OVERVIEW OF EXTERNAL EVALUATION WORKSHOP METHODOLOGY

METHODOLOGY AND OVERVIEW

The Most Significant Change methodology (MSC), is a participatory, dialogic, qualitative method that evolved in development education settings. It involves the collection and selection of significant change stories from stakeholders at different levels of working across a programme/project. Participants are given a short brief to help them to surface their own most significant change moments, describe the landscapes of change from their perspective, identify helper characters, 'challenge' scenarios, and other features of their change journey, and draw lessons for sustained change in the future. Their stories are collected and passed across an organisational/project structure for groups of stakeholders to discuss, to assess for significance, and to consider what they reveal about the wider changes (in this case the six core themes of the project). In this method there is still a rigorous focus on evidence, but the evidence is considered from different perspectives and is presented in the service of rich and meaningful accounts of change.

Following a beta workshop of the MSC process and materials with the PMO, minor changes were made for the three face to face workshops (1 per work-stream) held in October 2024. The workshops were designed to allow partner project teams an opportunity to:

- reflect and share the impact that the overall programme has had:
  - on them as individuals
  - on students/colleagues
  - across their institutions
  - across the TU sector
  - in relation to N-TUTORR's core themes and transforming the student experience
- develop a series of meaningful 'significant change stories' about critical incidents and change processes
- provide a space to share, discuss and reflect on the stories

A structured story writing process was developed to support participants during the workshops. This included a range of bespoke materials such as narrative prompts cards and individual storyboards for participants to complete. Participants could take a metaphorical or literal approach to their change stories. On completion of the individual stories, each participant shared a synopsis of their story with the group. This was followed by group discussion work focusing on what the stories revealed about each of the work-streams, and a plenary discussion. 57 staff and students attended the workshops. Participants were given the option to share their story boards with the evaluators. 52 story boards were collected for analysis.

The synthesis of the thematic analysis of the individual stories and group discussions have provided:

- a set of key insights around the development, implementation and future of the programme
- insights into a set of common specific issues and other lessons learned
- the perceived main impacts from each of the 3 main work-streams at individual, institution and sector level
- the perceived obstacles, enablers, values and lessons learned across each work-stream
- a set of powerful metaphors/allegories around the transformational journey of the programme from the perspective of project staff
- a set of work-stream/partner project team values that complement the programme themes.

Word cloud created from individual story boards

Powerful metaphors or allegories

The fellowship
While the goal appears to be the end of the quest, the most valuable and lasting asset is the fellowship itself and the bonds they forge in undertaking the journey and overcoming the challenges. Lasting contacts and connections, a sense of trust and openness to sharing. '*The fellowship is its own legacy*'. A connected metaphor was the relay team, not travelling together but supporting each other on their own legs of the race. Teams are coaches, more powerful working together despite their different strokes.
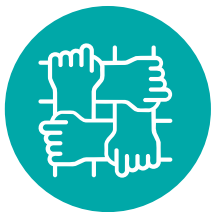
The quest
N-TUTORR allowed programme staff to travel, literally (e.g. across campuses and universities, for meetings, visits, showcases, masterclasses) and more metaphorically, to explore other possibilities, 'future learning' scenarios and fantastic possibilities. Fetching new knowledge from a distant land was a theme, often related to digital transformation.

Finding the pot of gold
Unexpected riches release 'hidden' powers or potential. 'Money talks'. But it is a risk/trap' a pot of gold doesn't last forever. It is a magic elevator but not a sustainable way to raise aspirations.
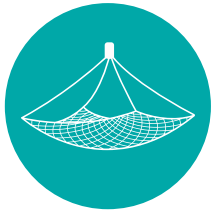
The net or hammock as magic object
(Rather than a magic elevator) we need a net/rope/hammock – many threads that we produce and keep producing/mending together. It is therefore resilient, sustained and secure. A hammock of support - what in practical terms sustains it? Do common frameworks and understanding sustain it? Do enduring (personal) connections?

Fairy godmothers
The programme was seen as having an almost magical capacity to fulfil wishes. This was associated with funding, but more particularly with project staff roles (especially the SECs) and the time and space afforded for staff and students to step aside of their day to day roles, assess values and purposes, and consider new ways of doing things. The project was also associated with Santa ('wishes for Christmas'). The Coordinator was considered more of a 'wise sage'. (In addition to fairy godmothers, N-TUTORR hero figures included outlaws ('sometimes you have to be an outlaw to be a hero'), explorers, wise sages, caregivers, creators.

The imposter, imposter syndrome
Individual student experiences paralleling those of staff on the project (are we good enough to achieve this?) and of the sector overall. The sector was described as a 'poor orphan' or 'neglected step-child'. A Cinderella sector, serving Cinderella students (among the most deprived). For a time, Cinderella has been raised up and has gone to the ball. It would be too easy to go back to the ashes.

Overcoming fear ('the monster')
Related to the imposter syndrome, a surprising number of stories referred to fear, shame, self-doubt and other negative personal feelings. These came from students in relation to their journeys into higher education, and project staff in relation to the project demands '*it did scare me, the sheer amount of investment*'. Students have had to overcome experiences of racism and exclusion, deprivation. Accessing higher education is fearful. Change is fearful.

