

**ENHANCING PROFESSIONALISM THROUGH THE CONTINUING  
EDUCATION OF MICRO AND SMALL TOURISM ENTERPRISES:**

**A MODEL FOR PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper originates in the context of growing recognition that the success of the global tourism industry will ultimately depend on the professionalism of its workforce (Edgell et al., 2008). Indeed, as far back as 1986, Baum and Reid highlighted the need for professionalism in the Irish hospitality sector. More recently, the Tourism Policy Review Group (TPRG) report (2003, p. 54) targeted the need for enhanced professionalism in the fragmented, SME-dominated Irish industry (cf. Travers et al., 2004). However, while a general consensus exists on the merits of higher levels of professionalism, and education's role as a key driver of the professionalisation process is undisputed, continuing education for owner/managers of micro/small businesses is problematic (Kelliher et al., 2009). While the larger tourism businesses benefit from a graduate management intake and continuing executive development, the owner of the small tourism operation is limited in their professional development and face barriers to both access to and engagement in education associated with their scale, specifically their resource poverty and the bind of the workplace (Fáilte Ireland, 2004; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004). In light of the foregoing, Fáilte Ireland began a tendering process for the delivery of a degree-level programme for owner/managers of micro/small business enterprises to address this deficit, and the authors' tertiary institute was successful in this process. A new three-year Bachelor of Science in Small Enterprise Management (BSc), based on an andragogical philosophy and problem-based learning approach (PBL), was developed during the 2009-2010 academic year. This paper details the BSc's development; it will provide insights into how the particular sector-specific challenges were met through a creative and innovative programme, tailor-made to be responsive to its specific audience's major needs for a sense of involvement, relevance and flexibility both in content and delivery (Storey and Westhead, 1997; Moon et al., 2005).

While there is an awareness of the potential enhancement of professionalism that PBL offers (Nilsson, 2007), Strobel and Van Barneveld's (2009) meta-analysis of the literature highlighted a lack of consensus on the impact of PBL on learning outcomes. This paper will add to the extant literature on PBL by addressing the first stages in the operationalisation of the BSc initiative to enhance professionalism which involved substantial interaction with stakeholders (Fáilte Ireland discussions, round-table discussions and pilot study with potential students, and post pilot study interviews with participants). In addition to elaborating on the feedback to date from the pilot-study, the authors present their observations on the significance of these initial findings and the implications for the programme development team and industry stakeholders. Finally, although the BSc is specific to a particular sector, it is perceived that this paper, which reports on the first stages of a longitudinal study on the programme's learning impact, should provide guidelines to other educators who are responsible for the development of higher education for adult learners who are owner/managers of micro/small business enterprises.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Fáilte Ireland highlights that tourism “is one of the largest and most important components of indigenous industry within the Irish economy” – the total contribution in 2008 of the tourism industry to GNP was approximately 4% (€6.3B) (Fáilte Ireland, 2009). Furthermore, tourism is seen as a major contributor to achieving sustainable economic development of rural regions (Fossati & Panella, 2000). Despite the current economic difficulties that have severely impacted the tourism sector, the outlook for this sector is strong globally but less so from a European perspective – a 46% drop in tourism traffic is expected by 2020 – thereby indicating the urgency of establishing interventions to circumvent this expected erosion. In light of the foregoing, a major objective of national policy is the enhancement of the industry’s professionalism, seen as a major vehicle for improving the innovativeness and the overall competitiveness of Ireland’s tourism sector (The National Development Plan, 2007-2013; The Tourism Policy Review, 2003).

The Irish tourism industry is fragmented and composed mainly of a heterogeneous mix of micro and small enterprises (Travers et al., 2004) that are particularly susceptible to a myriad of external threats and environmental factors which impede their long-term development and competitiveness (Dale and Robinson, 2007). In addition to facing these broader economic issues, tourism operators are commonly characterized by resource poverty, poor strategic focus and dependency on the focal owner/manager (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Dale and Robinson, 2007; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009), often resulting in a reactive rather than a proactive response to their external environment. The scale of the average business dictates that they have different problems, solutions and environments than their larger counterparts (Leitch and Harrison, 1999); their scale also presents particular trading conditions and management practices not seen in larger operations. For instance, the micro/ small enterprise owner/manager often has lifestyle objectives which compete with business objectives, such as

business growth which may be foregone for the sake of time with the family (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004) and they must be multi-skilled and flexible, as they are expected to become involved in general operations in addition to performing more executive functions, thereby reflecting the ‘hands on’ nature of the industry (O’Leary and Deegan, 2005, p. 428).

