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Ireland's new Innovation Academy: academic-practitioner partnerships in action

Suzi Jarvis and Frances Mitchell



Suzi Jarvis and Frances Mitchell are both based at the Innovation Academy UCD, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland.

The starting point

With unemployment in Ireland currently above 14.2 percent (29 February 2012) (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2012) and a decrease in unemployment in the under 25's of 8.7 percent (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2012) to be contrasted with an increase in immigration in the same age group of 14.8 percent (February 2011 – February 2012) (Central Statistics Office (CSO), n.d.), the process of relationship building between academic researchers and educators, students and external future employers has become not only desirable but increasingly essential for local economic development and population stability. Simultaneously, the need for a cultural shift from graduates seeking a job to creating their own has risen to the fore due to the previous low levels of indigenous industrial technological development in Ireland and the consequently high levels of dependence on foreign direct investment.

The Innovation Academy has developed a Graduate Certificate in Innovation & Entrepreneurship that focuses on inspiring creativity, innovation and entrepreneurial thinking in multidisciplinary teams of postgraduate students. The original focus was on PhD students of all disciplines contained within three higher education institutions on the island of Ireland (University College Dublin, Trinity College Dublin and Queens University Belfast) bringing together students as diverse as digital literature, engineering, business, medicine, history, post-modern feminism, physics and micro-biology, to name but a few. The delivery of the Graduate Certificate is through small group teaching and experiential learning with the aim of enabling the student to take an active role in their learning. There is also a large amount of self-reflection integrated into the assessment that in turn is fed back into the programme in order to achieve the learning outcomes.

The Graduate Certificate is modular in its structure and designed to be as flexible as possible so that it can fit around the schedule of the busy PhD/Postgraduate student. The core module, Creative Thinking & Innovation, lasts for three weeks and comprises of a first week of intense learning, team challenges, role play, media communications training, team theory, creative design and guest speakers from industry (public, private and charitable) followed by a two week industry placement project in a multi-disciplinary team.

Beyond this core module (worth 10ECTS – European Credit Transfer System), the students have a range of options with which to complete the full Graduate Certificate (30ECTS). They must complete the Opportunity Generation & Recognition (5ECTS) module, which focuses on communication skills and the identification of opportunities in their research, but beyond this they are free to select from a series of modules that include Online Marketing & Social Media (hosted by Google in their European HQ) (5ECTS), Protecting your Idea (IP) (5ECTS), Planning your Venture (5ECTS), Creative Capital: Financing your New Venture (5ECTS), Inspiring Creative Thinking: Didactic Methods in Practice (5ECTS), Pro-bono Economics,

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Social Entrepreneurship and Impact Evaluation (5ECTS) as well as the opportunity to do further industry placement project work in a Hosted Project Placement (2.5/5/10ECTS).

Experiences to date

Drawing on interviews with key individuals involved in the Innovation Academy, as well as secondary data, we have developed key insights into the benefits to individuals and organizations involved in the programme.

In terms of the students who have attended the core module to date (170) their discipline backgrounds break down as shown in Figure 1.

When we look at the industry collaborations, we have had 47 different industry speakers in to talk to the students and worked on projects hosted by 35 different organizations, including Google, HP, IBM, The Revenue Commissioners, The Irish Development Agency (IDA) and Dublin City Council. The organizations break down can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 1 Breakdown of student disciplines, November 2010-March 2012