The laboratory or 'future city' as a place of experimentation
It must be possible to try things and to fail. Strong narrative about the future as a place of possibility, undermined by a focus on 'firefighting' in the present. The present landscape does not lend itself to a future focus but is in many ways still encumbered by the past (legacy buildings, systems, beliefs about the sector and its students).
A vision of TU/N-TUTORR graduates taking leading roles in the future of Ireland: '*Policy becoming people-oriented… a respectful, meaningful and compassionate society.*'

Building (virtual) bridges
1. Overcoming geographical distances. Again, for students and staff, distance/transition a problem. Hybrid spaces and well resourced digital platforms can help. For the TUs as institutions, the distance between campuses needed also to be bridged. Often these bridges were 'virtual' or 'magical' – they existed in digital space.
2. Overcoming political and cultural differences at organisational level. For campuses to merge, different ways of doing things must be reconciled. The integrated VLE at TUD was an example of this.

Pirate ships
The topic of academic integrity and the challenge of generative AI were described in terms of stormy waters that could only be navigated with '*all hands on deck*'. Pirates added to the danger – representing essay mills, AI-enabled cheating, the pressures that lead students to use AI unhelpfully.

Seeing the light
Light must be shed for the sector to move out of 'dark' times of low resource, backward practices, to become a learning and innovation sector. The castle is '*all in light*', there are '*rainbows*', '*24 months of sun and flowers*'. Student co-ordinators helped '*open the books*' (students said), allowing them to 'see' that things can be changed, they can make a difference. '*The light is visible but sometimes it's further away than we originally thought*'. There is also a fear that after the end of project funding "*They [the Presidents] are going to be turning off the lights on this*'.

From a desert to a fertile landscape
Things can happen here, even if it takes work. Planting a hedge as part of Waterford Campus – a physical legacy and reminder of '*new shoots*'. A difference has been made, even if it is low-level. A hedge rather than a forest. From a confused (foggy, unclear, uneven, rugged) landscape to a clear, even, navigable one. We know what we are doing (largely: we have drawn our own maps). From a lack of information, silos and lack of trust to greater transparency (links to 'light')

The monument: 'Build it and they will come'
People are drawn to success. Sometimes '*just doing it*' is the only way to move forward. Lasting and tangible outcomes will continue to draw people together, as well as creating a legacy.

Climbing the mountain
Experienced and inexperienced climbers worked together – the experienced explorers learned that the 'innocents' also had skills and perspectives worth having. Different team members approached the mountain differently. '*Some stood on top of others so they could be first to the top. Some stopped to help. Some set up obstacles. Some went missing along the way.*'

A different mountain metaphor involved students taking '*the long way*' around the mountain, but the safer way. This became a useful allegory for change at the level of the programme and the sector, as well as for students looking to develop themselves (within frameworks of academic integrity and values). 'The long way is often the best way for learning.'

Edge of a cliff, running into a wall
Sense of a sudden ending, perhaps a precipitous situation or dire risk to the impacts and gains of the project as funding comes to an end. Extreme uncertainty for individuals in key roles as well as for project activities, values, impacts, and legacy materials. '*There's still a need… even if we're not doing this, it's really for our colleagues, . . . there's going to be a huge black hole there in January when somebody comes and looks for training*'.

Key insights derived from the individual stories

Student Empowerment

- Huge value in spending time with students, valuing their stories (staff benefit from this too).
- (Creating the compendium of assessment types) allowed students to be valued as experts in their own experience. Reflecting on their own educational past, present and future. Genuine parity of expertise with staff: revelation that students themselves can have impact on developing the student experience
- ·Student champions are/were 'the bridge to students' – how to sustain this role and these values/practices?
- Students telling their stories need to be heard thru processes and systems that persist, and not only ad hoc (as per this project).
- Legacy of student champions (they want to leave a legacy). Suggestions from the students in the workshops: create a community, make a club, have some carrots/sweets to tempt students in (a hoodie, the chance to present at a conference), but then give them things to do that will be more nourishing in the longer term.
- Suggested areas of focus: mental health and physical fitness, a place to get away from formal curriculum, a cooking club (lifeskills and socialisation), help students make friends, as well as graduate attributes and values, sense of belonging and mattering increasingly important for students, need to be able to learn with other students.
- How can we capture the stories of all the student fellows, not just the ones at the workshop? Agreed there was a need for more videos. Perhaps also examples from other sectors – identify lessons in sustaining student partnerships over time.

Collaboration and Partnership

- Shared best practice leading to institutional learning and cross pollination of ideas: '*people talk to other people in working groups… We've had so many working groups and communities of practice, and I know we're maxed up, there's so much talent in our group. But that cross pollination has been a real positive.*' 'I think all of us feel that we could ring each other across our sector and say, hey, this is where I am, how did you do this?'
- Programme colllaborations and CoPs - if they can only keep going in some guise they can be 'ready to go again' if/when new sources of funding or other opportunities arise. Collaboration is its own opportunity.
- Need to keep meeting, meetings need a purpose for participants to see the value (time out of the day job).
- Student/staff partnerships. These met a range of needs and movitavations. Partnership should become the default for enhancement work.
- There are opportunities e.g. SATLE funding for local partnerships, ring fence some for partnership work, now have guides/ resources and a network of knowledge. '*You don't have to do everything and carry everyone*'
- Structures, funding brought opportunities to produce "*more than sum of parts*", there was a bit of magic (and fairy godmothers), collective power, intangible benefits of partnership working, how to focus that going forward?
- Staff developers network could be expanded, perhaps with support / governance from THEA/HEA.
- Sharing training on key themes - all staff in each TU and across sector, enabling some shared costs (bought in training, resources etc, alongside shared procurement processes).
- A yearly conference - host rotation- theme 'Staff Training and Development' – shared ownership, building on/maintaining the shared resource base (web site). Awards, champions and heroes are celebrated.
- Provide guidance to institutions for building on and following on N-TUTORR – develop outline plans before 31/12/24 to draw on remaining funding/expertise and ensure continuity).
- Support impact assessment - post project survey? Identify key outcomes, impacts and benefits to inform institutional and sector investment going forward.

