STUDENT PARTNERSHIP IN TEACHING & LEARNING

Lessons from the Enhancing Digital in Teaching & Learning in Irish Universities Project

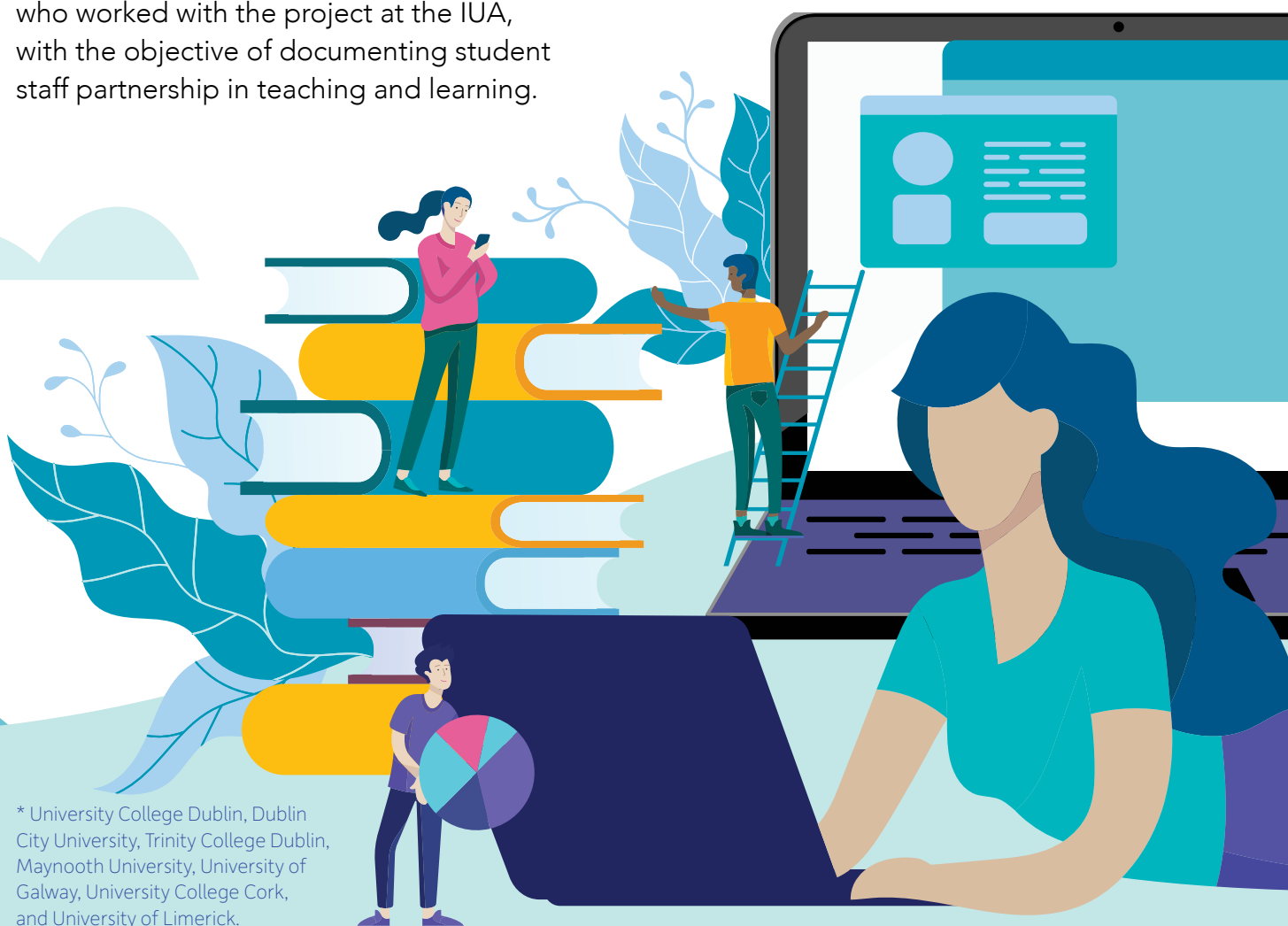**Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning**
Irish Universities Association

Summary

From 2019, the Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning (EDTL) project hired student associate interns to work with project staff in each of the seven IUA universities* in creating digital resources to support teaching and learning.

