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TU Dublin Learner Assembly Framework

Barry J. Ryan
Technological University Dublin, barry.ryan@tudublin.ie

Fionnuala Darby
Technological University Dublin, fionnuala.darby@tudublin.ie

Shaun Ferns
Technological University Dublin, shaun.ferns@tudublin.ie

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OLLSCOIL TEICNEOLAÍOCHTA BHAILE ÁTHA CLIATH
TU DUBLIN
TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY DUBLIN

UNIVERSITY EDUCATION MODEL

Learner Assembly

Towards a TU Dublin Learner Assembly Framework

TU DUBLIN LEARNER ASSEMBLY VISION

The TU Dublin Learner Assembly brings together students who represent our University population in all its diversity, to explore important and strategic topics, relevant to both students and the University.

In the Assembly, participants are encouraged to actively contribute and engage with each other through open and respectful dialogue, with a commitment to equity and fairness. As an inclusive University, we want the culture of TU Dublin to be a more equitable partnership between our learners and our University.

Through the Assembly we will build ongoing and relevant conversations to address challenging issues together and guide our strategic goals.

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TU DUBLIN LEARNER ASSEMBLY DESIGN AN DEVELOPMENT

The concept of a Learner Assembly was explored with key partners including the TU Dublin Students Union, Student Services and Wellbeing, People, Organisation and Culture, representative of the HoLDs and the University Education Model Team. This took the form of an initial scoping meeting followed-up by regular online meetings. These discussion-based meetings sought to better understand what a Learner Assembly is, as based on existing examples, and what a TU Dublin Learner Assembly could and should be.

During these meetings the potential benefits of a TU Dublin Learner Assembly were identified as several fold and included addressing the need from previous projects (*e.g. Our Student Voice*) that noted the need to give students a voice. The proposed Assembly would also give non-student facing professional services and Vice-President Offices a chance to interact directly with students on strategically important topics. Other questions of importance that emerged during initial discussions included:

- The impact of the Learner Assembly (i.e. will it drive change)?
- Adopting a "You Said, We Did" approach.
- The timeframe for change (i.e. will participants 'feel' the change)?
- Will the Assembly loop be closed, and, if so, how?
- How will attendees be 'listened to' and actions/decisions communicated post-Assembly? Where are the outputs of the Learner Assembly going and how will they be used?
- Can the Learner Assembly be used to 'drill deeper' and build on existing (high level/general) data already in hand (such as ISSE survey)? What do students really want? Key here is to avoid repeating data gathering when we have the data already.

Figure One: Key Initial Questions

TU DUBLIN LEARNER ASSEMBLY PRINCIPLES AND FRAMEWORK

In an attempt to address these questions and to move towards a TU Dublin Learner Assembly, the Learner Assembly Exploration Group developed the TU Dublin Learner Assembly Principles (*see Table One*). Following extensive deliberation and discussion within the Learner Assembly Exploration Group strong recommendations; including **in-person** events, with Learner Assemblies **rotating** through all campuses to address the 'think globally but live locally' conundrum, were included in the Learner Assembly design. Additionally, the recommendation **not to pay** attendees, but to offer **incentives** instead was also adopted. The practical realisation of these Principles required a TU Dublin Learner Assembly Framework (see *Table Two* and *Figure One*).

Once the collaborate TU Dublin Learner Assembly Framework design was completed and agreed by the Exploration Group, the proposed approach was presented to the Registrar. Subsequently, a Learner Assembly was endorsed by the Registrar, and the activities of the Learner Assembly Exploration Group extended to a Working Group to organise the first Learner Assemblies.

Table One: The 5A Principles of TU Dublin Learner Assembly Framework.

Principle	Description
AUTONOMOUS	The Assembly is free from outside control or coercion and does not report to any University group
AGENCY	Students have the power to choose Assembly topics and how the Assembly is conducted, making it a fair and inclusive process
ADVISING	Every student contribution is important, drawing from their personal experiences and perspectives
ADVOCACY	The Assembly outcomes are documented and promoted by supporters across the University
ACCOUNTABILITY	The Assembly outputs are integrated into University actioning systems, ensuring a closed communication and feedback loop

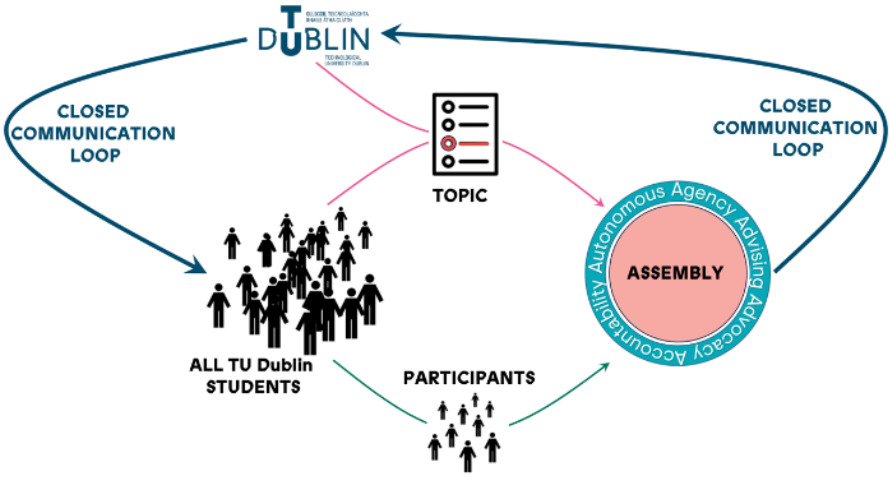

Figure Two: Schematic of the TU Dublin Learner Assembly denoting the central position of the student population and the Learner Assembly participants. The topic of the Learner Assembly is an important strategic topic to both students and the University and is selected collaboratively. The outputs of the Learner Assembly are directed to the most appropriate University structures and the communication loop subsequently closed through communication with the student population.