In the context of growing recognition of the importance played by these small businesses in terms of local community and regional improvement, there has been renewed focus at a national level in terms of policy development to support and facilitate their growth and stimulate innovation in these firms (Jones and Tilley, 2003). The literature suggests that professionalism is a determinant of innovation in small tourism firms (Sundbo et al., 2007), yet these micro/small businesses face many obstacles to professionalism, such as inept management skills and low levels of training and education (Dale and Robinson, 2007; Jones and Tilley, 2003). However, both Johnson et al. (2006) and Sundbo et al. (2007) have argued that professionalism can be realised through education. The role of education is all the more important given Hjalager’s (2003, p. 33-34) argument that “closer links between stakeholders and educational institutions is a step towards the professionalisation of the entire sector and to improving the knowledge base and innovative and economic capabilities”. Yet, tourism education has been criticized for its lack of responsiveness to industry needs (Baum, 2006), in addition to its over-emphasis on vocational training in craft skills, and lack of appropriate and available tertiary education (Fáilte Ireland, 2005, 2007; Inui et al., 2006). Further, while the larger tourism businesses benefit from a graduate intake and continuing executive development, the owner of the micro/small tourism operation is limited in their professional development. Indeed, the literature indicates that these owner/managers are lacking in entrepreneurial behaviour (Morrison, 2006) and competencies in such areas as marketing, information technology, quality assurance, pricing policy, innovation and knowledge management (Fáilte Ireland, 2005). As a consequence, a key aspect of governmental response

is the targeted education of the micro/small enterprise owner/manager, with specific reference made to the development of higher levels of professionalism (TPRG, 2003).

In light of the foregoing, Fáilte Ireland began a tendering process for the delivery of a degree-level programme to address this deficit, and the authors' tertiary institute was successful in this process<sup>1</sup>, resulting in the development of a new three-year Bachelor of Science in Small Enterprise Management (BSc); the rest of this paper will detail the operationalisation of this initiative, providing a model for future programme development. The next section presents the BSc's development including the primary steps taken in deciding on the underlying teaching philosophy, key themes for the content of the programme and the stakeholders' fundamental parameters for consideration in the design and development process.

## **MODEL DEVELOPMENT: PRIMARY DATA COLLECTION CONTRIBUTION**

### **Research Methodology**

A review of the literature surrounding learning theory, in particular that which was pertinent to adult, micro/small business learners, was a major component of the methodology. In addition, in the past decade there has been growing recognition of the importance of stakeholder involvement in the development of new educational initiatives and, in particular, the need for higher education to be responsive to stakeholder needs (Enterprise Strategy Group, 2004; Hynes and Richardson, 2007). In this context, the programme design team viewed the consultative process as invaluable in order to ensure that higher education meets

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<sup>1</sup> Space issues do not allow the authors to discuss in detail the precursor to the degree previously developed and operated within the Institute, namely the tourism learning network (TLN) initiative. The network facilitated tourism owner/managers' pursuit of a Certificate in Tourism Business Practice and is now in its 4<sup>th</sup> year of operation with over 210 graduates to date. Feedback from both Fáilte Ireland and these graduates through a wide range of research activities with this cohort, revealed a high level of demand for a degree programme customised to their specific needs.

not only the knowledge needs of its targeted learners but also their generic skill needs (this is a key component of the model for programme development illustrated in a later section of the paper). Indeed, it was essential that the course design team<sup>2</sup> gathered detailed and rich information concerning the degree's major dimensions: content, context, process and outcomes. In many respects, each of these four dimensions of the BSc represented a 'blank sheet' and, as a consequence, the model development involved a number of stages in order to promote a culture both inclusive and responsive in terms of the BSc's design and implementation. Furthermore, in order to develop the model, a qualitative methodology was selected as it offered the opportunity for a collaborative context for two-way dialogue with the relevant stakeholders, thereby generating rich data detailing their respective opinions and perceptions to inform programme development. The data was collected through the following four stages:

- 1) Discussions with Fáilte Ireland (the funding body) personnel responsible for education and training to identify module themes (five sessions over the Spring/Summer 2009).
- 2) Round-table discussion with practitioners to obtain their perspective on module themes (June 4<sup>th</sup> 2009).
- 3) Pilot study and completion of feedback forms (February 16<sup>th</sup> 2010).
- 4) Post-pilot interviews with practitioners (March 1<sup>st</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> 2010).

