

Building Entrepreneurship and Innovation through the Continuing Education of Micro and Small Tourism Enterprises: A Contemporary Framework for Program Delivery

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Abstract

The Irish tourism industry is fragmented, composed mainly of micro/small businesses, and its owner/managers are lacking in innovativeness and competencies in such areas as marketing, knowledge management, information technology, quality assurance, pricing policy, innovation and management. As identified by Fáilte Ireland² (2005; 2007), there is a need for increased professionalism and innovation in the industry – the agency sees education as key to their enhancement. While the larger tourism businesses benefit from a graduate management intake and continuing executive development, the owner of the small tourism operation is limited in their professional development. Indeed, literature highlights that continuing business education for owner/managers of micro/small businesses is problematic due to resource poverty, lack of appropriate and available tertiary tourism education, and that the foregoing is not confined to Ireland (cf. Jameson 2000; Billett 2001; Fáilte Ireland, 2005, 2007; Inui et al. 2006; Kelliher and Henderson 2006; Walker et al. 2007). In order to promote the professionalism and innovativeness of owner/managers of micro/small tourism enterprises, a degree program which satisfies the personal and professional development needs as well as the necessary knowledge requirements of the aforementioned cohort was developed by the authors' tertiary institute in collaboration with Fáilte Ireland; it is currently in its final stage of development. The programme's target launch date is September 2010 and involves delivering the program nation-wide.

This paper details the development of a contemporary framework which is based on an andragogical philosophy and problem-based learning approach. The mode of delivery is blended learning and learners are credited for recognised prior learning (RPL). Although the framework has been crafted for one particular programme, targeted at a particular sector, it is perceived that it should provide guidelines to other educators who are responsible for the development of higher education for learners who are owner/managers of micro/small business enterprises. The authors drew on and integrated varying streams of learning literature as well as integrating results from a longitudinal study involving major stakeholders in order to develop the framework. The framework underscores the criticality of the collaboration between educators and major stakeholders to ensure that higher education meets not only the knowledge needs of its targeted learners but also their generic skill needs.

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² Fáilte Ireland is a government agency charged with the development and promotion of Irish tourism.

Introduction and Background

The Irish tourism sector is fragmented and comprised of over 17,000 businesses – the vast majority of which are micro/small businesses. These types of businesses have a low skill base and engage in little formal education (Jameson 2000; Braun and Hollick 2006) and these owner/managers are lacking in innovativeness and competencies in such areas as marketing, knowledge management, information technology, quality assurance, pricing policy, innovation and management (Failte Ireland 2005). As identified by Fáilte Ireland³ (2005; 2007), there is a need for increased professionalism and innovation in the industry – the agency sees education as key to achieving this enhancement.

While the larger tourism businesses benefit from a graduate management intake and continuing executive development, the owner of the micro/small tourism operation is limited in their professional development. The literature highlights that continuing business education for owner/managers of micro/small businesses is problematic. Major barriers cited, which are perceived to be global, have been: their resource poverty – most especially the inability to leave their business, the lack of appropriate and available tertiary tourism education, and isolation due to location (cf. Sargeant, 1996; Jameson 2000; Billett 2001; Fáilte Ireland, 2005, 2007; Braun and Hollick 2006; Inui et al. 2006; Kelliher and Henderson 2006; Walker et al. 2007).

Overcoming these barriers to continuing education for this business cohort has been centralised in the authors' School of Business⁴ teaching strategy over the past several years as evidenced in its tourism learning network (TLN) programme which started in the 2006/2007 academic year and the degree programme that is the focus of this paper. The TLNs were

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⁴ At Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT).

established by Fáilte Ireland in order to meet the learning needs of micro/small to medium tourism enterprises. Indeed, as identified in the literature, feedback from the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) indicated that they wanted training that was “short, snappy, relevant and local.”⁵ At the time TLNs were established, ‘learning networks’ was not a concept people were familiar with nor was it in common usage in the Irish tourism industry. In collaboration with Fáilte Ireland, the authors’ business school were the originators of the TLN learning framework⁶ and the school has, since the TLN roll-out, facilitated and managed the TLNs located in the South and South-east regions of Ireland. To-date, the school’s programme has been very successful⁷ - as it also has been nationally.⁸ In addition, and in conjunction with Fáilte Ireland, the authors’ School of Business provides an opportunity for tourism providers to obtain a Level 6⁹ certification through its TLN initiative.¹⁰ The certificate graduates represent the target cohort for the new degree programme – Bachelor of Science in Small Business Management (BSc).

The rest of this paper is focused on the development of the contemporary framework outlined in Figure 1. The first section presents the contribution of the literature to the framework. This is followed by a description of the primary data collection stages and accompanying results which finalised the framework’s design. The framework also draws on the prior

⁵ Fáilte Ireland’s policy document, *Competing Through People: A Human Resource Development Strategy for Irish Tourism 2005-2010*. See also: Gibb, 1997; Meldrum and de Berranger (1999); Dalley and Hamilton 2000.

⁶ See Foley et al. (2006). This framework is the underlying basis for the process and content of the South and South-east TLNs which are managed by WIT’s School of Business.

⁷ This consideration is based on the school’s assessment of its TLN programme which was derived from the feedback of TLN stakeholders (participants, Fáilte Ireland, and course providers).

⁸ Utilising general guidelines, thirty-three TLNs have been established in Ireland by varying types of providers (academics and/or consultants). The success of this initiative has been recognised and endorsed at national level via the recently received Taoiseach’s Public Service Excellence Award and the Irish Institute of Training and Development (IITD) Outstanding Achievement Award. The networks are now in their fourth year of operation.

⁹ In third level institutions in Ireland, qualification standards extend from Level 6 (Certificate) to Level 10 (PhD). These levels denote the standard of knowledge, skill and competence that should be acquired by learners in order to obtain the relevant award as established by the National Qualification Authority of Ireland. See <http://www.hetac.ie/docs/Business%20-%20Award%20Standards.pdf>.

¹⁰ Certificate in Tourism Business Practice.

teaching experience of the authors' and the course design team,¹¹ especially in regard to the TLN initiative.