Strategic Leadership

- N-TUTORR has to an extent led the strategic agenda when it comes to digital infrastructure, learning and teaching innovation, academic integrity and assessment. '*We've been leading… we're passing the vision now to the Presidents. They are the last people standing.*'
- '*We've operated in our spheres, in our buildings, and we know one another, and we know our policy positions. We've been able to navigate, to achieve things, understand those policy positions, but when you step out of that and … and particularly when you walk to a national level policy position, that's where the thing begins to fall apart.*'
- On the one hand 'gatekeepers' can sometimes turn out to be unexpected friends.
- However, on the other hand, bureaucracy, 'processes', 'politics'. 'the way of doing things' and 'rules' almost always feature as obstacles rather than enablers. '*Computer says no*'. Policy says '*not like this*'. There has to be a 'tearing down' in order for a transformation to emerge. This is not really resolved despite the many ways N-TUTORR has created new ways of working.
- Presidents group as and is key - they can make quick decisions, they lead out the collaboration piece. They could bring 20k each to the table and invite proposals for ongoing partnerships, at least in the short term while the funding opportunities are clarified.

Transformation in general

- Despite the transformational impact of N-TUTORR and the strong ambition to continue innovating, a key lesson has been the need for transition to be evolutionary, embedded and widely accepted before moving on to another phase.
- '*It's not having to throw the baby out with the bathwater, which is something revolution does, and it is just exhausting*'.
- '[Innovation] *can't come at the expense of no rooms, the light switch that doesn't work, that the computers that need to be repaired… the mould in the room that has got the computer equipment to it*'.
- On the other hand, despite the need for change to be grounded in real need, and strategically directed, there was a recognition that dynamism is also needed because '*there will be more crises… and some of our students are in crisis all the time*'.

Legacy

- Requires an excellent website as a platform for sharing training and resources. Legacy of the resources key - need to make sure the project does not become '*just whispers in hallways*'.
- Repository/searchable/even without support good for 3 years. Currently (Nov 2024) 84 items in the resources and publications section, mostly Masterclasses. How are resources and outcomes being collated?
- Also the Repository of Exemplars.
- Testimonials, staff/student stories, outcomes of fellowship projects and student champions work. Make sure these are highly accessible e.g. video voices.
- Fellowships: so many diverse projects, very modest funding liberated pent-up creativity and ambition. ROI of fellowships has been large, and has multiplier effects. Staff practice changes will be noticed and disseminated in very local ways. '*people have run projects who have not received a penny but wanted to be part of it*'.
- Embedding may be quite local: some aspects of N-TUTORR are becoming embedded and may be more sustained if they stop being identified with the programme, while others will continue to be branded as 'special', and this is how they will be valued and sustained; and those differences will not be the same across partner institutions.
- Student voice has been 'so powerful', impact from students, '*can't go back from here*'.
- Stories around the six themes of the project, importance of branding so that transformations that become sustained and embedded can still be traced back to N-TUTORR.

Ambitions

- Embed and continue great work of the programme.
- Embed and extend digital backpack and badges.
- Bring resources together and make them discoverable, clearly branded.
- THEA needs to tackle some big issues such as engagement and retention, and look at ROI.
- Need to understand student expectations and perspectives better.
- Curriculum change, with fellowship projects as exemplars.
- Continue to develop 'part-baked' ideas that can become future bids for funding, or future opportunities'.
- '*We've done so much now, we have to embed it. We don't want to lose the momentum*'.

Sustaining benefits and impacts

- '*No-one wants this to end, we want to do more.*'
- A pot of gold doesn't last forever. Time to look for 'pots of silver' – interim sources of funding that can keep some activities going and some collaborative opportunities in play.
- The fellowship is its own legacy – how to sustain practices of collaboration, local and sectoral? Requires leadership and stakeholder buy-in, including at Presidents level.
- Could we continue the masterclasses beyond N-TUTORR?
- Important to have local roles and functions that align to N-TUTORR themes. For example, a new office in each of the partners (and maybe the whole sector) called 'Student Empowerment Office' could facilitate both local and sectoral student partnership working, ensure students are equal partners, and enhance student/staff partnerships across TUs.
- N-TUTORR provides a real-world example of sustainability goals embedded – this should be celebrated. The SDGs will remain relevant and critically important.
- The values of EDI and student empowerment can also be sustained, even if the student champions move on. How do we ensure future cohorts of students are 'in the room' adding value, being valued, picking up the baton.

Academic integrity and the generative AI landscape

- TEQSA academic integrity modules customised for Ireland, TU sector co-founders of GAIN (Global Academic Integrity Network).
- A framework developed by NAIN for the identification, recording and management of cases of academic misconduct within HEIs.
- N-TUTORR was instrumental in coordinating a response to generative AI, probably the biggest post-pandemic shock to the TU sector.
- GenAI network across the TU sector, led by students with disabilities and learning differences.
- '*When our students are graduating with the cap and gown, we need to know that they're graduating for their own values, and what they've actually learned for themselves.*'
- '*We discuss this in terms of safe pathways… you can run up the hill and do it really fast with GenAI, or [you can] take a safe path with the correct knowledge, the correct tools*'
- Identifying factors that lead to overuse and unhelpful use – being over-assessed, feeling unable to cope, being depressed or self-doubting, being in fear of assessment. Intervening with empathy in those trajectories rather than moralising to students. Also student demographic factors play a big role, which is where AI touches on EDI. '*We have to improve inclusion in academic integrity, because we do have over-presentation of students from certain [] groups in academic misconduct cases… Academic literacy seems to be more available to certain students than others. Sometimes poor decisions about academic integrity come from the pressures experienced by certain groups of students*'.
- Ensuring AI guidelines are easy to read and to understand. Need to develop a code of conduct and AI declaration: '*what AI is/is not to us*'.