The next section presents descriptive details on each stage of the data collection as well as each stage's findings.

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<sup>2</sup> The course design team is comprised of 20 academic staff and the TLN's project manager – Dr. Anthony Foley is the programme director and Jennifer Hussey is a PhD candidate who is tracking the BSc development as well as its initial year of operation. Drs. Holden and Lynch are core members of the design team.

## Data Collection Stages and Findings

### *Stage 1: Fáilte Ireland Discussions*

From the earliest discussions between the course design team and the funding agency,<sup>3</sup> it was clear that Fáilte Ireland had a clear set of requirements that would need to be met by the nascent degree. The first stipulation was for the programme to be truly national in its design, development and delivery. The second concern from the funding agency was that the degree should be relevant and customised to the needs of the micro/small tourism enterprise. In particular, Fáilte Ireland stressed that the programme should reflect the latest educational thinking on design and delivery.

Based on the foregoing as well as the extant literature surrounding the educational needs of micro/small business operators, it was decided to apply an andragogical philosophy<sup>4</sup> to the new BSc programme. Within this philosophy, the programme recognises the value of the accumulated experience of the students – as recommended by Augier and March (2007); the aim is for the participants to achieve a balanced integration of new academic knowledge with prior experiential knowledge, through the application of both sources of knowledge to real-life problem scenarios. Hence, a key outcome of these discussions was the decision to use blended learning as the mode of delivery, and employ problem-based learning (PBL). PBL has an action learning ethos<sup>5</sup> and is founded on Dewey's (1938) belief that experience is a major source of learning as well as Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning. With its emphasis on self-directed learning, PBL utilises small student 'network' groups (of no more than five/six students) and the role of the lecturer is not to simply be a 'conveyor of

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<sup>3</sup> Discussions involved the following executives from Fáilte Ireland: (1) at national level - Professional Development Advisor, Professional Development Manager, Head of Professional Development, and Director of HRM and (2) at regional level - General Manager and Professional Development Adviser.

<sup>4</sup> Knowles (1980) developed a model of adult education entitled andragogy, which highlighted that adult learning is distinct from the traditional pedagogy employed for facilitating learning in children. Pedagogy centralises course content and perceives students as passive learners, whereas andragogy is particularly relevant to the micro/small business context as it focuses on the application of knowledge to real life, in addition to valuing the active engagement to be gained by involving the adult learner in identifying their own development needs as "they seek to fill the gaps of knowledge in their experience base" (Forest and Peterson, 2006, p. 118).

<sup>5</sup> An action learning ethos had proven successful in Fáilte Ireland's tourism learning networks programme see, for example, Reinl and Kelliher (2008) or Kelliher et al. (2009).

information' rather, they act as facilitators and mentors in the learning process, guiding learners to appropriate resources. Furthermore, the literature indicates that PBL has been identified as conducive to achieving the high level skills, knowledge, and appropriate personal traits to grow and transform enterprises (cf. Duch et al., 2001; Burns and Chisholm, 2005) (in line with the funding body and institute's strategic aim to enhance tourism professionalism).

Hanke's (2009, p. 13) examination of PBL and entrepreneurship reveals many reasons why PBL is ideally suited to the development of professionalism; for example, it "encourages students to adopt a mutual commitment to excellence", similar to a professional colleague group encouraging a code of ethics and standards of practice. Furthermore, Inui et al., (2006, p. 339) contend that "skilled individuals are necessary to the industry, but it is the reflective ones who have the insight to question and improve common practice in the context of tourism development", while Hanke (2009, p.13) argues that PBL enables participants "to question the existing standards, methods, and processes". Indeed, Westcott et al. (2010, p. 36) stress the benefits of PBL in developing independent autonomous thinking and reasoning within a professional context, as well as a strong professional identity "by considering professional issues and contexts throughout the learning and becoming confident in articulating these", while at all times maintaining relevance for the practitioners.