Although the framework has been crafted for one particular programme, targeted at a particular sector, it is perceived that it should provide guidelines to other educators who are responsible for the development of higher education for adult learners who are owner/managers of micro/small business enterprises. The authors drew on and integrated varying streams of learning literature as well as integrating results from a longitudinal study involving major stakeholders in order to develop the framework. The framework underscores the criticality of the collaboration between educators and major stakeholders to ensure that higher education meets not only the knowledge needs of its targeted learners but also their generic skill needs.

Framework Development: The Literature

The BSc represents an opportunity for those tourism businesses who have been awarded a Level 6 certificate through the TLN initiative to achieve a higher level of management education. The BSc is a natural evolution of the TLN Fáilte Ireland initiative which allows tourism practitioners, particularly owner/managers of micro/small tourism enterprises, to continue their personal and professional learning in a formal way that will allow them to achieve a recognised academic award. Interaction and feedback from TLN participants (current and past) as well as Fáilte Ireland has highlighted the need by practitioners for the aforementioned degree programme.

¹¹ The course design team is comprised of 20 academic staff as well as the TLN project manager, Anne-Marie Frampton. The authors of this paper are core members of the course design team. Dr. Anthony Foley is the programme director and Jennifer Hussey is a PhD candidate who is tracking the BSc development as well as its initial year of operation. Space issues do not allow the authors to discuss in detail the considerable role that the entire course design team had and is still having in the BSc's development, however the criticality of this interaction to the BSc's development is noted in Figure 1.

- **INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE** -

Teaching Philosophy and Approach

Underlying the development of the framework was the call in the literature for small business education which defines learning as “the human process by which skills, knowledge, habit and attitudes are acquired and altered in such a way that behaviour is modified (Beach, 1980)” (as cited by Gibb, 1997, p. 15) and knowledge to be “information combined with experience, context, interpretation and reflection” (Davenport et al. 1998, as cited by Dalley and Hamilton, 2000, p. 51). Both of the foregoing definitions have had a significant impact on the underlying philosophy and approach to the BSc; the former definition identifies that learning embraces skills as well as knowledge and behavioural change, while the latter definition identifies the constructionist nature of knowledge. While there has been a growing recognition of the need for a shift away from the prevalent ‘transmission’ model of education “where pre-existing fixed ideas are transmitted to the learner” (Kolb and Kolb 2005, p. 194) and learning and knowledge are narrowly defined, especially in the small business context (cf. Gibb 1997; Ehrich and Billett 2004; Foley et al. 2006; Fuller-Love 2006), the ‘transmission’ model and its attendant definitions are still ubiquitous.¹² In the context of the small business, researchers in the area have determined that small businesses learn best when they are able to utilise their own business as a learning site (Ehrich and Billett 2004) as, according to Halme (2001), “Education and training need to relate to the daily reality of the

¹² The development of the BSc was also informed by current WIT strategy. In 2008, the Institute was awarded funding from the Irish government’s Strategic Innovation Fund to examine knowledge transfer in its curricula. Major objectives of the initiative: to enhance the learning experience of students and their employability skills as well as embedding them with life-long learning skills. In order to achieve the foregoing, the initiative actively promotes an andragogical philosophy and problem-based learning approach. One of the author’s of this paper, Dr. Mary T. Holden, had a primary role in this initiative during the 2008-2009 academic year.

recipient” (p. 111); further, the criticality of peer-to-peer learning to enhancing an individual’s learning or their firm’s success has been well argued by academics and researchers such as Gibb (1997), Hannon et al. (2000), Boud et al. (2001), Halme (2001), Kelliher et al. (2009), and Zhang and Hamilton (2009). Further, in an online context, Park and Choi (2009) have determined that the high rate of attrition of adult online courses can be limited through ensuring that adult learners are satisfied with their course and that their learning is relevant to them; they argued that value and satisfaction is found in a course when adult learners are able to apply the new skills and knowledge learned. An additional consideration, as indicated in this paper’s findings from discussions with Fáilte Ireland (outlined later), was that the BSc had to address the professional development of tourism operators as well as contribute to the enhancement of the sector’s entrepreneurship and innovativeness.

Based on the foregoing as well as the course design team’s own knowledge of the educational needs of micro/small business tourism enterprises (derived from the TLN initiative), it was decided to apply an andragogical philosophy as well as an action learning approach (specifically problem-based learning) to the new BSc programme. Andragogy is particularly relevant to the micro/small business context as it focuses on the application of knowledge to real life and perceives students as a central and active component in the learning equation (cf. Knowles 1980);¹³ it builds on and extends student experiences as it is “predicated on the belief that during the span of living, humans accumulate experience...Students bring applicable knowledge and skills to the learning process. They seek to fill the gaps of knowledge in their experience base” (Forrest and Peterson 2006, p. 118). A PBL approach was selected by the team as it was perceived to be conducive to achieving the high-level

¹³ In addition, there is a consensus in the online learning literature that in order to ensure a “quality online learning experience” the learning approach must shift from the traditional, teacher-centred perspective to a learner-centred perspective (see Boyer et al. 2006).

skills, knowledge, and appropriate personal traits to grow and transform enterprises (cf. Duch et al. 2001; Burns and Chisholm 2005). PBL is founded on Dewey's belief that experience is a major source of learning as well as Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning; it also has an action learning approach which Cunningham (1999) identified as central to an andragogical philosophy. Modern management problems require that students have the ability to leverage both their experience (know how) and new knowledge (know what), thereby exemplifying and centralising the relationship between experience and theory. Indeed, as Kessels and Poell (2004) noted in discussing the importance of learning through andragogy to today's firm: "In a knowledge economy, in which improvement and innovation are required for long-term survival, standardization is not the goal but the extraordinary, the surprising, the artistic" (p. 148). Reflecting the andragogical philosophy and PBL approach, the learner is centralised in Figure 1.