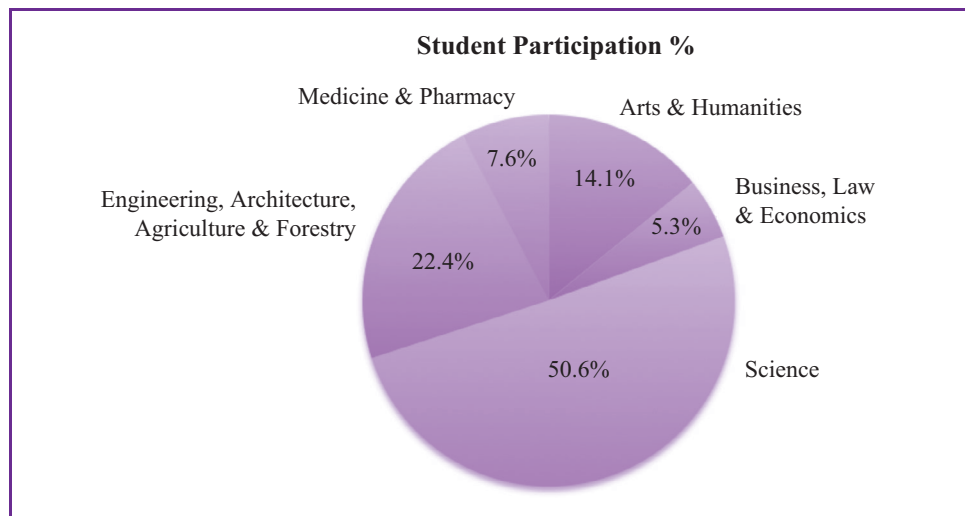
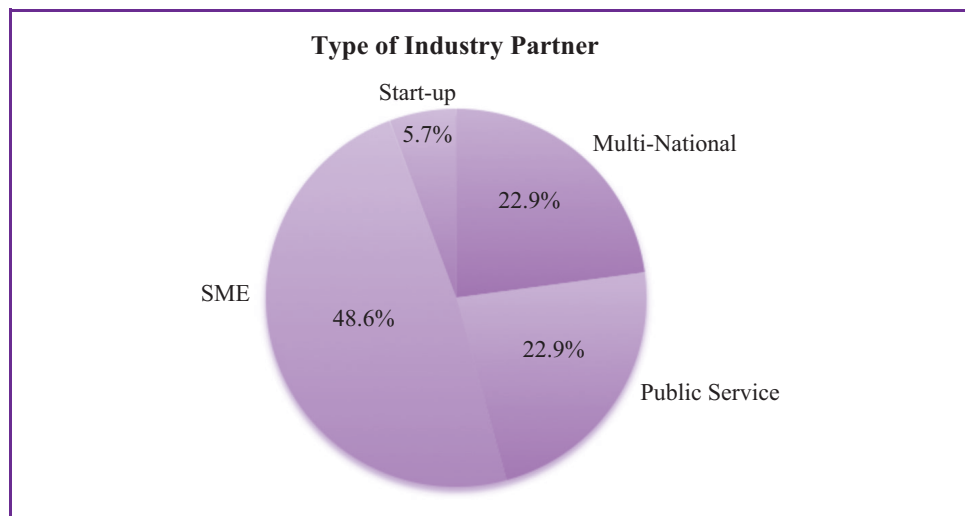


Figure 2 Structures of host organizations



As a particular case study we focus on one external organization project and describe the multi-faceted engagement with the Academy and its partners (Figure 3).

ConnectIreland and the Google effect

Terry Clune, CEO of Irish company Taxback.com, uses incentivised referral as the key to his business model. In an altruistic move he realized that the same model could be used to source potential SME jobs for Ireland from abroad and suggested this plan to An Taoiseach Enda Kenny (Irish Prime Minister). The idea was immediately integrated into the governments jobs plan and was put out to public tender.

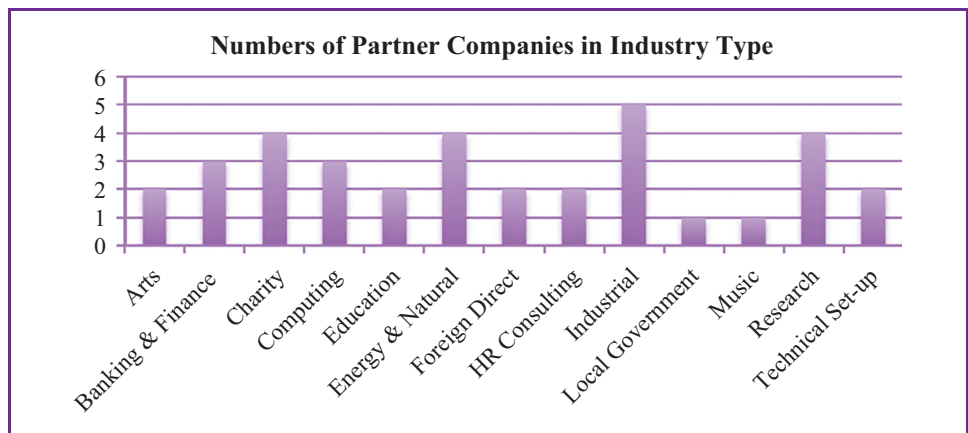
Terry Clune set up an independent company, ConnectIreland, to apply for this tender and our students were brought in close to the submission time to examine their tender document and see if they could “do it better”. With 40 million diaspora, the aim of the website is to channel the knowledge and networks of the diaspora around the world to bring information on potential inward investment to Ireland that would ultimately result in new jobs for the economy.