The consultation with Fáilte Ireland, the direct engagement with tourism industry entrepreneurs in a round-table discussion and pilot session, and the utilisation of a PBL ethos for the programme highlight the course design team's commitment to relevance and customisation of the BSc to the needs of the micro/small tourism business sector. This resulted in an increased awareness of the importance of developing insights into critical areas for the tourism entrepreneur such as networking and business planning. The imperative for the BSc to develop graduates as tourism professionals with the ability to address challenges



and opportunities facing the Irish tourism industry as well as enhanced entrepreneurship and innovativeness was also highlighted in discussions with Fáilte Ireland. The discussions with the agency resulted in agreement on a number of guiding themes for the programme:

- *Market Engagement and Web Technology* – enabling the participants to develop effective business models in a Web 2.0 environment where the Internet is driving tourist information, communication and reservations.
- *Tourism Business Processes* – highlighting effective practice in service operations for tourism entrepreneurs.
- *Network Development* – addressing the challenge for the industry in developing sustainable tourism networks.
- *Entrepreneurial Development* – it is critical that owner/managers of micro/small tourism enterprises develop the functional capability and critical skills needed in a hyper competitive environment – this is fundamental to enhanced professionalism.
- *Sales and Strategic Market Development* – effective engagement with the market is essential for Irish tourism.
- *Tourism Competitiveness and Innovation* – key challenges for Irish tourism lie in driving a competitive tourism destination and also in developing innovation in service design, delivery and communication. Fáilte Ireland has highlighted the importance of assisting the industry to address these challenges as articulated in a number of Irish tourism policy studies.<sup>6</sup>
- *Environmental and Energy Management* – in line with the emerging green economy which has implications for cost control and target marketing for tourism enterprises.

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<sup>6</sup>For example, TPRG (2003) *New Horizons for Irish Tourism: An Agenda for Action*.

### ***Stage 2: Practitioner Round-table Discussion***

The major objective of this stage was to obtain the viewpoints of the targeted practitioners on module content – both generic skills and discipline-specific knowledge. The round-table discussion involved nineteen practitioners (TLN certificate holders) and was facilitated by two of the paper's authors. The sample of practitioners that were recruited were chosen via convenience sampling involving the following criteria: (1) from the targeted cohort (past TLN participants with the Certificate), (2) closely located to WIT (from the counties of: Waterford, Wexford, Kilkenny, and Tipperary) (as it was held at a busy time of year, the course design team did not want to ask individuals who would have had to add extensive travel time to the time-out from their business), (3) perceived by the team to be the most likely interested in the BSc, and (4) represented a diverse set of tourism providers, from hospitality services and attractions to micro/small and medium sized accommodation providers. In order to provide a starting point for the discussion, practitioners were first asked to write down three major issues/challenges they were currently facing in their business or felt they would be facing in the future. This was then followed by the authors asking one of the practitioners to identify and relate to the group their issue/challenge/problem. What followed was a free-flowing discussion among the practitioners in which many issues/challenges were identified.

The analysis of this stage found that there was considerable agreement among the participants concerning their needs. The issues/challenges, both personal and professional, which were identified by the participants, are detailed in Table 1 below. In Appendix 1 there is a brief synopsis of practitioner comments which reflect each issue/concern.

Business planning.	Environmental law/regulations.	Keeping a positive outlook.	Stakeholder management, most particularly with local authorities.
Business writing skills, especially in regards to writing funding applications.	Finance/Accounting.	Leadership.	Strategic perspective.
Change management.	Human resource.	Marketing knowledge and skills.	Supply chain management.
Conflict management.	Innovation.	Negotiation.	Time management.
Customer service.	IT/Web/social media skills.	Project management.	Verbal communication skills.