The Role of Induction

Research has shown that although non-traditional students such as the BSc's targeted cohort may be highly motivated, their transition into higher education can be problematic (Tait and Godfrey 2001; Barron and D'Annunzio-Green 2009). The non-traditional student who is entering higher education from a further education institute (such as the case of the targeted BSc cohort) has several concerns connected with his/her entry:

- Feelings of isolation and lack of identity.
- Lacking in academic self-confidence.
- Fearful of the level of responsibility he/she must take for their own learning.
- Lack of knowledge concerning teaching, learning and assessment methods.
- Level of work expected from him/her.
- Time management.

- Work/life balance.
- Study skills.
- Teamwork skills.
- Ability to cope with higher academic level.
- Financing his/her study.

The authors' own experience with the targeted BSc cohort also indicates that writing skills and IT skills may also be of concern.

Barron and D'Annunzio-Green (2009) determined that students will work through their difficulties as they expect the "first few weeks to be difficult" but learners also expect that support will be forthcoming from academic staff – a major finding of their study was the need by institutes to establish an early intervention in order to enhance the learner's academic self-confidence. Research has indicated that, in order to enhance the quality of the student's learning experience, an induction programme which addresses the foregoing concerns is critical. Similar to the literature where induction has been acknowledged as an "ongoing process throughout the degree programme" (Tait and Godfrey 2001, p. 260), the induction programmes for non-traditional students offered in the authors' business school are scheduled for pre-semester delivery as well as delivery, when needed, throughout the first year. This same approach will be utilised for the BSc with further supports added, if and when necessary, through the further two years of the programme. The formal induction will be credited.

The Role of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Many higher education providers have recognised that learning "occurs in many contexts including work, involvement in social and community activities, or learning through life

experience” (Sheridan and Lenihan 2009, p. 1), hence there has been a growing formal recognition of this learning by third level institutions. In line with European Union policy concerning lifelong learning, the recognition in Ireland has been driven by the Irish government as evident in its RPL guidelines published by the Irish National Qualifications Authority in 2006, hence the formal recognition of prior learning is relatively new. Because of its recency, the course design team had little knowledge of what RPL entailed – this then represented an area of research for the team and meetings with WIT’s registrar’s office in order to incorporate RPL into the BSc. The award of credits for RPL as well as the TLN certification, enables the School of Business to offer the three year full-time programme in a part-time mode, thereby easing the learners’ study burden and making formal education more accessible – time for study and work-life balance are issues that have been identified previously in this paper as being of major concern to adult learners; as indicated in the findings presented later in this paper – these were also issues for the BSc’s targeted cohort.

The Need for Flexibility in Programme Delivery

Research has shown that flexibility in delivery is necessary in order to accommodate students’ (such as the targeted cohort) delivery needs (access, time, and place) (Collins et al. 2003; Braun and Hollick 2006; Barron and D’Annunzio-Green 2009). For example, Fuller-Love (2006) has noted that access and place are particularly relevant to businesses located in rural areas where infrastructure is poor – this is particularly pertinent to the Irish context. Further, as the attrition rate of online courses is high (Park and Choi 2009), the course design team wanted to ensure that this component of the programme would be crafted optimally. The need for flexibility in formal education by tourism micro/small tourism enterprise owner/managers will be met through the blended learning approach which will involve the availability of content as well as the facilitation by faculty of online discussion boards/chat

rooms combined with face-to-face interaction with peers as well as lecturers. Ausburn (2004) has commented that the literature has recognised that this type of a mixed-mode instructional model combines the “best features” of both the traditional classroom as well as the online classroom. In her meta-analysis of the literature, she related that “Among instructional design elements of distance courses online, the research evidence favours interactivity, communication, and ‘bonds’ or ‘connectedness’ as important features of course design, with elements such as chat, e-mail, discussion boards, group activities, and learning communities typically drawing positive responses from students” (p. 329). It is perceived by the team that this mixed-mode approach should have a positive impact on learner retention. However, there are issues connected with distance education as identified by McAlister et al. (2006) and Sherman and Beaty (2007) which must be addressed by the course design team such as technology and its support, broadband availability, learner IT skills, reduction in student engagement, staff resourcing and commitment, staff expertise, and course design.

Lack of Engagement in Formal Education

A major issue identified in the literature has been the low up-take of either informal or formal education/training by small business owner/managers – much of the education/training that is undertaken by small firms is informal, in-house and short-term (Lawless et al. 2000; Storey 2004; Devins et al. 2005; Fuller-Love 2006). Storey (2004) has argued that the low up-take of formal education is due to “costs in terms of loss of staff time and the view that the training will not be tailored to specific firm requirements” (p. 126), while Johnson (2002) has contended that the reasons for the lack of uptake are varied – a poor choice of communication channel by providers or owner/manager scepticism/needing more convincing about its benefits. In the context of the BSc, the gauging of the need for the degree by the School of

Business is based on discussions with past TLN certificate graduates as well as Fáilte Ireland executives and the agency's past research on education and training for the tourism sector.¹⁴

Framework Development: Primary Data Collection Contribution

Research Methodology

A major component of the methodology involved an intense literature review in connection with learning theory and blended learning, particularly that which was pertinent to adult, micro/small business learners. In developing a programme which would meet the needs of the targeted learners as well as the needs of the sector, it was essential that the course design team gathered detailed and rich information concerning the degree's major dimensions: content, context, process and outcomes. In many respects, each of these four dimensions of the BSc represented a 'blank sheet' to the course design team. A qualitative methodology was chosen as this type of methodology results in gathering the rich detail (Patton 1990) that was needed by the team but it also enabled the team to enter a collaborative and an expeditious two-way dialogue with the relevant stakeholders – Fáilte Ireland and the targeted learners. The research methodology involved four stages of data gathering and was longitudinal:

1. Discussions with Fáilte Ireland personnel responsible for education and training to identify module themes (five sessions over the Spring/Summer 2009).
2. Round-table discussion with practitioners to obtain their perspective on module themes (June 4th 2009).
3. Pilot study and completion of feedback forms (February 16th 2010).
4. Post-pilot interviews with practitioners (March 1st – 9th 2010).

¹⁴ The success of Fáilte Ireland's TLN initiative and especially the number of TLN participants who have graduated with a certificate would suggest that there is a demand for formal education if content and delivery suit the micro/small tourism operator. To date, over 440 tourism enterprises have participated in the TLNs managed by WIT's School of Business with 210 certificate graduates.