The team itself included students from Soil Ecology, Neuroscience, Biochemistry, Physics and Management who were Irish, Chinese and Sri Lankan. On examining the project the students quickly realized that the key to the effectiveness of the system was to ensure that ConnectIreland got to the right people with the right contacts as quickly as possible. To develop this idea further they used a technique normally used in botany and zoology, a dichotomous key. This series of Yes/No questions that the students developed led to an eight dimensional classification of leads that ConnectIreland would be able to fully integrate into the front end of their website and as a result fully optimize the process and ensure that time and resources were most effectively used.

ConnectIreland were so impressed with the team’s project that they are currently integrating the dichotomous key into their front-end system.

In February 2012 the Innovation Academy ran their first Online Marketing and Social Media module, co-developed with and hosted by Google in their European HQ in Dublin. Multi-disciplinary student teams were given a website to promote via digital marketing with a maximum budget of €10 per day in order to apply the skills they were learning from Google experts. One of the websites was ConnectIreland.com. This promotion campaign was so successful that they were contacted by other government agencies as their current “messages” were being overshadowed by the ConnectIreland online presence. Subsequently three of the attending students have gone on to run more targeted international digital marketing campaigns for individual companies.

Figure 3 Types of host organizations



When we look at the impact of these two industry collaborations we can see that even though the Innovation Academy is still in its early stages its impact is growing not only nationally, but internationally. There is also the undeniable impact it is having on the job market in Ireland, working directly with initiatives to bring new jobs to Ireland – all by thinking differently.

Benefits and pitfalls

Although most of our students are in the first year of their PhD, those in their final year have reported recounting their Innovation Academy experiences substantially in job interviews, and attribute their success at interview to these experiences. Students have also utilized their Academy peer group to promote and develop their own projects, either relating to their PhD research or social projects running in parallel. Companies are noting that working with the student teams, even for the short two week period, has a positive impact on their workplace, encouraging debate on issues where before there was none, forcing people to look at the problem from a different angle and even in some cases trying to beat the students to the solution in the same timeframe. However, students and/or host organizations often engage to the extent that they find it difficult to disengage at the end of the taught programme.

Despite the successes of the Academy it remains challenging to integrate unconventional programmes into university Governance structures, which usually revolve around disciplines, particularly for teaching programmes. Additionally, integrating new adaptable ways to educate versus knowledge transfer, lecturing based techniques followed by written exam based assessment, can be complex to navigate when proof of quality and impact requires monitoring beyond the end of the taught course. In the first year of the programme all students were self-selected and therefore more positively oriented towards such an experimental programme. In the second year 75 percent of students have joined the Academy as part of a new structured PhD programme where students participation in the Academy is compulsory. We have noted differences between the cohorts in terms of motivation and engagement. Student conscription versus self-selection is now a parameter that we are recording as we monitor long-term impact.

Conclusions

The experiences of the Innovation Academy provide valuable insight into the role of universities in developing a national culture of innovation and entrepreneurial thinking and tracking its graduates and their activities in years to come will determine whether our programmes do indeed impact on graduate employment levels and the growth of innovative indigenous industry. We anticipate significant policy implications resulting from the impact of our programmes, especially with regard to the further development internationally of multidisciplinary approaches to entrepreneurial thinking and the expansion of innovation in education alongside education in innovation.