Transforming learning, teaching & assessment

- Teacher as hero. Transforming teaching, inclusive assessments (EDI), student assessment choice, diversifying practice, (vlogging as an assessment choice for example), making use of hybrid spaces and new more integrated digital environments.
- Great feedback from students, not only student fellows. Enjoyed new assessment modes, 'fun' learning, had choice and creativity, felt engaged and enabled.
- Curriculum framework: '*we built a lot of work, we actually added two extra pillars, we got it accepted by academic council. It's how we develop all our programs going forward in MTU, it's going to be a tangible manifestation of that [work].*'
- Curriculum transformation: '*We want to improve our student populations. We want to reach out to an international population… and people I think always understand that digital is key to this.*'
- In addition to reaching out, TUs need to serve local and regional students, who are often from educationally disadvantaged populations.

Transforming staff capacity and capability

- Impact on staff was termed 'eye opening': getting to know colleagues, working together in new ways and with new resources, finding power in people.
- Stakeholders talked more about values and meaning than they did about capability, despite acknowledging that they had found new skills and helped to develop them in other staff. '*I wish this was my full time job - you never feel you are doing all you could be*'.
- Need a clear account of role of student experience co-ordinator (SEC) – has been hugely impactful both internally and externally. How to value and therefore sustain this kind of capacity? SECs are/were bridge to uni/programmes for students.
- Need to have local, sector and national levels of awareness within the staff – this has been unique feature of N-TUTORR.
- Partly an issue of managing knowledge assets. Partly of ensuring people remain connected.
- Could continue working with existing networks, continue online Masterclasses, hosted in turn.
- Impact on professional services staff was huge and needs to be sustained and optimized – there was real value in those staff feeling of equal value and having equal access to bespoke and generic training.
- How do we manage the loss of capacity that will come with the end of project funding?
- There needs to be a national level agreement about workload modelling: '*the unions are not saying you shouldn't do this, they're simply saying you shouldn't be doing this unless there's an agreement, until there's a plan… And I actually am one with the unions on that. There does need to be an agreement, so everybody is clear what they're taking on, what their rewards are, what efforts are being made to make this work.*'

Transforming digital infrastructure

- With the opportunity to invest in technology come new risks, reputational and financial. Tech companies are in the business of making promises that are not always to be relied on. Metaphors included the 'false friend', the Wizard of Oz (who was in fact a man behind a curtain), the emperor with his new clothes, the figure of the jester.
- Shared expertise was particularly valued here as a way of 'keeping honest' external vendors, and reinforcing the integrity and professional judgement of colleagues at partner universities. '*what we have in this project is a lot of digital realism … which I think is an incredibly useful resource*'.
- Technology was seen as 'the great enabler', particularly with integrated systems. With technical investments to the fore, previously disregarded members of staff had 'risen from the basement' to show the value of their know-how and to take on a much more strategic role.
- There was appreciation of 'properly fitted out' rooms for hybrid and hyflex teaching had started to overcome the legacy of negative experiences teaching online during the pandemic.
- However, technology needs to 'just work'. It can't become another source of anxiety and potential failure. It requires support. '*in certain places, the offer of new equipment was turned down because there's no capacity to support it. They're at max already, which is fair enough, but that's such a shame.*' There is a similar issue of capacity with the equipment 'left behind' when project funding ends: '*We put in huge investment into digital learning environments, and [IT teams] have to take over that supporting and that maintenance piece. And that is an implication for their budgets long-term.*'
- There are opportunity costs to spending on digital: '*the benefits of doing digital well and realistically and appropriately are huge, but the opportunity costs of doing it badly are all the basic things that you're not doing, you're not investing in*'. This is where 'digital realism' becomes critical: putting in the time and research to ensure money is spent appropriately on resources that will deliver tangible benefits on a significant scale, and into the future, not on 'shiny new toys'.
- It was suggested that from 'digital by design' the project could be sustained by a 'desire' and then a 'demand' for digital.

Transforming learning spaces

- Important to move on from terms like hybrid, hyflex, acknowledging that there is a wide variation in learning spaces and their uses ('more of an ecosystem').
- 'Learning environments demand multi-stakeholder involvement in their development, their design, their use… they are diverse, multi-campus… training and people being trained is a need.'
- A student-centred environment is not digital OR in-person but involves elements of both. It also extends beyond the classroom, to the library, social spaces, the campus as a whole: '*it's about socializing the campus, and the culture of the institution as a learning environment*'.
- Common spaces became central to the project, with the library in one case stepping forward to host the new hybrid spaces. This helped ensure resources were owned equally by campus stakeholders: excellent shared spaces made better use of limited funds than smaller scale developments distributed among departments.
- The campus itself should be inclusive and accessible, and that also supports student mental health and wellbeing.
- '*With the learning environment every element has to work for complete buy-in. It's about social design, it's not just buying the tech.*'
- '*We had hardware with so many advantages, but how are we going to make sure that these are actually realized in a business-as-usual way?*'

CPD (leadership)

- Must achieve buy-in from management, HR, unions, for ongoing staff CPD. This requires a significant cultural change. Meanwhile where does CPD sit? Who is going to champion it? There needs to be a more strategic view of CPD (owned by ??) and this discussion needs to involve the whole TU sector, Govt, Regional Authorities, HEA/THEA, unions and student unions.
- Issues around staff contracts still remain. There needs to be a national level workload agreement.
- Enhance the visibility and status of THEA Showcase the good work of N-TUTORR as part of their role and knowledge base.
- Publish academic (review paper) which includes future recommendations.
- Knowledge sharing CoP with HR strategic leads and CPD teams from each institution.
- Staff training needs analysis needs to be continued and shared.