**Table 1: Issues and challenges identified during round-table discussion**

### ***Stage 3: Pilot Study and Completion of Feedback Forms***

The course design team felt that this stage was critical because of the lack of academic staff experience with problem-based learning and blended learning – both are new initiatives in the School of Business; it was challenging for the team to ensure that the design of the pilot resulted in obtaining rich, accurate data about these two key elements of the BSc.<sup>7</sup> Equally, this stage was crucial to ensuring that the targeted cohort were major contributors at each key step of the BSc’s development. The pilot study and the feedback form were crafted by the authors in order to gather information from potential participants of the BSc concerning: (1) their response to PBL, (2) perceived problems arising in connection with PBL, (3) particular challenges in connection with working in an online environment, (4) barriers to completing the assessment, and (5) any other issues/concerns arising. Although the course design team made every attempt to make the pilot realistic, there were limitations to its ‘reality.’ For instance, the depth and breadth of resources to be reviewed for the assessment fell short of Level 7 standards<sup>8</sup>, therefore results in all likelihood do not fully reveal latent issues/concerns in connection with study skills, time management, coping with level of work expected,

<sup>7</sup> The utilisation of PBL and blended learning in the programme represent key challenges for the course design team going forward. Only two members of the design team have previous PBL experience and this experience is extremely limited – both members have used PBL for the first time in the academic year 2009-2010. The BSc is the first programme in the business school to employ blended learning and no academic staff member has previously utilised this approach. A series of training workshops given by experts on PBL and blended learning has been delivered over the past academic year to the course design team. Further, two of the authors of this paper attended a week-long Summer school on e-learning in June 2009 at Dublin Institute of Technology. Despite the foregoing, the authors perceive that there exists some trepidation in connection with the delivery of the programme.

<sup>8</sup>As per the National Qualifications Authority (NQA) of Ireland (2006).

teamwork, etc.; also, the assessment did not attract a grade, hence it was perceived that this had a negative impact on the level of individual and team effort in completing the assignment. However, despite the foregoing, it is perceived by the authors that the pilot PBL process accurately reflected that which occurs in an actual classroom context. As a guide to other studies, the following paragraphs outline how the pilot-study was implemented.

Once again, convenience sampling was utilised, employing the same criteria as Stage 2 but the choice of individuals was not limited by distance. Fifty letters were sent to past TLN participants who obtained certification, inviting them to participate in the pilot study – the sample was comprised of practitioners who had attended the prior round-table discussion and those who had not. Eighteen positive responses to the course design team’s invitations were received and all eighteen participants attended the workshop<sup>9</sup>. For those who had not attended the prior event, their letter contained a brief description of the BSc. It was explained to both sets of participants that the pilot involved two steps. The first step would last from 10:00 to 2:30 (including lunch) and would involve the following agenda:

- Introduction to the programme including update on progress to date.
- Overview of programme schedule and delivery plans.
- Introduction to the WIT eLearning support website and Moodle.
- Introduction to problem-based learning.
- Division of learners into teams.<sup>10</sup>
- Introduction to module and presentation of ‘trigger.’<sup>11</sup>
- Team roles allocated and team rules identified.
- Brainstorming session – identify learning issues.

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<sup>9</sup> In return for agreeing to partake in the pilot-study and the follow-up interview process, participants were promised a formal Certificate of Appreciation from WIT’s Head of Graduate Business in recognition and gratitude for their contribution.

<sup>10</sup> With the participants’ written agreement, the PBL component of the pilot was recorded from this point onwards (audio and video).

<sup>11</sup> The ‘trigger’ for the pilot actually involved a quote from the round-table discussion: “*I tend to wear maybe five different hats in one day; maybe if I could manage my time better and wear just two hats per day*” which was also accompanied by a clip-art picture showing a man juggling different types of hats. The trigger is associated with the ‘Critical Personal Skills’ module which is scheduled to be delivered in the first semester of the BSc.

- Presentation to teams of assessment to be completed; as a start, some online resources were given to the learners by the facilitators.

The second step involved working in teams to produce a ‘solution’ to the trigger. The workshop unfolded as outlined in the above mentioned agenda. Participants were divided into four teams; each team was facilitated by one of this paper’s authors. At the end of the workshop, each team was asked to provide to the course design team a written report – no more than 250 words – which would be assessed. This document was to be uploaded to the pilot’s Moodle site by each team one week later. All teams uploaded their assignment on time.

Based on post-pilot discussions between the authors, several major findings from this stage were determined:

- The practitioners quickly grasped the PBL process.
- The participants saw the PBL process and trigger as engaging and very relevant to them.
- The time that they would need to devote to their studies was a major concern (both in terms of time per week as well as the degree’s three year duration).
- The financing of their fees was also a key concern.
- Obtaining exemptions for prior learning was another major issue.