Keywords:
Action learning,
Coaching,
Team development,
Experiential learning,
Self managed learning,
Skills

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About the authors

Professor Suzi Jarvis graduated from the University of Oxford with a BA in Physics and began her research career by organising her own industry sponsored DPhil (Kodak Ltd) in the Department of Materials, Oxford. This was followed by eight years' international work experience at the Joint Research Centre for Atom Technology; a Government Research Lab in Tsukuba, Japan, working in the area of nanotechnology. Towards the end of her time in Japan she was actively involved in the policy changes and restructuring which occurred

across the science and technology sector primarily through her connections with the Science and Technology office of the British Embassy. On moving to Trinity College Dublin in 2002 she gained experience in establishing major new ventures as one of the founding Principal Investigators of the Centre for Research on Adaptive Nanostructure and Nanodevices (CRANN); a joint venture with multi-national partner INTEL. During this time she also established a multi-disciplinary team pursuing a number of research areas at the interface between electrical engineering, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, and botany. In 2007 she took up the Chair of Biophysics in the Conway Institute of Biomolecular and Biomedical Research at University College Dublin. Recently her serendipitous discovery of patentable protein structures in a broad range of natural adhesives has opened up the potential for the biomimetic production of new biomedical adhesives (patent US 7,851,434). In 2009 she was involved in Enterprise Ireland Business Partners Programme along with co-inventor Dr Anika Mostaert to further develop the commercialisation potential of the research. Her group also has particular strengths in the development of novel atomic force microscopy techniques for bionanotechnology, and works closely with industrial collaborator, Asylum Research. In May 2010 Suzi took up the newly created position of UCD Director of the Innovation Academy to provide academic leadership and vision in order to help PhD students generate and exploit their ideas for economic and social benefit. Suzi has extended the Academy remit to encompass internationalization, a broadening of participation to include pre- and post-PhD as well as life-long learners from industry. She also works to identify and instigate the cultural changes necessary to enhance creative thinking and innovation across the island of Ireland.

Frances Mitchell has a Bachelor in Engineering from University College Dublin, an M.Phil. in Music and Media Technologies from Trinity College Dublin and an MBA from Dublin City University. Following graduation Frances spent two years as a process engineer and line manager with Procter & Gamble at their second largest global manufacturing facility in Amiens, France. Her core projects were technology, IT and motivational based, where she was the site liaison with the European centres of excellence. With a long-standing interest in music Frances returned to Ireland to complete her Masters in Music and Media Technologies in TCD. She subsequently worked as an event manager with Catapult Event Management and Design (Dublin) for a diverse range of businesses, both public and private, including a major project for AIB in relation to the Ryder Cup. This was followed by four and a half years as CEO of Crash Ensemble, Ireland's leading new classical music ensemble. During her time with the company Crash Ensemble more than doubled output, touring in the USA, Australia, Europe and the UK as well as Ireland. They also recorded for RTE, the BBC, ABC and WNYC, commissioned national and international composers, created new outreach programs, collaborated with many other arts companies and festivals and maintained a stable funding portfolio with the Arts Council. Her final project involved Crash Ensemble becoming the first Irish act to be signed to Nonesuch Records. The new album of music by Donnacha Dennehy (due for release in Spring 2011) features collaborations with Grammy Award winning US soprano Dawn Upshaw and Grammy nominated sean nós singer Iarla Ó Lionáird. In her current role as Academy Facilitator Frances has responsibility for the primary core module Creative Thinking & Innovation in terms of delivery and management, including sourcing and managing industry placement projects and guest industry speakers. She also has responsibility for the Opportunity Generation & Recognition modules and the larger Industry placement project programme. Frances is also working on the internationalization of the academic programme and was recently in Estonia under the ERASMUS programme delivering a module to undergraduates from the TTK University of Applied Sciences. She will be giving a workshop at the "Learning by Developing - New Ways to Learn" Conference on Creativity in Higher Education, which will be hosted by Laurea University of Applied Science in Helsinki in May 2012. Frances Mitchell is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: frances.mitchell@ucd.ie

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