Other lessons learned

Time and timing

- Time, timescales and timing came up constantly as a challenge for project impact and sustainability, from the shortened timescale of the original bid to the mismatch between the programme schedule and the academic year. The word 'time' and its derivatives appears 49 times across the stories collected (n=52).
- Not being aligned with academic calendar meant some missed opportunities, both early on and towards the end of the project when legacy planning was taking place as a new academic year was beginning, rather than ending.
- Challenging to take time away from what students and staff perceive to be the 'real work'. What is 'real work'? What is worth spending time on?
- Challenges with buyout of hours for sub-projects and fellows/champions from HoDs – time is entirely allocated – workload model is also an issue here (where is the time for scholarship, professional development?)
- Challenge of short attention span – this was a comment on individuals but could also apply to funding cycles and change initiatives.
- Greater impact of some of the frameworks, role descriptors, shared processes etc could have been in place earlier 'we were working backwards'.
- Post-covid timing was of course the reason for the resilience funding in the first place, but there was a sense that many of the human lessons of the pandemic had not been fully learned. Values had to be reasserted.
- Coming just as the TU sector was emerging – 14 institutions coming together as 7 within one sector – was both an opportunity and a risk. 'One of the real challenges has been change on top of change'. Some felt the programme supported individual institutions to integrate better; others felt there was change fatigue, and the effect was one of cumulative weariness rather than synthesis.
- Other agendas that were emerging – Athena Swan, academic integrity, SDG goals – were very well aligned with N-TUTORR values and ethos, or became so due to their parallel timing.

Transforming Learning, teaching & assessment (LTA)

- Teacher as hero. Transforming teaching, inclusive assessments (EDI), student assessment choice, diversifying practice, (vlogging as an assessment choice for example), making use of hybrid spaces and new more integrated digital environments.
- Great feedback from students, not only student fellows. Enjoyed new assessment modes, 'fun' learning, had choice and creativity, felt engaged and enabled.
- Curriculum framework: 'we built a lot of work, we actually added two extra pillars, we got it accepted by academic council. It's how we develop all our programs going forward in MTU, it's going to be a tangible manifestation of that [work]'
- Curriculum transformation: 'We want to improve our student populations. We want to reach out to an international population... and people I think always understand that digital is key to this.'
- In addition to reaching out, TUs need to serve local and regional students, who are often from eduationally disadvantaged populations.

Evidencing and communicating the impact

- How to demonstrate the value of the small projects at each institution, the fellowship projects and the work of student champions? This is where very small investments of time and funding have led to multiple impacts, likely to have a huge cumulative return. This is where measurement of outcomes becomes almost impossible.
- We can look at broad metrics such as retention and achievement but it is difficult to link them back to N-TUTORR directly. There is an impact on the culture of institutions, a new way of engaging students – perhaps students are the best communicators and champions of this.
- Important to label spaces/resources within our colleges that were funded via N-Tutor so that people value what has been delivered.
- Capture personal stories in relation to themes.

Tangible assets

- Compendium of assessments methods by students.
- Job and role descriptions for key project roles, particularly the SECs.
- Procurement processes.
- Student champions – alumni, also the role itself and processes for payment to students.
- Assessment framework/toolkit: a 'critical resource for change'
- Transitions to HE programme and its alumni/advocates.
- Curriculum framework, assessment framework.
- Digital backpack and badges.
- Research papers and reports.
- New digital ecosystem: 'We really do have a lot built - it's all on a phone where you can just quickly access and tap.'
- New learning spaces: better designs and use cases for existing spaces. '19th century buildings where staff were literally meeting students under the stairs now have new 2- and 4-seater pods for meetings, and a telepresence robot.'

Sustaining these assets

- Who wants what we have created? Who is looking for the solution we have built? (Creating the market? Promoting the product?).
- What are the pieces and who might take them on? EDI, digital learning teams?
- What is the priority to maintain and sustain so we can use the time, resources and energy we have effectively?
- We need ideas on the back burner, ready to go if there is funding again.
- Human resource implications of curating and maintaining resources - mindful of staff workload and their wellbeing. Where does this come from?
- Relatively modest input of staff time around end of programme funding could make a significant difference to how complete and discoverable the legacy of assets is.
- Back pack - could this be linked to a sectoral level badge? Similar to the school badge Irish students can get just now as recognition for extra curricular work they do? That could be low cost to develop across the partnership.
- Passion is there – sustainability has been embedded in some of the work strands. Time/capacity might not be there after December: 'Very sad as I have 3 months to find a job.'
- Important to have local roles and functions that align to N-TUTORR themes and values, so that the resources make sense, can lock in to local agendas.

The power of stories

- 'that kind of ripple effect of one person being enabled and empowered to do something, and then then telling that story, it's sometimes so much more powerful than anything else.'
- 'We had to write a forty million euro project in a few weeks. Then had to rewrite the project in ten days around sustainable development.' The sector needs strong, ongoing stories from which new project ideas can emerge: 'we need part-baked ideas ready to pick up.'
- LMS platforms have expanded functionality but 'we had to tell new stories to help staff navigate them'.
- There is a power in sharing honestly, including feelings of vulnerability. 'It was the students' idea to share their stories with others. How they felt this would have helped them when they were considering education.' Students brought stories of discrimination and exclusion, and overcoming these.