The next section presents descriptive details on each stage of the data collection as well as each stage's findings.

Data Collection Stages and Findings

Stage 1: Fáilte Ireland Discussions

From the earliest discussions between the course design team and the funding agency,¹⁵ it was clear that Fáilte Ireland had a clear set of requirements that would need to be met by the nascent degree. The first stipulation was for the programme to be truly national in its design, development and delivery. This reflected the national nature of the Fáilte Ireland TLN initiative, whose participants are eligible to pursue a Certificate in Tourism Business Practice in parallel.

The second concern from the funding agency was that the degree should be relevant and customised to the needs of the micro/small tourism enterprise promoter. Fáilte Ireland is conscious that there are many academic programmes which are accessible and relevant for Irish tourism practitioners in larger enterprises, particularly hotels. The undergraduate interested in general business and tourism programmes is similarly sure of choice. However, there is a dearth of academic programmes which can address the business development needs of the owner/manager of the micro/small tourism enterprise. Therefore, the rationale in developing the BSc, which in its design, content and delivery meets these needs. In particular, Fáilte Ireland stressed that the programme should reflect the latest thinking on design and delivery. The consultation with Fáilte Ireland, and directly with tourism industry entrepreneurs in a round-table discussion and pilot session, and the utilisation of a PBL ethos

¹⁵ Discussions involved the following executives from Fáilte Ireland: (1) at national level - Professional Development Advisor, Professional Development Manager, Head of Professional Development, and Director of HRM and (2) at regional level - General Manager and Professional Development Adviser.

for the programme have all been part of the course design team's commitment to relevance and customisation of the BSc to the needs of the micro/small tourism business sector. This process resulted in an awareness of the importance of developing insights into critical areas for the tourism entrepreneur such as networking and business planning. The imperative for the BSc to develop graduates as tourism professionals with the ability to address challenges and opportunities facing the Irish tourism industry as well as enhanced entrepreneurship and innovativeness was highlighted also in discussions with Fáilte Ireland.

The discussions with the agency resulted in agreement on a number of guiding themes for the programme:

- **Market Engagement and Web Technology** – enabling the participants to develop effective business models in a Web 2.0 environment where the Internet is driving tourist information, communication and reservations.
- **Tourism Business Processes** – highlighting effective practice in service operations for tourism entrepreneurs.
- **Network Development** – addressing the challenge for the industry in developing sustainable tourism networks.
- **Entrepreneurial Development** – it is critical that owner/managers of small tourism enterprises develop the functional capability and critical skills needed in a hyper competitive environment.
- **Sales and Strategic Market Development** – effective engagement with the market is essential for Irish tourism.
- **Tourism Competitiveness and Innovation** – key challenges for Irish tourism lie in driving a competitive tourism destination and also in developing innovation in service design, delivery

and communication. Fáilte Ireland has highlighted the importance of assisting the industry to address these challenges as articulated in a number of Irish tourism policy studies.¹⁶

- **Environmental and Energy Management** – in line with the emerging green economy which has implications for cost control and target marketing for tourism enterprises.

Stage 2: Practitioner Round-table Discussion

The major objective of this stage was to obtain the viewpoints of the targeted practitioners on module content – both generic skills and discipline-specific knowledge. The round-table discussion involved nineteen practitioners (TLN certificate holders) and was facilitated by two of the paper's authors. The session was held in the morning and started with the provision of tea and coffee and closed with an invitation to lunch. The round-table lasted approximately two hours. The sample of practitioners that were recruited were chosen via convenience sampling; they were: (1) from the targeted cohort (past TLN participants with the Certificate), (2) closely located to WIT (from the counties of: Waterford, Wexford, Kilkenny, and Tipperary) (as this was a busy time of year, the course design team did not want to ask individuals who would have to add extensive travel time to the time-out from their business), (3) perceived by the team to be the most likely interested in the BSc, and (4) represented a diverse set of tourism providers, from hospitality services and attractions to micro/small and medium sized accommodation providers. In order to provide a starting point for the discussion, practitioners were first asked to write down three major issues/challenges or three major problems that each were currently facing in their business or felt they would be facing in the future. This was then followed by the authors asking one of the practitioners to identify an issue/challenge/problem. What followed was a free-flowing discussion among the practitioners in which many issues/challenges were identified.

¹⁶For example, Tourism Renewal Group (2009) *New Horizons for Irish Tourism*.

The analysis of this stage found that there was considerable agreement among the participants concerning their needs. The issues/challenges which were identified by the participants were:

- Time management.
- Project management.
- Negotiation.
- Finance/Accounting.
- Human resource.
- Business planning.
- IT/Web/social media skills.
- Supply chain management.
- Customer service.
- Conflict management.
- Business writing skills, especially in regards to writing funding applications.
- Verbal communication skills.
- Stakeholder management, most particularly with local authorities.
- Marketing knowledge and skills.
- Environmental law/regulations.
- Change management.
- Leadership.
- Innovation.
- Keeping a positive outlook.
- Strategic perspective.

In Appendix 1 there is a brief synopsis of practitioner comments which reflect each issue/concern.

