Professional Development Module in University: Building a sense of belonging for first-year students

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Abstract

Can a professional development module for first-year students help build a sense of belonging with their desired profession? In Munster Technological University (MTU) all first-year students must undertake a Creativity, Innovation and Teamwork (CIT) module. For each degree programme, this module is tailored to the needs of its students. The objective of this module for first-year Accounting students is to instill a sense of what it is to be accountants by building key skills and helping them envisage their pathways to becoming accountants. This paper introduces the teaching and learning techniques and assessment methods of the CIT module. It also presents Accounting students' opinions on their professional development from this module. Findings report development of some of the key skills required of accountants in the workplace and increased knowledge of the accounting profession, thus building first-year Accounting students' sense of belonging to their desired future profession.

Keywords: professional development; accounting profession; belonging.

1. Introduction

Having chosen a degree programme, first-year university students have already started to make choices about their future career. For some, first-year is about discovering future options, for others it is about confirming what they want to become. Some students will be happy with their choice, but others won't. First-year in university, referred to by Lizzio (2012) as the 'transition in' stage, has the highest attrition rates. This may be due to financial difficulties, lack of parental support or the number of semester hours (Fike and Fike 2008), but it may also be due to a lack of belonging with what they are studying (Noble *et al.* 2007; O'Keeffe 2013). While traditional modules tend to focus on delivering content and building students' knowledge, research shows that it is professional development education that increases students' likelihood of remaining on their degree programme (Noble *et al.* 2007; O'Keeffe 2013). Could it be that professional development, even as early as first-year, enhances students' sense of belonging with their chosen profession?

In Munster Technological University in Cork (Ireland), all first-year students undertake a mandatory module (in their first semester in university) called the Creativity, Innovation and Teamwork (CIT) module. While there is guidance as to the indicative content of this module, each department has autonomy to tailor this module to suit the needs of its students. In the Accounting and Information Systems Department, the CIT module focuses on professional development. After completing this module, students in the Accounting degree programme should have: 1) developed key skills that could be required of them as future professional accountants and 2) enhanced their knowledge of the accountancy profession.

This paper will present the teaching and learning techniques and assessments of this early professional development module. It will also report the findings of a survey of first-year Accounting students, before and after taking this module, showing the positive effects of this module on their skills-set and knowledge of their chosen career. By developing key skills and knowledge of the profession, the module gives students a taste of what being accountants is like right from the start of their time in university, thus helping them build a sense of belonging with their desired profession.

2. Teaching and learning the CIT module

There is a growing body of research in accounting education literature (Albrecht and Sack 2001; Kavanagh and Drennan 2008; Jackling and De Lange 2009; Wells *et al.* 2009; Yu *et al.* 2013) and in wider business education literature (Crebert *et al.* 2004; Buckley and El Amoud 2010; Sheridan and Linehan 2017) focusing on the skills required by employers of graduates. Kavanagh and Drennan (2008) and Jackling and De Lange (2009) report the importance of technical skills (such as key accounting skills and computer skills) and generic skills (such as written and oral communication skills, team skills and interpersonal skills) to

accounting graduates. Other contributors to accounting education literature refer to these as "hard" knowledge and "soft" skills (Andrews and Higson 2008, p.411). Hard knowledge relates to the content of the students' programme of study (often to particular modules) and the ability to apply that knowledge to business situations. Soft skills relate to other skills that are seen as "vital for graduate success" (Andrews and Higson 2008, p.415). Yu *et al.* (2013) identify "technology skills, teamwork, and oral communication" (p.1) as the skills needed by graduates to be better able to do the work in the workplace.

In the UK Riley and Simons (2016) found 79% of practitioners stating that written communication skills are considered in hiring entry-level accounting graduates. Tan and Laswad (2018) state that "a team player with a positive attitude and good communication skills appeared to be the most valued behavioural skill as perceived by employers" (p. 403). Conversations with accounting students at MTU after a six-month placement, confirm that students see written communication, teamwork, creation of presentations and presenting as some of the key skills required of trainee accountants. According to Siriwardane and Durden (2014), collaboration is required between accounting educators, practitioners and communication specialists to develop these skills in accounting graduates. The teaching and learning techniques and assessment methods of the CIT module reflect these valued skills, the desire for collaboration between academics, practitioners and specialists, and the need for students to build a sense of belonging with their future profession.

2.1. Teaching and Learning techniques in the CIT module

A variety of teaching and learning techniques were established for the CIT module. The aim was to ensure the development of students' key skills, improve collaboration between academics, practitioners and specialists and ensure students build a sense of belonging with the accounting profession. The teaching of this module is allocated three hours per week for one semester (15 weeks). This is divided each week into two hours in class and one hour in an IT lab. During this time, students get the opportunity to attend lectures, workshops with the Careers Department (to develop CV writing and presentation skills), a careers fair (to talk to accountancy bodies and potential employers), and a series of guest speakers (to learn about what accountants do in the workplace). They also get time each week to develop IT skills (Microsoft Word, Excel and PowerPoint) and partake in supervised team meetings/group work (to complete their assessments for this module).

2.2. Assessment methods of the CIT module

Accountants are often guided by the phrase "what gets measured gets done". This is definitely the case when devising assessments aimed at achieving the objectives of this module. There are three pieces of assessment for students in this module. Students must:

1) Present their desired career path in pairs using PowerPoint (worth 20%) in week 4. (10 minutes for each pairing to present their findings to the class)
2) Write an individual report on "What it is to be an accountant?" including preparation of a CV and reflection on one of the guest speakers (worth 30%) in week 11.
3) Prepare a poster and a presentation for a business plan for a new company in groups (of four or five) (worth 50%) in week 15.

Students are informed of these assessments at the beginning of the semester. Descriptive briefs and assessment rubrix are provided during the semester. The assessments examine the development of key skills (creating presentations, presenting, writing reports, and working in teams) and knowledge of the accounting profession, thus fulfilling the overriding aim of building a sense of belonging with their desired profession

3. Research Methodology

To determine whether the teaching/learning techniques and assessment methods of the CIT module achieve the desired outcomes, students were asked about their perceptions at two key points in time – before and after undertaking this module. In September 2019, 52 students commenced the Accounting degree in Munster Technological University. Questionnaires were used so that the researchers could quantify results (Creswell 2003; Hair *et al.* 2007) and compare results from the first and last weeks of the module. The questionnaire (using a 5-point Likert scale) was used to ascertain students' confidence levels (very poor, poor, good, very good, excellent) in six key areas before and after studying this module. The six key areas (ascertained by the researchers from accounting education literature and conversations with accounting students after completing work placement) were preparation of a written report, teamwork, creation of presentations, presentation skills, knowledge of what it takes to become accountants and knowledge of what it is to be accountants. 42 students responded to both questionnaires. The responses of these 42 students were used to compile the findings discussed in the next section.

4. Findings

This section presents the findings of the six key areas included in the questionnaire sent to students, as outlined in the previous section. In the questionnaire before taking this module, students reported feeling confident about writing reports and working in teams. These were skills they felt that they had already built during second-level education. These levels of confidence remained after completing this module. Other lecturers on the program reported low levels of report writing skills in this cohort, so a mismatch between expectations and perceived ability exists. While students were asked about their confidence levels at both stages, perhaps in the second questionnaire students should have been asked whether or not

these skills were enhanced because of this module. This is something the researchers wish to explore in more detail in the future.

With regard to presentation creation, prior to studying this module 33% of students reported a very poor or poor ability to create presentations. After studying this module this was reduced to less than 5%, with significant improvements in those considering themselves as very good or excellent (see Figure 1).
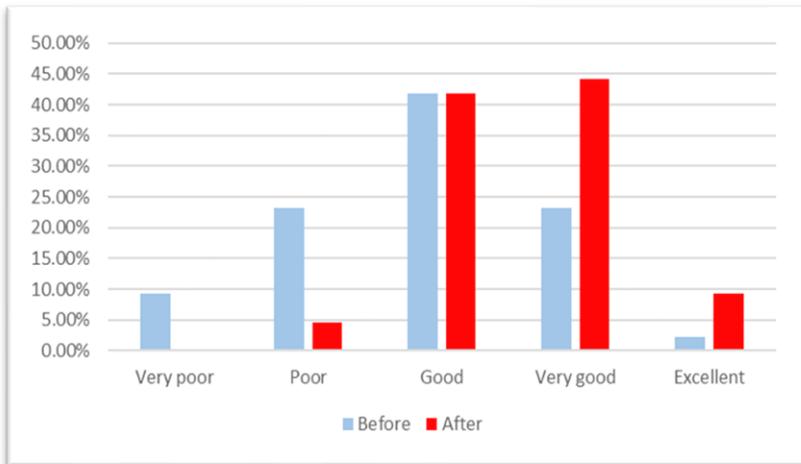

Figure 1: Confidence creating a presentation

Similarly, prior to studying this module almost 60% of students reported very poor or poor presentation skills. After studying this module almost 60% of students considered themselves good at presenting (see Figure 2).
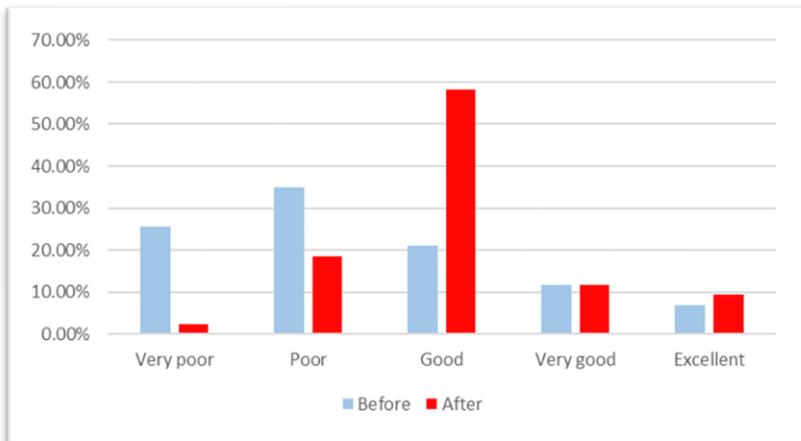

Figure 2: Confidence in presenting

The next question asked students about their knowledge of how to become accountants. Prior to this module 12% of students reported a poor knowledge, and 52% reported a good knowledge, of what could be required of them to become accountants. After this module, this had improved, with almost 69% of students reporting having a very good or excellent knowledge of what could be required of them to become accountants (see Figure 3).
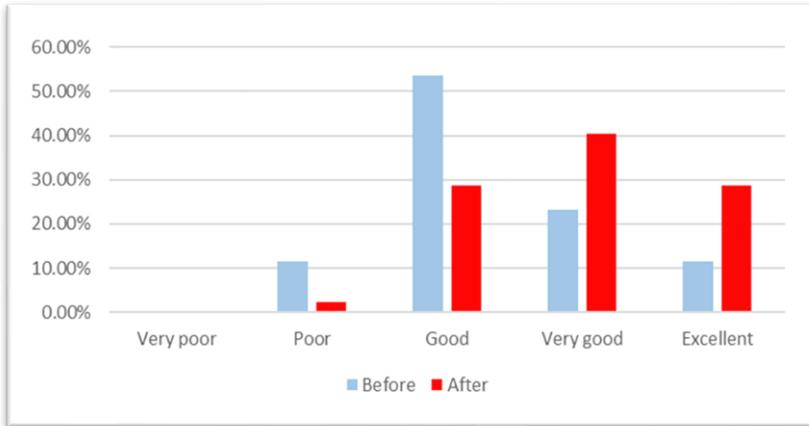

Figure 3: Knowledge of what you have to do to become accountants

Similar results were found when students were asked about their understanding of what it is to be accountants. Prior to this module 5% of students reported a poor knowledge, and 57% reported a good knowledge, of what it is to be accountant. After studying this module 67% of students reported a very good or excellent knowledge of what it is to be accountants (see Figure 4).
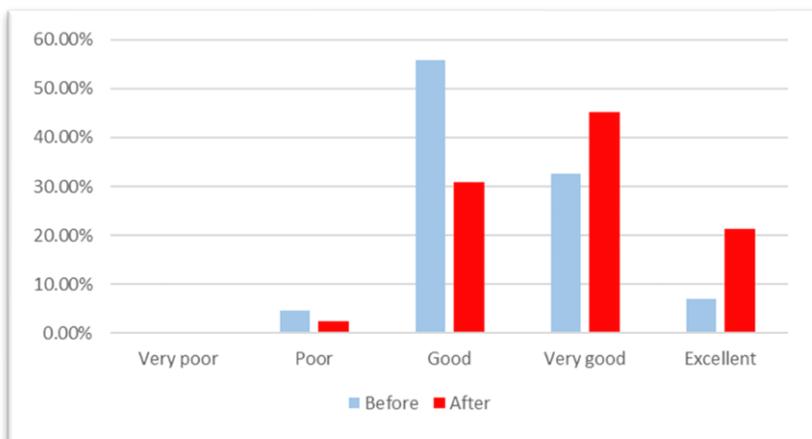

Figure 4: Knowledge of what it is to be accountants

For the teaching staff, these positive results are very encouraging indicators of the success of the module. However, further work is required to improve the confidence levels further.

5. Conclusion and further research

Early professional development gives students a closer idea of what they will find when they enter the workplace, right from when they begin their degree programme. The CIT module targeted at first-year accounting students aims to build first-year accounting students sense of belonging to the accounting profession. This is achieved by enhancing some of the key skills required of them in the labour market and giving them insight into what is ahead for them as accounting interns and graduates. The CIT module is also a way of improving the link between university education and employers.

The four skills that the CIT module aims to developed are report writing, teamwork, creating presentations, and presenting. Students reported improved confidence their abilities in all four of these skills. Even before taking this module, students reported being confident about their report writing and teamwork skills, and these levels of confidence remained after completing the professional development module. Confidence levels in creating a presentation and presenting were low before this module and improved significantly after undertaking this module. Even though students were asked to present twice during this module (week 4 and week 15), they still did not report increased confidence to very good or excellent levels. For future iterations of this module, it has been decided to provide more in-depth feedback to students after their first presentation. In doing so, areas of improvement will be highlighted and can be taken onboard for the second presentation. After the second (final) presentation, each student will be encouraged by feedback pointing out their strengths and areas in which they could improve.

As well as developing key skills, the CIT module also aims to give first-year accounting students insight into what could be ahead for them as accounting interns and graduates. This module provides students with knowledge about the accounting profession. Students' knowledge of what could be required of them to become accountants and knowledge of what it is to be accountants were enhanced significantly after taking this module. Improved skill-sets and knowledge of the profession and the possible pathways ahead help students to build a sense of belonging with their chosen profession. Future research is required to further explore if an enhanced sense of belonging is beneficial to students when applying for and undertaking placement during the degree programme, or when applying for graduate roles.

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