At that time, these interns were all students enrolled in the seven universities and were employed as interns for a period of up to one year. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted among these interns/former interns and staff from the seven IUA universities in the EDTL project as well as the student associate interns who worked with the project at the IUA, with the objective of documenting student staff partnership in teaching and learning.

This report presents experiences of student interns and staff on their involvement in the EDTL project. It describes the EDTL internship model, the role played by students in the internship, how students benefited from the internship, staff thoughts about the model, student-staff and student-student collaboration in the project, what worked and what did not work, and students' recommendations based on their internship experiences.

* University College Dublin, Dublin City University, Trinity College Dublin, Maynooth University, University of Galway, University College Cork, and University of Limerick.

Background

The Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning in Irish Universities Project (EDTL) ran from January 2019 to September 2022, funded through the Irish Higher Education Authority's Innovation and Transformation Programme. It aimed to enhance the digital attributes and educational experiences of Irish university students through enabling the mainstreamed and integrated use of digital technologies across the teaching and learning process. Between 2019 and 2021, the project recruited student associate interns with the main objective of bringing students' voices to the project and actively involving them in creating digital resources to support online teaching and learning in the seven universities* under the IUA.

Each university had at least one student associate intern who worked collaboratively with a member of staff affiliated to the EDTL project (EDTL project leads). In addition, there was always one intern working under the EDTL project at the IUA apart from the third cohort (2021) where the project hired two interns at the IUA, one who worked mostly in coordinating other interns as well as editing the newsletter and the other mostly on the research role that contributed to this report. In late 2021, after TU Dublin joined the IUA, a student intern for that institution was recruited to join the team.

Whereas most universities had one intern at a time and hired new ones after at least six months, some universities had more than one intern working concurrently.

* University College Dublin, Dublin City University, Trinity College Dublin, Maynooth University, University of Galway, University College Cork, and University of Limerick.

Each student associate intern at the university level worked on projects related to their own university's EDTL project activities and often collaborated with other interns across the seven universities and the IUA. These interns completed tasks such as organizing and hosting webinars, contributing to and editing newsletters, updating EDTL Instagram posts, as well as creating digital teaching and learning resources for both students and faculty.

At the time of hiring, the interns had to be actively enrolled in an ongoing course in one of the partner universities. The internship period ran for a first period of six months with most interns accepting to extend their contracts after the initial six month period. During their internship, students were paid at an hourly rate of €13.91 with the expectation that they would work for 60 hours per month in whatever format that best suited their needs, factoring in university schedules and demanding assessment periods. The model acknowledged that interns were full-time students and part-time employees, hence bringing about flexibility that prioritized college work.

Diagnosis among interns

Diversity among interns

The project hired from diverse disciplines, level of studies and type of students from the partnering universities.

LEVEL OF STUDY

12
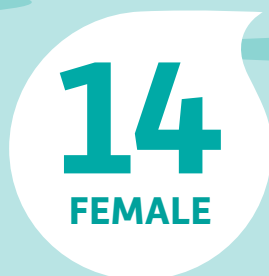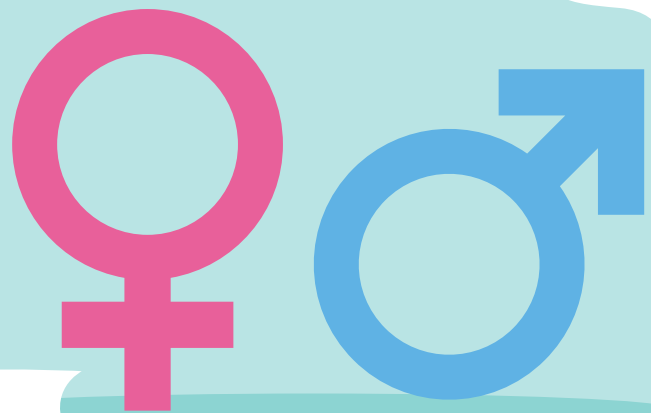**UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS**

8 MASTERS STUDENTS

1
DOCTORAL RESEARCH STUDIES STUDENT

TYPE OF STUDENTS

3 INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

18 LOCAL STUDENTS

7 MALE

14 FEMALE

GENDER REPRESENTATION

Study backgrounds

Note: This nature of diversity enabled the inclusion of various perspectives from different groups of students based on the unique experiences that could not be captured from hiring from one group.