Stage 3: Pilot Study and Completion of Feedback Forms

The course design team felt that this stage was critical because of the lack of academic staff experience with problem-based learning and blended learning – both are new initiatives in the School of Business; it was challenging for the team to ensure that the design of the pilot resulted in obtaining rich, accurate data about these two key elements of the BSc.¹⁷ Further, this stage was crucial to ensuring that the targeted cohort were major contributors at each major step of the BSc's development. As identified in the literature, and based on the team's previous experience with the targeted cohort, the course design team wanted to ensure that the programme's approach and delivery would meet micro/small owner/manager needs. The pilot study and the feedback form were crafted by the authors' in order to gather information from potential participants of the BSc concerning: (1) their response to PBL, (2) perceived problems arising in connection with PBL, (3) particular challenges in connection with working in an online environment, (4) barriers to completing the assessment, and (5) any other issues/concerns arising. Although the course design team made every attempt to make the pilot realistic, there were limitations to its 'reality.' For instance, the depth and breadth of resources to be reviewed for the assessment fell short of Level 7 standards, therefore results in all likelihood do not fully reveal latent issues/concerns in connection with study skills, time management, coping with level of work expected, teamwork, etc.; also, the assessment did not attract a grade, hence it was perceived that this had a negative impact on the level of individual and team efforts in completing the assignment. However, despite the foregoing, it

¹⁷ The utilisation of PBL and blended learning in the programme represent key challenges for the course design team going forward. Only two members of the design team have PBL experience and this experience is extremely limited – both members have used PBL for the first time in the current academic year. The BSc is the first programme in the business school to utilise blended learning and no academic staff member has previously utilised this approach. A series of training workshops given by experts on PBL and blended learning has been delivered over the past academic year to the course design team. Further, two of the authors of this paper attended a week-long Summer school on e-learning in June 2009 at Dublin Institute of Technology. Despite the foregoing, the authors perceive that there exists some trepidation in connection with the delivery of the programme.

is perceived by the authors that the PBL process which occurred in Stage 1 accurately reflected that which occurs in an actual classroom context.

Once again, convenience sampling was utilised, employing the same criteria as Stage 2 but the choice of individuals was not limited by distance. Fifty letters were sent to past TLN participants who obtained certification inviting them to participate in the pilot study – the sample was comprised of practitioners who had attended the prior round-table discussion and those who had not. For those who had not attended the prior event, their letter contained a brief description of the BSc. It was explained to both sets of participants that the pilot involved two steps. The first step would last from 10:00 to 2:30 (including lunch) and would involve the following agenda:

- Introduction to the programme including update on progress to date.
- Overview of programme schedule and delivery plans.
- Introduction to the WIT eLearning support website and Moodle.
- Introduction to problem-based learning.
- Division of learners into teams.¹⁸
- Introduction to module and presentation of ‘trigger.’
- Team roles allocated and team rules identified.
- Brainstorming session – identify learning issues.
- Presentation to teams of assessment to be completed; as a start, some online resources were given to the learners by the facilitators.

The second step involved working in teams to produce a ‘solution’ to the trigger. Potential participants were also told in the letter that the second step involved giving the course design

¹⁸ With the participants’ written agreement, the PBL component of the pilot was recorded from this point onwards (audio and video).

team post-pilot feedback via a telephone interview. In return for agreeing to partake in both steps of the pilot, participants were promised a formal Certificate of Appreciation from WIT's Head of Graduate Business in recognition and gratitude of their contribution. Eighteen positive responses to the course design team's invitations were received and eighteen participants attended the workshop.

The workshop unfolded as outlined in the above mentioned agenda.¹⁹ Participants were divided into four teams; each team was facilitated by one of this paper's authors. At the end of the workshop, each team was asked to provide to the course design team a written report – no more than 250 words – which would be assessed. This document was to be uploaded to the pilot's Moodle site by each team one week later. All teams uploaded their assignment on time.

Based on post-pilot discussions between the authors, several major findings from this stage were determined:

- The practitioners quickly grasped the PBL process.
- The participants saw the PBL process and trigger as engaging and very relevant to them.
- The time that they would need to devote to their studies was a major concern (both in terms of time per week as well as the degree's three year duration).
- The financing of their fees was also a major concern.
- Obtaining exemptions for prior learning was another major issue.

¹⁹ The 'trigger' for the pilot actually involved a quote from the round-table discussion: "*I tend to wear maybe five different hats in one day; maybe if I could manage my time better and wear just two hats per day*" which was also accompanied by a clip-art picture showing a man juggling different types of hats. The trigger is associated with the 'Critical Personal Skills' module which is scheduled to be delivered in the first semester of the BSc.

In order to capture immediate feedback from the participants on the pilot-study, a short, highly structured questionnaire was prepared by the course design team; the feedback form's design was based on PBL feedback forms which had been previously utilised by the authors. All participants completed the feedback form before leaving for lunch. Results are listed in Table 1. The findings reflect the high level of engagement which was observed by the authors during the pilot study. All mean scores are at the high end of the scale.

- INSERT TABLE 1 HERE -

Stage 4: Post-pilot Interviews

The interviews were scheduled for the week following completion of the team assignment, allowing the participants the time to reflect on their recent experience involving the pilot study; most specifically, the team was interested in gathering information on their experience in completing the assignment. Seventeen of the eighteen²⁰ pilot participants were interviewed over eight days by one of this paper's authors. On average, each interview lasted 35 minutes; the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for follow-up questions and

²⁰ Contact was made with the remaining pilot participant on four separate occasions; for each time, he indicated he was too busy to be interviewed.

probing on pertinent issues raised by the participants. Key findings from the interviews are listed below:

- **Study time and semester timing** – all interviewees perceived that they did not have sufficient time in their schedule to devote to study; some concern was expressed concerning work/life balance. For example, one participant stated *“difficulty to set-out this time totally to myself... added stress that this would bring.”* Some participants indicated that semester scheduling would need to take into account that they take their holidays in September-October and that there is a national movement to extend the tourism season, stating: *“The problem is we take our break in September-October and there’s probably quite a few others in the same boat.”* and *“I’m organizing a festival in late September, so I won’t be available until October, really.”*
- **Length of degree** - six participants indicated that the necessary three year commitment was daunting.
- **Motivation** – some participants found the pilot study to be motivating in regards to considering further education; one individual stated *“I am awake again”* and another stated *“It has got me thinking again.”*
- **Group work** – some concern was expressed in connection with working with others to complete assignments such as an unequal burden of work. Five participants indicated that they were accustomed to being self-sufficient and were concerned over having to rely on the skills and abilities of others. For example, one interviewee commented: *“What we had to do was a very small thing...but some of the others took forever to do it”* while another participant stated: *“you always get studiers, then others not so into it.”* However, others welcomed the added support from peers in completing assignments, stating:

“Gained a group with similar problems and needs” and “People were willing to help each other” while others indicated that they were *“...well used to running a meeting.”*