Table Two: The TU Dublin Learner Assembly Framework

Item	Description
1	Transparently **select the topic** for the Learner Assembly.
2	Base the Learner Assembly on suitable **trigger questions** to encourage open discussion and debate.
3	Execute a **'flipped'** Learner Assembly (if possible) (e.g. share a very brief topic overview before Learner Assembly, via video perhaps; make the trigger questions available beforehand to allow participants to come to the Assembly with some pre-thinking/reflection already completed; support a balanced discussion by having short synopses presented before discussion starts in the Assembly).
4	**Facilitate** peer/group sharing, and discussion, bounded by the Learner Assembly topic.
5	**Scaffold conversation** towards convergence. (e.g. 'how might the points shared at this table be brought together and shared with the rest of the Learner Assembly?")
6	Collate, analyse, synthesise and share the Learner Assembly **output/findings**.
7	Close the communication loop through action of the **output/findings** and **reporting back** to the Student population. *

ACTIONING THE TU DUBLIN LEARNER ASSEMBLY FRAMEWORK - THE PILOT

To investigate the practicalities of actioning the endorsed TU Dublin Learner Assembly Principles and Framework a suite of pilot Learner Assemblies took place, in person, over the month of March 2024 and across all three campuses of TU Dublin (*Blanchardstown, Tallaght and City Centre*). A full report on the suite of Learner Assemblies comprising the pilot is available here, with points of learning and recommendations for enhancing future Learner Assemblies noted (*see below*).

What worked and why?

Student recruitment through Student Ambassadors inviting students to participate on the day was the primary reason for the strong numbers across all three campuses.

The Open Hour approach created a flexible way for students to 'drop in' and engage with the Learner Assembly; it attempted to 'meet the students where they were at'.

The modes of data collection allowed real-time visualisation of the quantitative data and provided discussion starting points for qualitative data.

Including an incentive for students (i.e. a lunch voucher) to attend increased engagement and participation.

What didn't work so well and why?

The Learner Assemblies were 'a moment in time' on each campus. True representation of the TU Dublin student population was not achieved. Students were 'convenience' recruited to participate and primarily comprised students that were on campus and available on the day of each Assembly.

The location of the rooms that hosted the Learner Assembly were 'off the beaten track' for most students.

The depth of discussion was limited as the students moved through the Learner Assembly, punctuated by the discussion posters.

Table Three: Summary of the parts of the pilot Learner Assembly that worked well compared with items that can be enhanced.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Learner Assembly Working Group Members: **Mr. John Carroll** (Student Success Manger), **Dr. Fionnuala Darby** (UEM), **Mr Shaun Ferns** (UEM), **Ms. Jennie Fitzpatrick** (Change Manager), **Dr. Dave Kilmartin** (APO Student Services and Wellbeing), **Mr. Brian Jordan** (SU President), **Mr. Peter McCann** (SU Vice-President of City Campus), **Dr. Sarah McElwee** (Head of Change Management), **Dr. Ciaran O'Leary** (HoLD, FoC,D&D), **Ms Sarah Rennick** (Clerical Officer, Careers) and, **Dr. Barry Ryan** (UEM; Learner Assembly interim coordinator).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations, and associated actions, emerging from the pilot Learner Assembly.

RECOMMENDATION ONE - RECRUITMENT

1 In order to create a Learner Assembly that truly reflects the University in all its diversity it is recommended that each School is tasked with nominating 4 participants and each School is asked to consider the TU Dublin student population when nominating.

RECOMMENDATION TWO - LEARNER ASSEMBLY RESPONSIBILITY

2 In order to build on this pilot, and to weave the Learner Assembly into the fabric of the University, it is important that it is suitably 'homed'. Given the Learner Assembly operates at the interface of students and University, the initial recommended home is within Student Services and Wellbeing. To reflect the importance of the Learner Assembly, appropriate resources should be made available to coordinate and develop (see *Recommendation 3*) the Learner Assembly.

RECOMMENDATION THREE - FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

3 In order to advance the Learner Assembly beyond this initial pilot it is recommended that the following actions are addressed:

Collaboratively develop Terms of Reference, Governance, Guidelines for Respectful Engagement in Learner Assemblies and role descriptors for Learner Assembly participants. It is suggested to review the National Forum Student Associates documentation for initial guidance.

Explore, in collaboration, alternative approaches to Learner Assemblies. In this pilot an Open Hour approach was used. Alternative approaches should be considered with a view to maximising engagement from a true representation of the student population, such as a day-long Learner Assembly or 'think tanks' and focus groups (*see Recommendation 1*).

The points of direct interaction with the University need to be fully understood. For example;

- How will the topic(s) of future Learner Assemblies be pitched/agreed?
- How will the communication loop be formally closed out as part of a sustainable framework?*
- How might opportunities for participant capability building be enhanced through the Learner Assembly (*e.g. providing critical feedback, respectful peer engagement and co-creation*).

**Ownership of Learner Assemblies to be integrated into the Quality Enhancement Plan with the assistance of the Student Experience Committee. This is to include appropriate assignment of actions and reporting of regular published updates on issues raised. Updates may include information on why actions cannot currently be delivered. University Quality Enhancement Plan to be a standing item on AQAEC and tabled at regular intervals at UET and Academic Council for review.*

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