The value of values

The stories emphasised the 'happy work' of doing something that project staff really believed was important and valuable. Every project story emphasised the ways that the project values aligned with the personal values of the storyteller, particularly EDI and student empowerment. Although there was pride at having achieved project metrics, this was mentioned far less frequently as a motivator than the opportunity to work in a way that felt 'meaningful', that was productive of values rather than simply of evaluation evidence.

"The project has been built around some values that are easy to say, but very difficult to realise. And I think in each of the groups there was a thing about collaboration, and there were reasons why we might not have collaborated, but actually the values and the vision allowed those to be overcome, and that does feel really a powerful story."

work-stream 1: Student Empowerment

Micro Level - Individual

student

- Student champions have 'seen themselves' and 'been seen'. They reported feeling valued, being engaged, contributing to their university communities and gaining hope and skills for the future.
- In the face of many challenges - dropping out, imposter syndrome, fear, shame, financial challenges – students have won through to access Higher Education through the pilot course.
- My Digital Backpack has been very extensively used and valued by students. Microcredentials widely taken up.
- Staff now recognise the value in listening to students, valuing their experiences and co-producing resources for transformation.
- Students are acknowledged experts in their own experience.
- '*Everyone benefits when students are heard*'.

staff

- New roles were defined – the Student Experience Coordinators in particular.
- The role of SECs has been demonstrated to have impact on individual students and on the way students are engaged and empowered. They were key to how N-TUTORR was perceived: defined as 'fairy godmothers'.
- Job profiles did not match the skillset needed so staff were defining their own roles as they developed into them. These lessons need to be retained.
- Less experienced/expert staff also showed they had valuable skills to offer.
- The staff fellowship projects delivered over and above the modest investment of funding. There was strength in the diversity of projects.
- The fellowship projects and the number of staff attending events demonstrated a huge unmet demand for training and (support for) innovation.

Meso Level - Institution

- The programme had allowed TU institutions to showcase what they can do. They were no longer 'hiding the portfolio under the bed'.
- The programme created space for staff and students to collaborate.
- Students were given priority in institutional structures and infrastructures and began to be heard.
- The most tangible impacts came from having well-resourced spaces for hybrid teaching, learning and assessment, and integrated digital environments. These became enablers for a more integrated culture of learning.
- Visionaries were given institutional support.
- New roles were defined and developed, providing a basis for further innovation and capacity building.
- N-TUTORR was seen as a 'caregiver', enabling and unifying, an antidote to cynicism and change fatigue.

Macro Level - Sector

- Through N-TUTORR the TU sector began to take its place in the national landscape. Its particular contribution was seen as producing a more compassionate HE sector, with EDI, integrity, student empowerment to the fore.
- TU students would overcome disadvantage to lead the Ireland of the future.
- The sector itself had overcome its own 'imposter syndrome' to run a successful EU funded project. Funders and HE sector bodies may not have had confidence that the TU sector could deliver, but the metrics and the high profile of the project have proved it can.
- The sector is now nationally leading in terms of the student experience and student engagement. It has shown the advantages of collaboration.
- The sector is 'coming of age' in a post-covid landscape, realising the positive lessons of that time (compassion, resilience, care)

Obstacles, enablers, values and lessons

work-stream 1: Student Empowerment

Obstacles

- Dept Education, EU.
- Time and timing – *'being always late to the party, recruitment too slow, procurement too slow…'*
- Recruitment, lack of clarity about roles (at the start), *'everyone was a new recruit'.*
- Imposter syndrome on the part of the sector as a whole.
- Computer says 'no' – existing IT infrastructures and their lack of reliability.
- Existing cultures and procedures creating barriers to innovation.
- Trolls '*you can't do that*'
- 'Fear' often mentioned as an obstacle – fear of change, fear of inadequacy, fear of failure, all tending to conservatism and 'resistance'.

Enablers

- Student champions, staff fellowships, other staff/students more peripherally.
- Institutional leads, stream leads, PS, Executive sponsors, Presidents.
- Library staff and other learning professionals.
- Expert voices (e.g. external consultants as well as internal leaders and emerging experts).
- Shared commitment to student empowerment.
- Fairy godmothers (SECs).
- Resources – paying students for their time and travel, buying lunch, showing they were valued.
- The value of a good data analyst and research team: critical to collect evidence and tell a convincing story with it.

Values

- Power of collective, team work.
- Co-mentoring, sharing skills.
- Student empowerment.
- Genuine parity of expertise and input (when it comes to the student experience, students are the experts).
- Resilience, persistence, courage, 'never give up'.
- EDI, everyone is valued, everyone benefits form listening to the student voice.
- When writing the project bid we were asked to be more implicit about the values – SDGs/EDI - these are things we were already doing but have been more clearly articulated and integrated.
- During lifetime of the project other values came to the fore – collaboration/collegiality/trust.
- *'To highlight how influential all our work is on each of our students.'*

Lessons learned

- Small actions can make a large difference (student stories, fellowship projects, corridor conversations).
- You don't have to do everything – learning to trust the collective.
- What students say matters: Support and empowerment, mattering, emotional support, broadening horizons.
- Link to SDGs gives the project longevity but needs continued conversation.
- Much can be achieved in a short space of time, but there is a cost in terms of people's energies and commitment. Embedding requires a different strategy - not using people up and hoping more will come along.

work-stream 2: Staff Development

Micro Level - Individual

student

This work stream has empowered staff to empower students:

'*I think some of the thematic areas, the six core themes of N-TUTORR are radical, and to think that we moved to dial on some of those things*'

'*ATU Sligo has the highest proportion of disadvantaged students in the country - so it was significant to work on this issue [with staff].*'

staff

There was pride in the metrics concerning staff participation - 3,000 staff members at one institution, 'most of our staff' at another. But the real impacts are on individuals:

'*I have had more impact from this programme in two years than in the whole of my academic career*'.
'*Coming out of my comfort zone - teaching a few students - to deal with seven campuses and hundreds of students.*'
'*Fantastic to be pushed - refreshed myself and my career.*'

The metrics did demonstrate that staff were '*hungry for training*' and far from needing to promote the opportunities, the programme tapped into a huge unmet demand.