- **Group mix** – six of the participants indicated that groups should have a good mix of businesses/management roles.
- **Chairperson role** – each of the four chairpersons drew attention to their role and the responsibilities that went with it – none of the other PBL roles (scribe, time-keeper and reader) were highlighted in the interviews.
- **Resource poverty** – this was in regards to manpower and financing the degree. As one participant stated: *“It’s all down to me and my husband – everything”* while others stated: *“With a young family, the cost is going to be a decider”* and *“My workplace will not subsidise my training, or allow me time-off for it, so these six days [modules’ residential workshops] would be my holidays.”*
- **Distance learning** – the issue of geographic spread of the group and the need for face-to-face interactions between residential workshops was raised by two and four interviewees, respectively.
- **Technology** – several interviewees indicated concern in connection with using the forum function in Moodle, their IT skills, and their lack of broadband (however, only two indicated they didn’t have broadband) while others indicated technology *“Will make it a whole lot easier”* and *“Moodle side – a dream.”*
- **Relevancy** – the BSc needs to be relevant for their business and for them personally; some indicated that they saw PBL as providing relevancy: *“Rather than having a lecture, everybody is involved in the problem...and*

rather than telling us the answer – our experience is brought into it,” “PBL is brilliant!...a workman’s way of solving problems,” and “One really is getting to grips with the material – you are learning as you go along, going through the research.”

- **Academic self-confidence** – one individual felt reassured about having the ability to complete the degree after the pilot study whereas another individual indicated that it created a *“Tiny element of self-doubt in my mind.”*

Discussion

Due to the literature and WIT’s teaching and learning strategy, an andragogical philosophy, PBL and a blended learning approach were chosen to underlie the BSc. The course design team understood that the targeted cohort needed content to be relevant and that the delivery of the programme had to be flexible (access, time, and place). Stage 3 was designed to collect data concerning participants’ perceptions towards the foregoing. These design elements of the BSc were received positively by the pilot group, however some concern was expressed over group work/group mix as well as the chairperson’s role. Although not covered in this paper’s literature review due to spatial constraints, there is little research on online group dynamics but that which does exist has shown that this is an issue that must be studied and addressed by the course design team as well as the composition of the group (see Allan and Lawless 2003; Smith 2005). However, the team does have considerable experience concerning group dynamics in the traditional classroom, and it is perceived that the induction, blended learning approach and academic staff experience should enhance the success of online collaboration. In addition, the team felt that the concern over the chairperson’s role was somewhat over emphasised by the participants because of the nature

of the pilot – just one week which did not allow for the normal turnover of roles that occurs in PBL (thereby assisting in realising a more equitable responsibility balance).

Findings support prior research by Tait and Godfrey (2001) and Barron and D’Annunzio-Green (2009) in regards to entry of non-traditional students into higher education in that potential BSc participants expressed concern over the length of time of the degree programme (three years) with all concerned about the amount of time needed to devote to their studies – this was expressed as a major concern in the pilot study by all participants as well as the post-pilot interviews – indeed, this issue was the only one that **all** of the interviewees identified. Researchers that have examined the lack of uptake of formal education initiatives by small/micro owner/managers have given various reasons why – cost, lack of relevance, scepticism of benefits, etc. (Storey 2004; Johnson 2002) – however, this study found that although the cost of fees was a major issue, the major concern appeared to be time. Neither relevance nor scepticism of benefits arose as issues but this could have been due to the nature of the study’s context in that they saw that the BSc was being crafted for them and with them. Because of the time issue, the recognition of prior learning was important to the participants – the crediting of their prior learning was explained to them in the pilot study; they were further told at that time that the RPL allowed the School of Business to offer the degree over three years in a ‘part-time’ mode, therefore their study time would not be as considerable as they first expected. However, it appeared that study time and the three year commitment could be issues that may prove to be insurmountable for some potential learners.

In collaboration with the course design team, Fáilte Ireland had identified several content themes in which to develop the programme’s modules from. The goal of the agency was to

enhance the sector's professionalism and innovativeness, and encourage a network approach to learning as well as a way of competing effectively, that is, 'cooperating to compete.' In the round-table discussion with practitioners, these themes were confirmed and the discussants also indicated various generic skills that they needed. Figure 1 highlights that the BSc is composed of the generic skills and discipline-specific content that were identified by Fáilte Ireland and the practitioners, hence it is perceived by the team that the BSc should provide the BSc's learners with the relevancy that they require from educational providers. However, it is notable that 'networking' did not come up in the round-table discussion as a need. This might have been due to participants' TLN background or unawareness of the benefits of networking such as learning, innovation and competitiveness for micro/small tourism enterprises (Gibb 1997; Halme 2001; Morrison et al. 2004).

In regards to the delivery aspect of the BSc, results on the issue concerning the IT component of the programme are unclear – some participants indicated a concern over the IT component but others indicated that the technology was a positive feature. However, based on experience with the TLN participants – it is perceived by the team that many of the targeted learners have very limited skills regarding software such as Microsoft's Word, Excel and PowerPoint as well as an interface such as Moodle, hence the course design team has incorporated IT skills into the induction.

Current Programme Status/Conclusion

One major challenge which now faces the course design team concerns the design of the modules. The team are both the designers of the BSc as well as module developers. As indicated previously, the degree addresses both graduate generic skill development as well as discipline-specific knowledge. The team's plan for the BSc involving generic skill

development begins in year 1 and will be progressed from year-to-year; module developers have responsibility for specific generic skills and their progression. The business faculty has and is currently working in teams and across teams in order to ensure generic skills are progressed as well as to ensure that program themes (discipline-specific knowledge) will be delivered through a tightly-knit and integrated curriculum. A matrix template has been designed in order to assign generic skill responsibilities as well as tracking each skill's progression across the three years of the program – the assigning of these responsibilities has been completed.

Module developers are now interacting in order to design PBL problems/triggers which are multi-disciplinary (where possible) in order to replicate the real-life problems faced by the owner/managers. The assessment for each module is also being prepared. A workshop on PBL issues concerning 'trigger/problem' design and assessments was recently completed by two of this paper's authors; module developers were given guidelines and examples of 'triggers/problems' in varying media as well as relevant assessments.

