Case Study

A) General Part

General	
Case Study Title	Lessons learned from research commissioned to evaluate a NUI Maynooth Certificate course.
DIALOGUE thematic group	Quality
Date of the case study	10.12.2011
Contact Information	Josephine.w.finn@nuim.ie
Name of the institution	National University of Ireland Maynooth
Location/country	Kildare, Republic of Ireland
Size of the organisation/ Number of academic/research and non-academic/administrative staff	Located 30 km west of Dublin, the National University of Ireland Maynooth is Ireland's smallest but fastest growing university. A college was first established at Maynooth in 1795. St. Patrick's College was Ireland's first national Catholic seminary. In the early 1970s the first lay students were enrolled. Due to continued growth in this cohort over the ensuing decades the secular university separated from St. Patrick's College and the National University of Ireland Maynooth was established. The current student population is 8,800. The university is divided in three faculties: – Arts, Celtic Studies & Philosophy; Social Science; Science & Engineering. The Department of Adult and Community Education is part of the Faculty of Social Science. The Department is the only academic adult education department in the Republic of Ireland. It offers a wide range of undergraduate courses in related subject areas and postgraduate professional programmes in adult and community education to doctorate level. It has a very active research profile both nationally and internationally. It has led the field on widening participation by providing appropriate courses both on and off-campus for non-traditional learners and adult education practitioners. An outreach campus was establised in Kilkenny (south east of Ireland) in 1997. Promoting social inclusion is central to the ethos of the Department. The work is underpinned by a belief that: • Policies and practices of adult education must be contextualised within frameworks that acknowledge the social and cultural forces that exclude specific sectors of the population from access to education and from contributing to the knowledge creation process. • Practices of pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, administration and quality assurance are interdependent

	and are all equally important in widening and supporting participation.

Continuing Education (CE) is a section within the Department and it carries much of the responsibility for liflong learning in the University. Up to 1 500 students register annually for CE courses . The Department has eleven academic staff, one of whom is a Professor and holds the Chair in the subject area. There are five administrative staff on campus at Maynooth and three administrative staff at the campus in Kilkenny. |
Website	http://adulteducation.nuim.ie/
Abstract	
Key words	Certificate course; whole centred approach;
Please provide a short abstract of the case study	The Continuing Education section in the Department has a wide range of Certificate level undergraduate courses on offer. These courses are evaluated during the course of delivery and also at the end of each academic year. All courses undergo more extensive evaluations at regular intervals. In most instances researchers with experience in the field, are employed to carry out the evaluations. The case study provided here was one such course evaluation; it was carried out on a Certificate course in which has been offered by the Department since 1999. It provides some interesting insights into the challenges associated with commissioning research especially as in this case a number of stakeholders were involved. This course evaluation was commissioned and carried out by external research consultants.

B) Specific Part

The following part depends on each thematic group, outlining strengths and weaknesses of the chosen situations.

1. Context:

> **Please present the general background ("landscape of experience") of the activity and in which institutions, organisations, units or sectors the case took place.**

The programme under review was developed in 1999 in partnership with national training agencies. It was a staff training programme for integrating literacy into teaching and into organizations.

The process of integrating literacy into l education entails developing student's literacy and numeracy skills at the same time as developing their knowledge in the core subject/vocational area. Thus tutors design and deliver programmes using methodologies that take account of the literacy requirements of the students. By addressing literacy skills development in this way, students are supported in their education, in their employment induction programmes and during on-the-job training in work placements. This inclusive approach to literacy development in teaching and training is the main focus of the NUIM Certificate course.

A very positive side effect of the programme has been the development, in some centres, of the use of

literacy integration as a 'whole centre' approach. This means that all signs, documents, communications are provided in ways that make the information understandable to everyone regardless of their level of literacy competency.

This case study is of particular interest because of the number different stakeholders involved; the model used in developing and monitoring the research evaluation project; the research outcomes; the lessons learned.

2. What are the objectives and purposes of the concrete action?

This purpose of this case study is to show the complexities of researcher/practitioner relationships especially when external stakeholders are collaborating with the institution and funding the research project.