Recruited in 2019

Vish Gain	IUA	1 July
	PG	*Journalism*

Recruited in 2020

Ruairi O'Gallchoir	IUA	1 July
	PG	*Data Science & Analytics*

Laura Anne Scanlon	DCU	20 July
	PG	*Digital Marketing*

Catherine Dawson	UCC	20 July
	PG	*Mathematical Modelling*

Aoibhínn Gilmartin	UCD	20 July
	UG	*Law with Social Justice*

Michaela Waters	MU	4 August
	UG	*Business & Accounting*

Lauren Muldowney	UG	10 August
	UG	*Medicine*

Ben Ryan	TCD	24 August
	UG	*Business & Political Science*

Alice Hynes	UL	1 Sept
	UG	*International Business*

Katharina Kurz	MU	4 August
	PG	*Anthropology*

Recruited in 2021

| **Míde Nic Fhionnlaoich** | IUA | 19 July |
| | UG | *Law with Social Justice* |

| **Fernandos Ongolly** | IUA | 16 August |
| | PG | *Anthropology* |

| **Jasmine Ryan** | UL | 19 July |
| | UG | *Politics & International Relations with Philosophy* |

| **Eimer Magee** | UCD | 1 August |
| | PG | *Biopharmaceutical Engineering* |

| **Hannah Arthurs** | TCD | 13 Sept |
| | PG | *Law/Entrepreneurship & Innovation* |

| **Stephen O'Riordan** | UCC | 1 Sept |
| | UG | *Applied Maths & Physics* |

| **Laura Ilupeju** | UG | 6 Sept |
| | UG | *Biomedical Science* |

| **Sinéad Mooney** | DCU | 6 Sept |
| | UG | *Communication Studies* |

| **Robyn Meyler** | MU | Sept |
| | PG | *International Business* |

| **Chris Abraham** | MU | May |
| | UG | *Electronic Engineering* |

| **Kyle Wright** | TUD | 6 Dec |
| | UG | *Creative Digital Media* |

Approach

Using qualitative research methods and case study research design, we interviewed student associate interns (both former and current) and project staff in 6 of our partner universities, aiming at documenting student-staff partnership in digital teaching and learning, based on the IUA EDTL project internship model as a case study. The findings of these qualitative interviews with our interns and staff contribute to the content of this report.

Profile of interview participants

14 IN-DEPTH QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

11 UNDERGRADUATE

3 MASTERS

1 FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

7 STAFF

In-depth qualitative interviews with student associate interns focused on exploring the role of students as partners in digital teaching and learning through capturing individual intern's experiences in their role in the EDTL project.

In-depth interviews with the project staff in each of the participating universities focused on the perspectives of those staff on the contributions of their respective student associate interns to the project.

What contributions did the student interns bring to the project?

The core objective of hiring students in the project was to bring their voices and perspectives in the development of digital teaching and learning resources in collaboration with project staff. Just like the evolution of the internship program from one intern to over twenty interns across partnering universities, our student interns adapted into other roles outside what had initially been defined. We saw the adapability of our student interns into other roles especially as a result of the pandemic. Generally, student interns contributed in the following ways:

1. Developing digital teaching and learning resources.

Students have developed great resources for us and the good thing is that they do it a lot from the top down bringing in their perspectives.
- Staff

2. Ideating and leading webinars (where topics such as assessment during the pandemic, resuming on-campus teaching and learning, experiences with various virtual learning environments among others were discussed). In total, 8 webinars were hosted by students and staff reaching live 279 attendees, attracting 1727 playback views on our website and 768 on Vimeo.

Student led webinars (aimed at staff)	Date	Attendees	Views*
The Student Perspective of Online/Remote Teaching	5 October 2020	47	464 (website) 368 (Vimeo)
The Student Perspective of Online/Remote Assessment	2 November 2020	39	276 (website) 50 (Vimeo)
Student Feedback on Online Learning	18 January 2021	42	220 (website) 88 (Vimeo)
Student Collaboration	8 March 2021	37	117 (website) 36 (Vimeo)
Inclusivity in Digital Learning: Student Perspectives	22 March 2021	55	378 (website) 144 (Vimeo)
Student Perspectives: Back on Campus	1 November 2021	29	70 (website) 34 (Vimeo)
Student Perspectives: Motivation for Learning	31 January 2022	19	97 (website) 30 (Vimeo)
Student Perspectives: Open Book Assessment	28 March 2022	11	105 (website) 18 (Vimeo)

3. Contributing to the project newsletter by writing on different topics based on their experiences as learners.

4. Conducting project research and disseminating research findings in workshops/conferences both locally and internationally.

I was involved in student surveys where I was responsible for sorting the data.

- Student

We contributed at different conferences and presentations as well as the fortnightly IUA webinars. We were also at a library event where we spoke and gave student perspectives regarding the library and ways that it could be improved.

- Student

Contribution Type	Event
11 International conference presentations	• *Association for Learning Technology Annual Conference (ALTC), Manchester, UK ALT Annual Conference 2021* • *European Conference on Academic Integrity and Plagiarism 2021* • *International Conference on Engaging Pedagogy 2021* • *Change Agents Network (CAN) Conference 2022* • *Generation Z in Higher Education Conference 2021* • *ICAI Annual Conference* • *SEDA Summer 2021 Conference* • *SEDA Spring Conference: Brighter Future – Opportunities for Educational Change* • *Surviving & Thriving in the Online Space – the experiences of Staff and Students. SEDA Winter Festival 2020.*
6 National conference presentations	• *EdTech Winter Online Conference 2021* • *Advance HE's Island of Ireland Symposium: Partnership for Student Success: Developing graduates for the 21st Century* • *Irish Learning Technology Association (ILTA) EdTech Conference 2022, Cork* • *EdTech Conference 2021 (2 or more)*
1 Peer reviewed journal publication	• *Inclusive Learning in Higher Education Symposium, University of Galway*
3 Invited Keynotes	• *Co-Creators in Enhancing Digital Teaching & Learning. University of Brighton Education and Student Experience Conference* • *GMIT DigitalEd week* • *CONUL T&L Seminar 2021*
1 Invited Panel	• *Inclusive Learning in Higher Education Symposium, University of Galway*
1 Other categories	• *Open Scholarship Week Galway 2022*

5. Giving feedback in modules that were being developed by staff as well as piloting some of the modules.

6. Championing and managing the project Instagram account that became a key channel for sharing digital learning and teaching resources and marketing project events to students.

> *I was responsible for reviewing the materials put together by staff from various departments and giving the student perspective and experiences. My feedback was received positively by staff and they were willing incorporate in campaigns that they were working on.*
>
> *- Student*

1. Students gathered useful work experience that they would use later while seeking employment and even applied in their employment after the internship.

2. Developed digital competencies and learnt new skills such as hosting webinars and podcasts, website management, editing, developing of graphics using programs such as Canva, social media management among others. This was both from experience gathered on-job and training by IUA staff.

Graphic design and social media management have been two major areas of work for the Interns, I might have established a social media account, but essentially, I would have passed over what is put up onto the social media account to our intern.

- Staff

Note: Having a project intern work with them was like having an extra pair of hands to assist in project tasks, hence students were also actively involved in many more project tasks on an ad-hoc basis whenever their time allowed.

What benefits did the students get from the project?

The internship program came with mutual benefit both to the project and the students; whereas the project benefited from the many skills and perspectives that students brought with them, the students also reported to have gained a lot from their internship in various ways.

One of my main roles that I was required to do was to review this Microsoft office course that my university provided and then I had to promote it to the student body and as a result I had to do the course myself before I could review it and then promote it. That was a major benefit, taking that training and then upscaling my personal skills.

- Student

As part of the project we received a lot of technological training as I said we got training in Canva, Amazon Web Services, video editing and so many other different things like that.

- Student

When I joined the project, I did not have any work experience. To be honest I would never be in the job that I am in right now if it hadn't been the EDTL internship position. That gave me the interest in the academic stuff to go on to do this job.

- Student

3. Developed social skills such as confidence and how to relate with other people as the internship exposed them to collaborative activities both with staff and fellow students.

> *I definitely felt the webinars gave me confidence when it came to public speaking even though I wasn't bad before, and now, I'm so comfortable just doing a webinar and being involved it definitely improved my confidence.*
>
> **- Student**

> *I delivered a workshop in collaboration with one of our interns. I have done that workshop many times over the years but when I delivered it in conjunction with the student, it was completely different for the better, because she was able to bring much more of a nuanced perspective to the workshop.*
>
> **- Staff**

> *My soft skills improved during the year. As I said at the start of the year, I was afraid to give my input at meetings or over email, but I got better in expressing my own input and expressing my voice and getting heard throughout the year.*
>
> **- Student**

> *Involving students has really brought the authentic student voice to the project activities and has helped us to shape the project.*
>
> **- Staff**

4. Developed their presentation skills and confidence to speak in events such as webinars and workshops.

What did the EDTL staff think about the internship?

1. From our project we have learnt that student partnership is successful when the relationship is mutual between staff and students. In our project, generally staff appreciated the value that the students brought to the EDTL project with greater emphasis on the authenticity of their representation. According to staff, involving students as partners in the project brought authentic student voices in each and every project activity where students were directly or indirectly involved.

2. Involving students and working directly with them brought in perspectives that would have never been captured by staff. During the internship, students brought in their lived experiences as 'students' highlighting issues that affected them from their point of views. Such examples are their experience with open book examination, virtual learning, remote assessment, blended learning in times of a pandemic as well as return to college after a pandemic could only best be understood when shared with students who had lived experiences of learning in this period.

> *The staff aren't getting inside a real insight into how students are experiencing things. And to be completely honest sometimes when the students came together and discuss those and allowed us to get that insight, to hear them speaking, to talk about the impact that was having on them in brought out different perspectives.*
>
> **- Staff**

> *One particular thing we were trying to do, especially towards the end was promote Blackboard Ally, which is a tool for Blackboard the VLE and which allows more accessibility for content that's posted online.*
>
> **- Student**

2. They also collaborated in contributing to the bi-monthly newsletter.

3. Students developed and managed the project Instagram page.

3. Having student interns in each university brought about some sort of convenience of partnering with students as they were accessible and were always available not only to bring student perspectives in the project but also to help them with project tasks.

> *We did campaigns on Instagram that were collaborative. The idea generation were collaborative and then some people will take on the different responsibilities of developing the graphics. For me the students I met from the EDTL project on a weekly basis were from the Instagram team so that is the most part we collaborated on.*
>
> **- Student**

Collaboration in the project

Two forms of collaboration came out from the internship programme. Even though the initial objective was concentrated more on student-staff collaboration, we saw a natural growth in collaboration among students as well; either in their respective universities or with other interns in partner universities.

How did students collaborate with fellow students?

1. Students collaborated in developing digital learning and teaching resources either with other interns in their respective universities or in other partner universities.

4. Students collaborated in the conceptualization, mobilizing, and hosting webinars.

5. They also collaborated in the review of training tools developed by project staff that were going to be used for other students.

How did students and staff collaborate in the project?

Student-staff collaboration was the core objective of hiring interns in the project. Involving students in the project saw a lot of meaningful partnership in various areas of digital teaching and learning and in many ways.

1. Interns were involved in reviewing, piloting, and promoting teaching and learning resources that had been developed within the project.

> *In some cases, staff have asked students to review tools or training opportunities for students or perhaps to engage in the organization of focus groups and engaging in developing resources. They have also been asked to engage in kind of spreading the word of the project on campus.*
>
> *- Staff*

2. Students and staff collaborated in the ideation and implementation of various workshops & conferences within their local universities and at the national project level.

Notes: Even though most of these workshops were staff-led, students were given the opportunity to collaborate among each other in their respective universities as well as with other interns in partner universities.

3. Students and staff also collaborated in the creation of resources that resonated with current student needs.

Notes: It should be noted that students' needs change over time (especially during and after the pandemic) and it is therefore important that a currently enrolled student is involved in infusing contextual student needs in teaching and learning.

> *More recently, we collaborated with our staff and students to develop a program of activities for academic integrity week. And as part of that we delivered some workshops in partnership between staff and students. We designed them together and, in many cases, we delivered them together.*
>
> *- Staff*

Barriers and facilitators to working with students as partners

We asked our interns and staff to point out barriers/would be barriers to engaging with students as partners. The following barriers emerged:

1. Student-staff power dynamics

Overall, we note that students are more likely to engage comfortably when the power dynamic fence between staff and students is reduced as these dynamics create hierarchies in partnership that may intimidate students and make them withhold their contributions.

Notes: Due to the student-staff power dynamics, students fear being judged and being reprimanded when they share their thoughts. There are some students who think that they will be penalized in one way or another if they gave staff feedback, and hence withhold their thoughts (especially those contradicting with what staff think or how they act).

2. Failure to compensate students for their time

We learnt from our internship model that students work more efficiently when they are valued and compensated for the work they do as well as the time they spend in projects. In the EDTL project, all interns were employed on a monthly contract amounting to 60 hours of paid work with the core duty of bringing their voices in the project.

Notes: It is important to recognize that when students are involved in any sort of partnership with staff, more often they would have given up something they were

supposed to be doing (sometimes part-time jobs) hence compensating students for their time (just like other project employees) came in as a key incentive in motivating them to be actively involved as well as ensuring retention while recognizing the importance of their contribution. Where students are not paid; there is a likelihood of intermittent participation and drop out. Paying students for their work enhances student-staff partnership.

3. Failing to implement student feedback

Whenever students give feedback, they prefer that their feedback be implemented or acted upon in some way or another to show concern. Not taking any action to the feedback that they have already given serves as a barrier to continuous participation. Implementing students' suggestions highlights the importance of their contribution and motivates them to engage further as they feel 'listened to'.

## 4. Lack of knowledge on avenues of student-staff partnership

Sometimes as much as students may wish to engage actively in teaching and learning by bringing in their perspectives, some of them do not have the knowledge of how and where to engage or sometimes are too busy with their college work to get time to participate.

Notes: Apart from student unions, most of our institutions of higher education often lack structured channels of student-staff partnership hence not seizing the opportunity as well as providing conducive environment to enhance student-staff partnership.

Overall recommendations based on the student's experiences

Lessons learnt from our internship model show that it is feasible to actively engage with students as partners in higher education. However, it is key to make sure that avenues of student-staff involvement are facilitated as well as students being compensated for their time and contributions. Based on the student interns' and project staff's experiences as captured in this report, the following recommendations are proposed as a way of enhancing student-staff partnership in higher education.

1. There is need for a structured model of involving students as partners in teaching which defines the 'how' and 'what' of student-staff partnership other than the student union.

2. It is highly recommended that students be compensated when they are involved to cater for the time that they spend collaborating with staff, as they would otherwise sometimes be engaging in part-time work. This will also encourage retention for a longer period and enhance their participation.

3. Training for both students and staff is important in highlighting possible areas of student-staff partnership as well as the processes of collaboration.

4. There is need to sensitize students on ways of giving feedback to staff without fear of being reprimanded.

5. It is important to be diverse and inclusive as students from different backgrounds bring different perspectives when involved as partners in teaching and learning. This could include various disciplines, academic levels, age, gender, racial backgrounds, social backgrounds etc.

6. It is important to involve currently enrolled students as it brings about a more authentic representation on issues that affect students, and their experiences change over time depending on the prevailing circumstances, such as a pandemic.
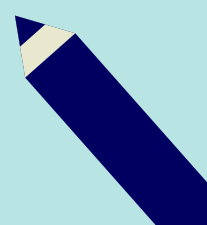
Gallery of student events

Student co-creation event

Student co-creation event

Ed Tech UCC

Student co-creation event

Student co-creation event

Student co-creation event

Student co-creation event

Student co-creation event

Enhancing
Digital Teaching
and Learning
Irish Universities Association