The online component of the program will be complemented with residential workshops which will provide a forum for more extensive peer-to-peer learning through networking, socialising, and intra/inter-class presentations and discussions. Currently, the course design team is examining the operational details of delivering the first year of the programme as well as the induction. Challenges here involve staff resourcing issues, finding the correct balance of 'contact' hours involving face-to-face versus asynchronous versus synchronous online communication, as well as the recognition of prior learning and the content and delivery of the induction.

In conclusion, the authors' hope that the framework developed by them will provide some assistance to other educators who are responsible for the development of higher education for adult learners who are owner/managers of micro/small business enterprises. In many respects, the authors feel that this paper represents a 'one stop shop' for adult learner programme designers as the framework's development is based on the integration of varying streams of learning research as well as results from a long data gathering process involving major stakeholders. The framework highlights the centrality of the learner and the criticality of the interaction and collaboration between major stakeholders to ensure that higher education meets not only the knowledge needs of its targeted learners but also their generic skill needs; the framework also addresses the overarching needs of an industrial sector as well as the need for a delivery that is flexible and 'local.' The framework's underlying andragogical philosophy and action learning approach corresponds to the adult education literature whereby it

...has long established that mature learners tend to be more motivated to learn and are more effective and efficient in the process if learning involves a role they are to perform, a task they desire to accomplish, or a problem they wish to solve (Havighurst, 1952; Knowles, 1984). Learner-centered instructional models are based on this tenet concerning adult learners and their need to be an active participant in all phases of the learning process (Boyer et al. 2006, p. 338).

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Appendix 1

Stage 2: Brief Summary of Practitioner Round-table Discussion Comments	
Issue/Concern	Comments made:
Time management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I tend to wear maybe five different hats in one day, maybe if I could manage my time better and wear just two hats per day.”
Project management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “It mightn’t even be the task it might be the operation. You’re straight in at operation...so you might at different times of the year you will be focusing on different aspects of the business ...”
Negotiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “...I need much better negotiation skills particularly when it comes to trying to get granting and funding...” “.. they feel that they’re worth x-amount of money and then we struggle to reach that.”
Finance/Accounting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I think the cash-flow is kind of the main...” “...financial planning in general which was obviously the budgeting, pricing, the managing the overall management of cash-flow...” “For finance, for funding, for grants.” “Knowing your way through; knowing how to get through the massive amount of forms that you have to fill in and fill them in effectively.” “Yea. That’s actually quite important – to be able to actually manage them, especially if you’re going to the bank or anything like that or a feasibility study or anything like that...” “...how we’re going to price ourselves over the next year to two/three years, four years.” “Accounting, cash flow and keeping track – which I’m not very good at.” A comment made in regards to recession: “So people need to know how to start all over again. Like if you go for a loan today, you’re nearly asked your mother’s maiden name – whereas a year ago – good man _____ [participant’s name] – pay that back, no problem at all. That’s all gone out the window.” “...people need to plan a little bit better to know their costs; there’s a lot of hidden costs when you’re in a business that people don’t understand, and don’t know until it comes up and bites them on the backside...it’s controlling your costs, controlling your sales, controlling your cash-flow...” “...I mean the babble that comes through from Europe on a weekly basis. It’s still very difficult to find what funding you can actually apply for.”
Human resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “...we struggle every year to get someone to be qualified – then because of that they feel that they’re worth x-amount of money and then we struggle to reach that.” “Sort of around employment and that and maybe from that being able to...with regards to in-house courses and things like that.”
Business planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “...development of the business and the direction. I suppose to what direction that we’ll be taking at the next step.” “...I find planning is the first great point because you have ideas about developing. Say you have property and so on and you’d like to continue on into...maybeorganic...”
IT/Web/Social Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “...and record keeping as in databases and things like that.” “...how technology could help your business as well. People did refer to Twitter and all that. Personally, I can’t stand the stuff but maybe there are ways and means of using those kind of things to develop your business without employing sales and marketing managers; maybe you can do it yourself using these things.”
Supply chain management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I suppose another indication there would be creditors and giving a certain timeframe – some are better than others and their pricing strategy then comes into that...”
Customer service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “...students that come up to the course – they need to know and understand the customer. And you need to go and know what they want...And don’t be frightened

	<i>to ask them what they want. There's too many people that assume what their customer wants and that's their own personal perceptions. Engage your customers and ask them what they physically want."</i>
Conflict management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"I had an experience with staff – having to go and having it resolved – it's quite difficult.</i>
Business writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"The other thing that I find is writing skills. It sounds a bit weird but writing skills – like you need to be able to put something into one line which takes a paragraph – if you can understand what I mean...Like especially if you're applying for funding. They want this bulk statement and I find it quite difficult to bulk things like that. I'm one of those write the book people. So I think really it's an education in itself to be able to put down in a short sentence."</i> • <i>"There is a skill to actually filling out application forms and if you haven't done it properly then you get put to the end of the pile."</i> • <i>"...so basically it's all about the writing. You know I'd prefer to be doing anything – you know, go down and wash up or do anything rather than do that – funding application."</i>
Verbal communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"...dealing with people...find the level to talk to people...that's a skill that has to be learned individually...You need to instil in people a joy of engaging other people and finding a level..."</i>
Stakeholder management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"...dealing and communicating with the local authorities. It's very difficult to get through to the local authorities and get them to do something for you...they don't seem to want to know you most of the time..."</i> • <i>"There's only one way to deal with the local authorities. I think you need to hire someone – the officials to give a tutorial and then they can explain how we deal with them. Nobody seems to know."</i> • <i>"...deal with getting to know the councillors to put pressure on the officials to do things for you..."</i>
Marketing knowledge and skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Comment made in connection with writing a marketing proposition: "It's more or less public relations – it's also the same problem would relate to having to do press releases. It's the first line that's the important one."</i> • <i>"...also just to put in there with regards to media – if you're doing radio interviews and those type of things...they can put a slant on it differently or whatever so just be aware and to deal with it."</i>
Environmental law/regulations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"And legalities. You'll be just driven demented with the amount of national, European bureaucracy that's coming down the line that's in existence already...you'll never know every single legal aspect of running your business but you do need to be aware of what's there in terms of employment law, waste management, energy laws...it's never ending, but it's never going to go away..."</i>
Change management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"Huge amount of change in the way things are done in terms of planning for a business, getting planning permission, legal aspects, financial – it's all changed."</i> • <i>"...continuous change...And being aware."</i>
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"What I think if you're going to be able to create people who are going to go away and improve their businesses and be tourism leaders I think you need to teach them leadership...Delegation is huge. There's too many people as managers cling on to things...Don't be frightened to fail. You need to teach that to students as well."</i>
Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"You need to teach them to be innovative...you need to be creative...They need to experiment – don't be afraid to fail."</i> •
Keeping a positive outlook	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"I think you have to breathe positivity into people – there's too much negativity around. That comes as much from the people that are teaching the courses as it does the individuals that are sitting there taking notes."</i> • <i>"Yea, you have to be positive. I'd be positive anyway and I'd take chances and all that kind of thing but when it comes down to the money and financial and the banks and all this kind of thing and all the red tape. Going through all this - you know you get a little bit discouraged."</i>
Strategic perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"They need to have strategic views and views for planning."</i>