3. How does this activity combine insights from research and practical hands-on   experience?

NUIM together with other stakeholders involved in the development, delivery and funding of the course, commissioned an evaluation of the course to:
- Improve the effectiveness of the course and implement changes, if any, in its content and delivery
- Support best practice for integrating literacy community and voluntary organisations
- Identify core elements of a whole-centre approach that would maximise benefits to learners
- Examine further innovative interventions

While all stakeholders were in agreement regarding the research brief, their areas of priority were different. NUI Maynooth emphasized the need for data that would indicate positive/negative effectiveness of the course and identify changes that may be needed in content and delivery methods. The external stakeholders were anxious to identify mechanisms to support the implementation of integrating literacy and to identify core elements of a 'whole-centre approach' that would maximise benefits to all participants. This latter issue was of special strategic importance to them. They had anecdotal evidence that the 'whole centre' approach was having a very positive impact in some centres. They hoped to find that the evaluation would provide reliable data would enable them to influence the development of a model for integrating literacy in all the stakeholder centres across the country.

The researchers carried out the research very competently. This was achieved due to their own expertise as researchers but also as a result of ongoing and lengthy consultations with the stakeholders and practitioners. However, it could be argued that the outcomes of the research may have been achieved more easily and with less cost and resources if a practitioner who knew the field well had been commissioned to carry out the research in the first place. This option was considered at the beginning but there was concern expressed about the need to safe guard objectivity and if a researcher who was also a practitioner carried out research in her/his own area of work it could be viewed as biased. The need for 'reliable' data was paramount.

4. Does the institution/sector/unit provide instruments (e.g. ICT or human resources) for the implementation of the concrete action? Which tools were applied?

N/A

5. Best practice/ Bad practice:

What kinds of results were obtained?

Findings from the evaluation research

1. The evaluation findings are based on analysis of questionnaire responses, course participants' evaluations, centre visits and a focus group. They indicate high levels of satisfaction and support for the NUIM Certificate course, in relation to course content and delivery. Participants proposed that further use be made of course projects, perhaps as case studies for future courses. They also recommended increased opportunities for peer feedback. The evaluators found the NUIM quality assurance system to be excellent.

2. While specific arrangements vary across centres, those surveyed made significant progress in integrating literacy. Greatest progress has been made where centres have included integrating literacy plans into their overall strategic plans and have access to literacy tutors and facilitators to promote integrating literacy throughout the centre. Although there is more work to be done, centres are focusing on developing a whole-centre integration of literacy approach.

3. Trainees with basic literacy needs have access to dedicated literacy tuition on a consistent, regular and frequent basis throughout the week, including one-to-one sessions and in groups according to their needs. All trainees have Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) which include a literacy plan. The Evaluators noted the dedication and commitment of management and staff in facilitating and supporting a wide ability range within each learning group.

4. Although course participants collaborate with vocational and subject tutors who have not completed the course, there was little evidence of formal in-house transfer of skills and knowledge gained on the NUIM course. Centres would benefit from a formal programme of in-house staff development training on the practical elements of integrating literacy.

5. There was uncertainty among some centre managers about whether the progress they have made constitutes 'Operating Integrating Literacy' or 'Operating a Whole-Centre Approach'. There is a lack of clarity in the understanding and interpretation of these concepts.

6. Centres are supported by training various agencies, including FÁS, NALA and the VEC Basic Education Service. The Evaluators concluded that the Whole-Centre Approach would be strengthened by a more directed and strategic synergy between agencies and centres.

Insights

The research findings provided the stakeholders and agencies with some insight into the struggles experienced by teachers who integrate literacy development into their everyday teaching. Not all teachers appeared to be up to date with strategic thinking about expanding the approach to create 'whole centres' where literacy development would be fostered at all levels of the organisation.

Barriers

Introducing a 'whole centre' approach to the integration of literacy education is challenging however some centres have achieved it and provide models of good practice for others. Yet difficulties persist for many. Dissemination of the integrating literacy approach requires ongoing promotion. Firstly not all staff receives the training and in many cases those who do receive it are unable to implement it fully because of work loads. Staff retention is also an issue as some staff move on into other careers and their learning moves with them. Opportunities for dialogue with centre managers need to be facilitated so that models of best practice could be disseminated. [1]

---

[1] *Evaluation Report of the NUI Maynooth Certificate in Integrating Literacy* 2007 **(unpublished)**

What do you consider to be the innovative or interesting part of this concrete action (case study)?

The nature of this evaluation required researchers to develop an insider view of the challenges and opportunities experienced by practitioners in the workplace, thus in carrying out the evaluation the researchers needed to be fully aware of the complex and often nuanced dynamics at play in the centres. It raised questions about practitioner research and whether someone with more experience in the field may have acquired data more relevant to the needs of the stakeholders.

What are the barriers (potential and effective) to the full implementation of this action and what are its benefits?

In which sense can this action be useful for DIALOGUE?

This case study identifies problems faced by research that examines practice. It raises a number of questions that require dialogue:

- Can a practitioner be also a researcher?

- How could this be achieved?

- What research methodologies are appropriate for practitioner research?

- What are the challenges and opportunities?

Relevance for DIALOGUE

Reflections on the case study are important to DIALOGUE as they point out some of the pitfalls that can result from commissioning research on practice. The insights and reflections offered here are those of the author.

While the outcomes of the research met the brief as laid down by the stakeholders, there was concern about the length of time it took for the researchers to develop an understanding of the course, the constituency, the partnership and methods for integrating literacy into teaching and in the centres. Also it can be difficult for researchers to navigate through the full range of complex relationships that exist within organisations and partnerships. The research activity threw up many interesting insights one of which was the problem of employing professional researchers who themselves are not practitioners in the field. The findings were less than helpful to the stakeholders who would have preferred more emphasis on case studies that focused on the 'whole centred' approach.

---

7. **Are researchers and practitioners directly linked in this activity?**
   Yes, the participants comprised professional researchers, practitioners, practitioner researchers and research managers.

- **If yes, how are they linked and what are the communication and interaction processes?**

A Research Board was set up with representatives from each stakeholder organisation including the Academic Course Director of the course, the CE Support Officer. A tender document was drawn up and agreed. External research consultants were appointed. Terms and Conditions were approved and the Research Board agreed to meet regularly throughout the evaluation process in order to monitor progress and provide advice and guidance to the consultants as required. The Academic Course Director convened and chaired the meetings and minutes of each meeting were circulated to the Board. Throughout the process there was good communication processes established between the researchers, the Evaluation Group, the Academic Course Director and the CE Support Officer.

If they do not communicate directly, how are findings from research connected to practical activities and vice versa?

N/A

7. Which elements would you identify as easily transferable to other institutions in different regional and national contexts?

Tender process and terms of reference
Preparation of a research brief
Reporting mechanism for monitoring the research
Support model for researchers
Communication process
Establishment of an Academic Research Board
Pitfalls

8. Recommendations for dissemination:

Briefly identify the most important points in the case study for other ULLL managers and practitioners – these may include risks as well as benefits.

Overall the quality of the report was very good however some stakeholder organisations would have preferred more details about working 'whole centred' models. They needed case studies of best practice that would explicitly identify core elements of practice and provide evidence, both positive and negative regarding outcomes. The outcomes could then be used to influence the development of a national integrating literacy strategy.

Please formulate some recommendations for the dissemination on the basis of the case study addressed to the working group and other partners.

Selection of researchers with knowledge of the sector is very important otherwise the process may be very slow as it will take time for researchers new to the field to become familiar with the subject area under review.
Partner agencies and stakeholders should be encouraged to clearly identify their expected outcomes and priorities at the beginning of the research project
Researchers need to be aware of the core purpose of the research
Guidance and advice is useful for researchers at all stages of the process
Good reporting mechanisms are important
Academic Research Boards are essential for all research projects but especially when research is being funded by partner organisations.

9. Additional information. E.g. bibliography, website, publications, reports

Evaluation Report of the NUI Maynooth Certificate in Integrating Literacy 2007 **(unpublished)**

We are intending to put your case study on the website.

Please tick **here** ☐ if you do **not** wish to see your case study published on the project's website