'*Having the resources has allowed lecturers to do things they always wanted*'; '*I booked 60 places for MS training and got 220 requests - everything we offered was snapped up*'.

One colleague who said of N-TUTORR training that '*changed their life, they couldn't believe it was free*'.

Impact on professional services staff was huge and needs to be sustained. There was real value in those staff feeling of equal worth and having equal access to bespoke and generic training.
'*The workshops were expensive and political in terms of buying out hours – and did not produce big numbers in terms of our metrics - but every one of those sessions was meaningful for those involved.*'

Meso Level - Institution

- Universities have clearer human/digital systems in place: '*there is now a clearer shape in IADT: staff experience, digital landscape, learning ecosystem.*'
- Within and between TU connections have built capacity for staff development, not only with shared events but with shared expertise and needs analysis.
- Enhanced and ongoing training and support: '*onboarding, gaining clear instructions, finding resources, understanding the role of others, accessing power apps…*'
- '*Bringing people out of the basement*' to lead projects of strategic importance to the university.
- New roles for professional staff; a new sense of equitable value through shared access to CPD.
- Encouraging investment in similar issues on the different campuses allowed the sector to cohere.

Macro Level - Sector

- Developing sectors self belief – N-TUTORR provided an opportunity to articulate what sector does well and uniquely.
- Important that the National Co-ordinator came from outside the sector.
- Senior management gained in (self)belief when they saw the sector delivering.
- Shared values (EDI, student empowerment) came to the fore.
- Increased understanding of how to deliver at this scale, increased staff capacity in managing funding and opportunity on behalf of the sector.
- Friendships, collaborations, '*they seem to be lasting connections that are not going to come to a stop*'.
- Visibility of the sector has been raised, particularly as innovating the student experience.
- '*It was about seven distinct and different institutions coming together with a shared direction of travel - actually we are 14 institutions originally*'.
- N-TUTORR provides a real world example of the SDGs driving a programme and being embedded in practice. Globally significant.

work-stream 2: Staff Development

Obstacles

- "The admin and busy work nearly broke me": *'policies, barriers, challenges, deadends, constraints, bureaucracy.'*
- Buying out hours – 'political and challenging.'
- Exam boards, ethics committees.
- (Lack of) time, (lack of) sustainable funding .
- Timing: 'starting the role in march when metrics were due in April'.
- A lack of information, including for staff signing up for events – did not always know exactly what they would get out of it or how it related to their day-to-day role.
- Lack of time is an issue for everyone.
- A lack of clear direction (at the start). The scale of the project could make it difficult to see the bigger picture (however, project structure helped with this). Uncertainty: *'Am I actually doing my job?'*
- Change fatigue, overwork, *'mindset, mental obstacles'*.
- Uncertainty across the sector and in key bodies such as THEA.
- Silos, and siloed behaviour.

Enablers

- Funds, finances, resources.
- Being able to support and extend work that was already gong on, not taking over but reinforcing positive developments.
- Staff being aligned to key themes. The themes, work-streams, values.
- Strength in numbers. Many flowers bloomed.
- 'A positive mindset', *'the N-TUTORR identity'*.
- A National Coordinator with significant credibility, a NC from outside the sector.
- Senior HEI leaders (once 'persuaded'), HEA (once 'persuaded'), N-TUTORR teams.
- All the stream 2 staff and opportunities to link with the other streams.

Values

- EDI as a value in terms of equally valuing the different campuses and institutions involved in the programme. And equally valuing the staff and students involved, whatever their role and expertise.
- Having a programme management office for the first time showed that management is an essential investment; raised expectations of future externally funded projects.
- '*I have been able to find real resonance and value in [this] work*'.
- '*Advocating for meaningful stuff in your work is essential*.'

Lessons learned

- Relationships last longer than events and resources.
- The stakes have been raised – a lack of future funding means not only losing some potential impact and benefits of N-TUTORR but creating a potentially negative reaction.
- A project is a series of concentric rings of influence and support. Sometimes people in the outer reaches become important. The periphery can become the centre

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work-stream 3: Digital Ecosystem

Micro Level - Individual

student

- The learning environment has to be frictionless for the students, who are at the heart of what the TU sector does.
- *'The nature of our students, the socio-economic disadvantage, the first timer, all of the key challenges that they face, a lot of people will walk over coals in our sector to support them'.*
- '*The [new] classrooms make it easier to focus on EDI, because they're in your head the whole time.*'
- Academic integrity work, led by students, showed that students can be responsible. They can be led by values. They want their learning to count, they want to aim high.
- It's about understanding what issues students are facing that make academic integrity a challenge. These are not equally distributed.

staff

- Mini projects provided tangible benefits and showed how 'parity of experience' across campuses could be combined with diverse approaches.
- There has been some recovery from the negative legacy of pandemic teaching online: '*we were putting teachers into hybrid and hyflex settings that hadn't been fitted out properly and they were being expected to teach in dual mode... they're still traumatized with those experiences. It's getting better, so I think that's positive.*'
- Staff training – '*showing people how to use this technology, these new rooms*' – was combined with ongoing CPD.
- Procurement highlighted the collective wisdom of IT teams and (in particular) the value of challenging vendors' claims – far easier with the collective confidence that comes from pooled experience across partners.

