, to provide added opportunities for peer learning, and to give a 'voice' to those students who may be more inclined to be silent in face-to-face class discussions (Baker 2000). ICD recognises the need to promote what Martin and Grudziecki have called the 'digital bildung' model', which proffers that it is essential for modern learners to develop digital literacy as an essential 'aspect of lifelong personal development' (Martin and Grudziecki 2006 p. 260).

Soft-skill(s) developed (including but not limited to):

- The capability to communicate and interact with others, either in teams or through networking
- Information and Communication Technology Skills

- **Accessible lecturing staff and a focus on the benefits of face-to-face meeting attendance:**
modules at ICD generally have 48 hours of student-teacher face-to-face meetings/lectures/tutorials or more, which is higher than in many other HEIs (e.g. undergraduate degree modules at larger HEIs (e.g. universities) in Ireland often have 20-36 hours of contact approximately). This extra teacher-learner interaction at ICD provides learners with increased opportunity to learn and receive formative feedback on progress. The strategic choice, at ICD, to pursue a strategy of comprehensive contact hours between lecturers and students is one that is based on research evidence highlighting the benefits of such an approach. This research has found empirical evidence that contact hours between faculty and students through lecture attendance is an important facilitator of academic success (e.g. Durden & Ellis 1995; Lamdin 1996). Also, even though ICD is implementing technology enhanced learning (e.g. via Moodle) to augment and increase student learning opportunities outside of the classroom, ICD maintains a focus on encouraging face-to-face student-teacher contact. This is achieved through higher contact hours, than many other HEIs, and also through attendance monitoring. Attendance monitoring takes place in every class in order to encourage students to maximise face-to-face contact hour attendance. This follows research empirical evidence that finds "attendance does matter for academic

achievement...What really seems to matter is excessive absenteeism” (e.g. “five or more misses...is associated strongly with poor academic performance”) (Durden & Ellis 1995 p. 345). ICD’s goal is to minimise student absenteeism given the potential reduction in student performance it can create.

Soft-skill(s) developed (including but not limited to):

- The capability to communicate and interact with others, either in teams or through networking
- Professionalism
- Reliability
- Good self-management and time-management skills

- **Peer-learning through comprehensive contact-hours:** having higher in-class contact hours than many other HEIs also stimulates peer-interaction between students helping them build networks and engage in peer-learning and collaborative work (e.g. group projects) opportunities

Soft-skill(s) developed (including but not limited to):

- The capability to communicate and interact with others, either in teams or through networking
- Reliability
- Good self-management and time-management skills

- **Focus on peer-working and team-working:** ICD promotes interactive teaching methods where lecturers engage students directly in discussions and ongoing formative feedback activities in order to provide students with optimal opportunities to improve their team-working skills. This is a direct response to the increased importance placed on team-working skills in business organisations. Where practical and beneficial, modules, across all programmes, also use group-work assignments to foster students’ collaborative project working skills

Soft-skill(s) developed (including but not limited to):

- The capability to communicate and interact with others, either in teams or through networking
- Professionalism

- Reliability
- Good self-management and time-management skills
- Creativity and self-confidence

- **Facilities for collaborative working:** ICD allows students to use any of its facilities during business hours for the purposes of learning and completing assignments, both individually and in teams. ICD's two dedicated computer labs are open to students at all times (except when scheduled for a class). Also, the ICD Library and Resource Centre is an open space where students are encouraged to use the computing equipment and study areas to work individually or as collaborative groups in preparing their assignments.

Soft-skill(s) developed (including but not limited to):

- The capability to communicate and interact with others, either in teams or through networking
- Good self-management and time-management skills
- Information and Communication Technology Skills

- **Flip (flipped)-classroom and learning off-campus:** through ICD Moodle, the pedagogical approach across all programmes at ICD has been evolving. While ICD still incorporates traditional classroom-based learning when appropriate, lecturers are increasingly sharing the learning materials with students via Moodle and encouraging them to engage in independent learning/study of specified module readings prior to class. During lectures, this independent study enables students to engage in discussions and activities with both peers and with lecturers in order to deepen understanding and evaluation of the learning materials. This approach enables ICD's learning environment and students to achieve the following goals (Baker 2000):

- "Focus more on understanding and application than on recall"
- "Provide students with more control over their own learning"
- "Give students a greater sense of responsibility for their own learning"
- Classroom contact hours are opened up for more active learning

Soft-skill(s) developed (including but not limited to):

- The capability to communicate and interact with others, either in teams or through networking

- Good self-management and time-management skills
- Information and Communication Technology Skills
- A willingness to learn and accept responsibility
- Creativity and self-confidence
- The ability to cope with uncertainty
- The ability to work under pressure
- The ability to plan and think strategically

- **A focus on formative feedback:** wherever practical, ICD modules incorporate one-to-one lecturer-student and overall cohort lecturer-to-class formative feedback. Graded (summative) and ungraded (formative) assignments and activities are used across all programmes at ICD with formative feedback provided formally (e.g. in writing) and informally (e.g. in-class discussions about assignments, before and after completion) in order to help learners to improve both their achievement of learning outcomes and demonstration of the achievement of learning outcomes. One example of this is the MA in Accounting and Finance Dissertation module which schedules weekly meetings (a minimum of 42 weeks per year) that all dissertation students are invited to attend with a minimum of 150 hours of dissertation meetings scheduled per year (taking in all three semesters). The number of hours of supervisor time to meet dissertation students at ICD is unlikely to be surpassed at any other HEI. Formalising dissertation supervision meetings rather than using the ad-hoc model often practiced at other HEIs is ICD's way of ensuring students reap maximum benefit from the supervisory infrastructure. It also entails structured workshops on primary and secondary research methods, academic dissertation writing, citation and referencing, and managing research projects.

Soft-skill(s) developed (including but not limited to):

- The capability to communicate and interact with others, either in teams or through networking
- Good self-management and time-management skills
- A willingness to learn and accept responsibility
- Creativity and self-confidence
- The ability to cope with uncertainty
- The ability to work under pressure
- The ability to plan and think strategically

- Good written and verbal communication skills

- **Focus on and facilities for multiple diverse assessment methods:** over recent years ICD has been shifting its assessment strategies across programmes such that they incorporate a lower proportion of final examinations and/or in-class tests. Alternative assessment methodologies and instruments are being adopted across modules, where beneficial and practical, including:

- Individual and group/team presentations
- Group assignments
- Assignments that include peer evaluation
- Moodle discussion groups and wikis
- Graded in-class discussions in flipped-classroom contexts
- Essays
- Business-oriented reports
- Roleplay and dramaturgical demonstration of learning
- Independent secondary research assignments
- Reflective logs and blogs

The benefits of diverse assessment methodologies are already being communicated by students in feedback.

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- The ability to work under pressure
- The ability to plan and think strategically
- Good written and verbal communication skills

- **Respect-based and equality focused cultural environment:** ICD's culture is focused on mutual respect between students and staff. ICD's staff and student culture does not include or tolerate discrimination on the basis of age, race, colour, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, national or ethnic origin, disability or disability status. Equality in educational access is a foundation stone of ICD's philosophy to education delivery with, for example, fully accessible facilities for learners who have diverse access requirements (e.g. fully wheelchair accessible facilities [e.g. classrooms, elevator and restrooms]). ICD also prides itself on minimising the difference between tuition/registration fees for Irish citizens, EU, and non-EU international students. ICD business school does not participate in price/fees-based discrimination; academic fees are the same for all students irrespective of nationality. The only exception to this is explained in section 7.5. ICD acts as an advocate for international students regarding visa requirements to maximise the potential for all potential students to access a high-quality education. International student or international learner is defined as "a person who is not an Irish citizen but is lawfully in the State primarily to receive education and training" (Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, Revised 2014 p. 8). ICD's approach to equality and respect is also of paramount concern from a student protection perspective. In the interest of student protection and welfare, ICD has a policy on student complaints (about staff, other students, or any other issues), a policy on non-academic general student misconduct, and sanctions and procedures relating to same detailed in section 7.2 (and subsections) of the QA policy. ICD also encourages students to report any instances of bullying or harassment, which will be dealt with by the disciplinary committee where necessary. The day-to-day running of courses also emphasises equality through a focus on students meeting deadlines for assigned coursework. ICD does not offer informal flexible deadlines for individual students because such practice is counter to treating all learners equally (extenuating circumstances are allowed of course [as are reasonable accommodations for special learner needs], but, also, all students have equal access to extenuating circumstances extensions [and/or reasonable accommodations for special learner needs] where required).

Soft-skill(s) developed (including but not limited to):

- The capability to communicate and interact with others, either in teams or through networking
- Creativity and self-confidence
- A willingness to learn and accept responsibility
- The ability to work under pressure

- Reliability
- Good self-management and time-management skills
- Professionalism

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