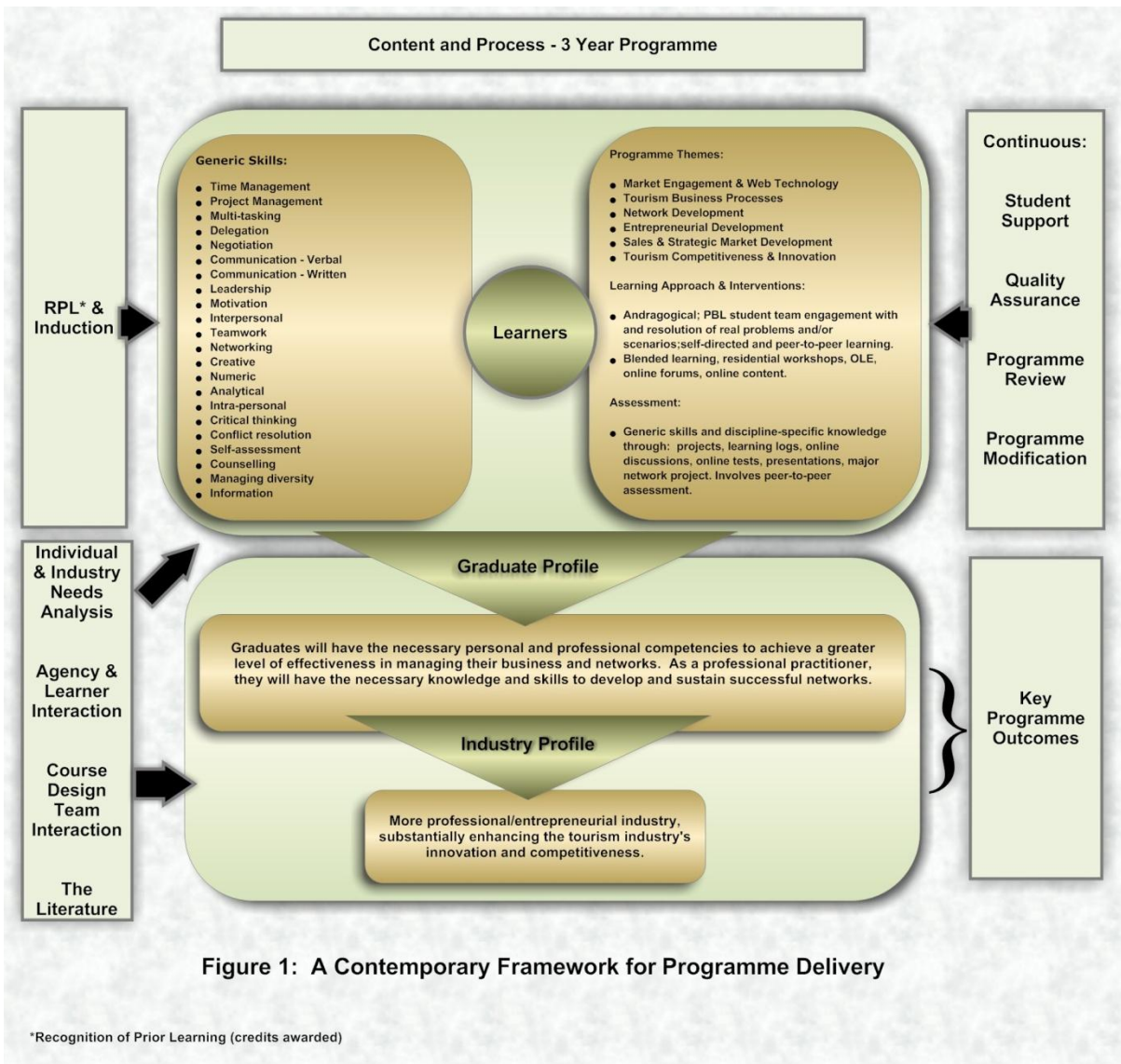


Figure 1: A Contemporary Framework for Programme Delivery

Table 1: Pilot-study Participant Feedback Results	Mean
My first impressions of the BSc degree programme were positive.	4.22
From what I have heard today, I believe the content of the BSc programme will suit my needs.	4.11
I found the subject content of the BSc programme was relevant to me and my business.	4.22
I believe the online forum provided (Moodle) will make it easier for me to communicate with others in my group.	4.35
I enjoyed the chance to discuss the problem posed amongst our team.	4.50
I understand the role each team-member plays in problem-based learning.	4.39
The role of the facilitator in problem-based learning was made clear.	4.39
The problem presented to us as a trigger was of relevance to me.	4.33
I believe I have a fair understanding of what problem-based learning is all about.	4.28
I have a good idea of the steps involved in the process of problem-based learning.	4.11
I am interested in finding out about enrolling on the BSc degree programme.	4.39
n = 18 Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree	