**Final Report on All–Ireland Doctoral Conference May 2012**

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**The Organising Team**

A joint committee was established between the Schools of Education within Queens University Belfast and University College Dublin to plan and prepare for the conference. The Schools of Education at the University of Ulster and National University of Ireland, Galway also helped with the organisation of the conference. This consisted of academic leaders Dr Patrick Walsh QUB, Dr Dympna Devine UCD, Dr Josephine Boland, NUIG and Dr Jackie Reilly UU along with a conference organising committee of eleven doctoral students from Queens University working with doctoral student representatives from UCD, UU and NUIG.

**Planning the conference: Collaboration**

Two main meetings were held in January 2012 in QUB and March 2012 in UCD. The structure of the conference was planned jointly, including allocating responsibilities for roles related to it, decision on conference theme and securing a keynote speaker. There was considerable liaison through email between committee members throughout the time from the first meeting in January up to the conference.

A poster to advertise the conference was designed by the students in UCD and this was circulated to all higher education institutions in the north and south of Ireland through the doctoral programme directors and school managers/administrators in each of the institutions. Participation in the committee was a learning experience for the students as they sorted and selected abstracts and organised the layout and timing of the conference itself. The joint nature of the co-operation between the lead institutions also helped to consolidate links. In the make-up of the committee, we included students from UCD and QUB who had each been involved in the organisation of the conference in the previous year. This ensured transfer of learning and building of capacity across the two schools in hosting and organising the conference. We were also glad to welcome students from UU and NUIG to help with the tasks involved in the organisation.

As it was the turn of QUB to host this year’s conference, doctoral students from QUB were responsible for organising the main logistics of the conference, including hire of the venue, securing funding, organising the schedule for the conference, the catering, entertainment and the conference dinner. For the two day duration of the conference, the students from QUB were also required to welcome and register delegates, chair the parallel sessions and generally ensure the smooth running of the Conference, Students from UCD designed the poster for this year’s conference, collated the book of abstracts, communicated with the delegates prior to the conference via email and also were on hand to chair sessions and help throughout the conference where needed.

**Planning the conference: Developing a Theme**

The theme was decided by a team of students and staff from QUB, UCD and UUJ who took part in a ‘brainstorming’ session in an attempt to isolate a title that would capture the heart of the conference. After much consideration the team decided the conference should be titled ‘Expanding the Horizons of Doctoral Research in Education – Comparing, Adapting, Advancing’. It was felt that this title encompassed what were some of the central aspirations of this endeavour, two of which are outlined below.

First, Education remains, in terms of policy, research and practice, divided between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. One of the chief aims of the conference is to encourage regular and substantial communication and collaboration between those operating in education research on both sides of the border. That the conference is even organised is an explicit call for both institutions and doctoral students within either jurisdiction to cooperate.

Second, the title also represents the journey of each individual doctoral student as they attempt to contribute to the education discipline, uncovering what is currently unknown and unravelling what currently confounds. In this sense all delegates are united in the one purpose and the conference is a symbolic assembling of many peers with a shared task. The subtitle of the conference ‘Comparing, Adapting, Advancing’ captures the spirit of the conference as doctoral students come together to share stories of successes and failures and to encouragingly exhort one another towards methodological innovation, indefatigable pursuit of knowledge and excellence in the writing and presentation of their findings.

**The Conference: Delegates and the Key Note Presentation**

The conference was held in the Students’ Union at Queen’s University, Belfast on May 18th and 19th 2012. It consisted of presentations by a combination of part time and full time students at varying stages of doctoral study from six higher education institutions across the island of Ireland: University College Dublin, University of Ulster, Queen’s University Belfast, the Open University, National University of Ireland, Galway, and All Hallows College, Dublin City University.

Please see the accompanying conference programme for details of the presentations (and the affiliations of student presenters); parallel roundtable sessions; and the key-note address by Professor Emer Smyth engaging with the theme of the conference “Expanding the Horizons of Doctoral Research in Education.”The conference booklet was produced giving full details of programme, abstracts and participant details. The paper sessions were clustered into 3 parallel sessions in each time slot and covered themes broadly related to Evaluation and Intervention, Higher Education and Lifelong Learning, Curriculum Policy and Practice, Arts/Design Based Methodologies, Inclusion, Language Learning, Rights and Equality, Leadership and Education Policy, Teacher Education and CPD, Pedagogy, Research Methodologies, Post-Primary Education, Religion in Education and Cross-Community Links, Emotion in Education. First year doctoral students from QUB designed poster presentations of their research projects which were displayed for the duration of the conference, Roundtable discussions covered topics drawn from students’ own suggestions in the lead-up to the conference and students were clustered into topics of their choice by signing up at the conference registration. The topics were related to how to get published; preparing for the viva; challenges in conducting fieldwork;challenges with writing at doctoral level.

The conference invited abstracts and delegates from all post-doctoral students who were studying in a School of Education in a higher education institution in Ireland, regardless of their year of study, subject matter, or approach to research. This inclusive approach meant that students were not only able to share ideas and learning experiences across institutions, but invaluable advice, experience and encouragement was offered to those embarking on the initial stages of their research by those who were, for example, in the final write-up stages, or preparing for their vivas. The representation of members of staff from various institutions provided another level of expertise.

Organising the conference, while involving infinitely more time and energy than was initially expected, was a thoroughly rewarding and invaluable experience for all the students involved. Most student members of the organising committee had limited or no experience of setting up an academic conference, and therefore found the process of organising and managing the conference to be challenging and involved a steep learning curve! However, the success of the conference, the learning acquired by ourselves and all delegates, and the positive relationships emanating from the event ultimately made the experience a fulfilling one.

**The Conference: An Academic and Social Event**

Throughout the conference time was scheduled in for regular breaks over tea, coffee and tray bakes. This was more than a chance to get refreshment and relaxation between sessions, it proved to be a valuable opportunity to chat informally to fellow delegates about the everyday experiences of life as a doctoral student. Conversations were had about our own particular topics and the trials they presented, and more generally about the ups and downs of the journey of research. The atmosphere during these coffee breaks was particularly noted as being friendly, welcoming and relaxed, and the feedback from delegates has been almost unanimously positive on their value for setting the atmosphere of the conference as a whole.

On the Friday afternoon of the conference following the key note speech, a wine and cheese reception was laid on for all delegates, with live acoustic music provided by a local band, Scorpion Jack. This was an extremely well attended and much enjoyed part of the day, with a delicious selection of wine, cheese and nibbles and the superb music provided a great ambiance in the room. Feedback received noted the “very good choice of wine available” and the great atmosphere and opportunity to get to know fellow delegates during this part of the conference. The band not only set a wonderful ambiance but also provided a talking point and conversation starter for people, and gave a ‘taster’ of Belfast’s local music scene.

After a chance to freshen up, the conference dinner was held at a local restaurant “Made In Belfast” on Friday evening. The chosen venue for the conference dinner provided delegates the chance to try the best seasonal, local produce from Northern Ireland, in a very unique and relaxed setting. A wide choice of three courses was on offer for a very reasonable price, and the restaurant also provided good wheelchair access and easy accessibility from Queen’s University. This was a very important event within the conference as it provided a forum to expand on earlier connections and conversations, and to form new friendships. It proved to be an extremely successful evening with many new links being made and in-depth discussions had, as well as plenty of fun and laughter. The delicious food was deemed a huge success and a plethora of informal feedback was given on Saturday morning as to what a delightful and useful evening it had been. One negative criticism of the evening was that there was not much chance to move around during dinner to talk with different groups of people. A buffet style dinner in future years may be a way to overcome this.

**Feedback from Delegates: Criticisms and Areas of Opportunity**

The conference was indeed a huge success however there are certainly points for improvement that need to be addressed for next year. A smaller number of respondents answered to this question and some of their suggestions for next year’s conference included providing more time for delegates to integrate and talk with students from other universities rather than remaining in groups with people from their own university. This not only alienates delegates who travel on their own from a university but it also prevents good interaction and discussion of research. Some ways that this might be improved would be to have the conference dinner in a venue which allows free movement.

Although some commented on this year’s venue as excellent, others felt that it was restrictive and did not allow for much conversation with others who you were not directly sitting with. When looking for a dinner venue next year, this should be considered. More time for facilitated discussion could be assigned in the conference timetable as currently the only time for this is during the round table discussions. There were tea and coffee breaks however these times were not felt to be sufficiently structured to allow for the type of discussion sought by some of the delegates. This is another point for consideration by next year’s committee. A number of other improvements suggested were that students presenting posters should stand by their posters for questions at an allocated time; conference proceedings detailing presenters’ full papers should be produced; presentations should run on time and more time should be given for movement from one presentation to another; and more institutions should be involved.

It was felt by some delegates that the communication between the organising committee and the delegates could be improved upon. The conference was planned at a relatively late stage which explains why some delegates commented that next time there should be more advanced notice. Some delegates expressed their desire for several calls for papers rather that just one, which would be a helpful reminder for students who have busy work schedules and many different dates to consider. Several delegates felt that important information they requested from the committee, asked via the committee email, was slow to come, if at all, and that a more rigorous process could be established that would ensure that delegates questions would be answered in a more effective and timely manner.

Some delegates suggested that an opportunity exists to have more universities involved in an organisational capacity and that this would aid further and more deliberate collaboration between all of the education faculties within universities on the island of Ireland.

**Feedback from Delegates: Approbation and laudation**

A week after the conference a survey was sent by email to all in attendance at the conference. Thirty-six out of the 53 attendees gave feedback through an online survey monkey questionnaire. As there was a great deal of organisation for the committee on both days, it was not feasible to give out a paper questionnaire to obtain feedback from the students while they were still present. An announcement was made during the close of the conference asking delegates to be aware that they would receive a follow up email requesting their feedback. Although the announcement was made, some delegates had already left the conference at this point, and among other reasons this may explain why 17 delegates did not respond to the questionnaire.

In relation to the importance of the conference each year for doctoral students, a large majority of the respondents, around 80%, stated that they found the conference a useful forum for developing networking and presentation skills, as well as their confidence and knowledge. Other comments in relation to this were that by participating in the conference, it provided a fresh perspective about their own research. This was highly valued as it gave the student a renewed sense of the importance of their study and also it allowed students to gauge what stage they should be at in their own research.

The round table discussions have been a vital part of the conference for the last three years and this year’s discussions did not cease to be an important time to learn together. The majority of the delegates found the roundtable session useful describing it as participative, engaging and informative. All of the conference delegates were divided up into groups of approximately six students, and an academic lecturer from Queen’s University, University College Dublin or the University of Ulster chaired each group. The contribution of each of the chairs was extremely valuable as they gave their insights on various issues facing PhD students such as learning to adapt to academic writing and preparing for the viva. This time is particularly important for students to share difficulties and worries and to realise that they are not alone in the struggle they can find themselves in when doing a PhD.

When faced with the question about what they enjoyed most about the conference, responses centred on the relationships and networking opportunities made available by such an event. Students felt that the collaboration of ideas, the mutual support in your PhD journey and the relaxed atmosphere that the conference presents, all contribute to what makes it a successful event each year. Other comments were that they received valuable feedback on their research in a non-intimidating environment and that the hospitality they received was much appreciated. The students at Queen’s University worked hard to ensure that the delegates were able to enjoy the opportunity and that it would be a constructive and supportive environment to share and learn.

It is very encouraging to note that the majority of the respondents stated they will come back to next year’s conference and many of them would recommend it to others. Two students said they would not be attending it again as they were in their final year and will have completed their studies by next May. We hope that the conference will continue to provide such an interactive and enjoyable forum where educational research can be shared by all doctoral students across the island of Ireland.

**Dr Patrick Walsh**

**School of Education QUB**

**Dr Dympna Devine**

**School of Education, UCD**

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