Meso Level - Institution

- Collaborations across TUs, particularly over systems procurement and integration.
- The project highlighted the importance of 'intrapreneurs' who can link strategic management with experiences on the ground ('*in the trenches*').
- New and refurnished spaces for learning, teaching and student support - these have helped lift TUs from the 'Dickensian poorhouse' to the status of a 'future learning landscape'.
- A lot of small-scale infrastructure is now in place: '*the TVR headsets, the software, the various pieces of equipment [in teaching rooms]*'.
- This work-stream had an impact on institutional strategies around IT and digital infrastructure too. '*We made a big impact on strategic plans: how can we align what's come out of N-TUTORR with those strategic objectives that we've set our universities*?'
- Assumption that core funding would be available behind those strategic objectives – this is an issue for the Presidents.

Macro Level - Sector

- The project has helped the sector to define its values, its characteristics, its distinctiveness: '*a great engagement with industry and employability, and with access as our defining mission*'.
- '*There is a contrast with the traditional universities. I won't say they couldn't have done it, but maybe they couldn't have done it.*'
- '*I'd like to think that HEA and the DfE will look at this and say this new sector, they're really able to pull together and bring in something substantial... we can all be very proud of that*'
- The project has aligned the sector with important national strategic priorities, but has also developed its own focus and identity.
- The project was able to achieve as much as it did, in the short time it had, partly because of '*the built-up pent-up lack of money - there was no way we were going to waste this 40 million*'.

work-stream 3: Digital Ecosystems

Obstacles

- Tight deadlines, limited resources.
- Existing ways of doing things –technical systems and procurement systems.
- Staff turnover – it was hard to get replacements/back fill.
- The lack of a national framework for procurement (at the outset).
- Poor communication of the vision (at the outset).
- Perceptions of INequity across roles and campuses – needed to be overcome to avoid cynicism and get buy-in.
- Digital fantasy, the projection of technology as a solution in itself – *'people go to a conference or read something and say why can't we have that – and often it is just fantasy and hype'*.
- Internal policies, protocols and restrictions.
- Change fatigue, perhaps justified: *'no sooner have you invested in something that you find out there's going to be a new iteration, [and] the new system is broadly just a different way of approaching the exact same solution.' 'I don't want to have to reinvent what I'm doing, because the answer is going to be the same at the end.'*
- Until the basics are fixed, innovation seems like a luxury: *'we have goggles and hybrid gear but we don't have a space to meet students, the Wi-Fi isn't connecting properly, there isn't enough car park spaces'*.
- *'I think people get very fatigued with a lot of shiny new toys when rooms are falling down, the actual infrastructure, the day-to-day fundamentals, aren't there'*.

Enablers

- N-TUTORR team, steering board, PMO.
- IT support staff and team leaders at the partner TUs.
- Technology itself as an enabler – not only functionally but because it demonstrates that the organisation is successful, that people are valued.
- Shared expertise and the power of collaboration.
- That mergers were already changing the landscape and driving integration.
- Perceptions of equity across roles and campuses.
- Digital realism – real experiences of use.
- IT support (generically, and in specific instances: *'x arriving with cables and signing in from another computer to make sure it all worked')*
- Having common and overlapping concerns allowed shared solutions to emerge – this was partly a product of the time and timing (post-covid, emerging sector).
- Supplier, manufacturers became assets (after work). Student champion network.
- Important to have 'wounded captains – people who have frontline experience, who are a bit battle-hardened and realistic – as go-betweens for management (generals) and the front line staff.
- Marketing, and contacts in the film industry (to produce compelling visual story about installation).

Values

- Responsiveness, resilience, trusting the users, trusting instincts.
- Lowering barriers to access with the help of technology.
- Making learning available to students anywhere.
- Making students feel they matter.
- Persistence (not giving up).
- The role of comedy in winning people over; also the value of the 'jester' within the organisation, who asks 'why can't this be possible?'
- (In relation to academic integrity).
- Trust, honesty, fairness, empathy, understanding.
- Consult early, consult often, consult everyone.
- Fix the basics (see obstacles) – they matter more than the 'shiny new tools.'

Lessons learned

- Invest enough in staff development or new systems will not be well used and will not return all they could on the investment.
- Always have a sustainability plan - build something that will be mainstream and will endure.
- Money is not enough, lasting change needs people, their belief/commitment and expertise.
- *'Social design is as important as system design.'*
- Build a coalition of the willing – others may follow later.
- *'Digital by design means deploying digital where it's needed and where it brings known benefits and solves problems that you know people are having.'*
- *'Goodwill is not a replacement for proper resource planning... Who owns the technology? What is the real cost of that ownership?'*
- *'Particularly when people are skeptical of the technology, you just get one chance with them.'*

WORK STREAM(S)/ PARTNER PROJECT TEAM(S) VALUES

N→TU TORR

STUDENT EMPOWERMENT

Empowering students as valued partners across all work-streams ensured that the student experience was at the centre of all developments.

COLLABORATION

Collaboration through co-working and co-mentoring at inter and intra institution levels ensured that sector level knowledge could be leveraged to be best effect across the partners.

TRUST

The project teams developed new levels of trust across the work-streams allowing the to share and develop approaches, particularly in relation to procurement of digital hardware and software.

RESILIENCE

Institutional teams developed new levels of resilience, responsivenss and adaptable to ensure that they met programme targets and deadlines.

EMPATHY

Empathy and understanding of student and staff needs, constraints and contexts was essential to successful stakeholder engagement with the programme.

EDI

Ensuring that equality, diversity and inclusion were embedded across all of the programme deliverables and interactions was at the centre of all of the work-streams.