In order to capture immediate feedback from the participants on the pilot-study, a short, highly structured questionnaire was prepared by the course design team; the feedback form’s design was based on PBL feedback forms which had been previously utilised by the authors (results are listed in Table 2). The findings reflect the high level of engagement which was observed by the authors during the pilot study. All mean scores are at the high end of the scale.

<b>Pilot-study Participant Feedback Results</b>	<b>Mean</b>
My first impressions of the BSc degree programme were positive.	4.22
From what I have heard today, I believe the content of the BSc programme will suit my needs.	4.11
I found the subject content of the BSc programme was relevant to me and my business.	4.22
I believe the online forum provided (Moodle) will make it easier for me to communicate with others in my group.	4.35
I enjoyed the chance to discuss the problem posed amongst our team.	4.50
I understand the role each team-member plays in problem-based learning.	4.39
The role of the facilitator in problem-based learning was made clear.	4.39
The problem presented to us as a trigger was of relevance to me.	4.33
I believe I have a fair understanding of what problem-based learning is all about.	4.28
I have a good idea of the steps involved in the process of problem-based learning.	4.11
I am interested in finding out about enrolling on the BSc degree programme.	4.39
n = 18	
Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree	

**Table 2: Pilot-study participant feedback results**

#### ***Stage 4: Post-pilot Interviews***

The interviews were scheduled for the week following completion of the team assignment, allowing the participants the time to reflect on their recent experience involving the pilot study; most specifically, the team was interested in gathering information on their experience in completing the assignment. Seventeen of the eighteen<sup>12</sup> pilot participants were interviewed over eight days by one of this paper’s authors. On average, each interview lasted 35 minutes; the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for follow-up questions and probing on pertinent issues raised by the participants. Key findings from the interviews are listed below:

- ***Study time and semester timing*** – all interviewees perceived that they did not have sufficient time in their schedule to devote to study; some concern was expressed concerning work/life balance. For example, one participant stated “*difficulty to set-out this time totally to myself... added stress that this would bring.*” Some participants indicated that semester scheduling would need to take into account that they take their

<sup>12</sup> Contact was made with the remaining pilot participant on four separate occasions; for each time, he indicated he was too busy to be interviewed.

holidays in September-October and that there is a national movement to extend the tourism season, stating: *“The problem is we take our break in September-October and there’s probably quite a few others in the same boat.”* and *“I’m organizing a festival in late September, so I won’t be available until October, really.”*

- **Length of degree** - six participants indicated that the necessary three year commitment was daunting.
- **Motivation** – some participants found the pilot study to be motivating in regards to considering further education; one individual stated *“I am awake again”* and another stated *“It has got me thinking again.”*
- **Group work** – some concern was expressed in connection with working with others to complete assignments such as an unequal burden of work. Five participants indicated that they were accustomed to being self-sufficient and were concerned over having to rely on the skills and abilities of others. For example, one interviewee commented: *“What we had to do was a very small thing...but some of the others took forever to do it”* while another participant stated: *“you always get studiers, then others not so into it.”* However, others welcomed the added support from peers in completing assignments, stating: *“Gained a group with similar problems and needs”* and *“People were willing to help each other”* while others indicated that they were *“...well used to running a meeting.”*
- **Group mix** – six of the participants indicated that groups should have a good mix of businesses/management roles.
- **Chairperson role** – each of the four chairpersons drew attention to their role and the responsibilities that went with it – none of the other PBL roles (scribe, time-keeper and reader) were highlighted in the interviews.
- **Resource poverty** – this was in regards to manpower and financing the degree. As one participant stated: *“It’s all down to me and my husband – everything”* while others stated:

“With a young family, the cost is going to be a decider” and “My workplace will not subsidise my training, or allow me time-off for it, so these six days [modules’ residential workshops] would be my holidays.”

- **Distance learning** – the issue of geographic spread of the group and the need for face-to-face interactions between residential workshops was raised by two and four interviewees, respectively.
- **Technology** – several interviewees indicated concern in connection with using the forum function in Moodle, their IT skills, and their lack of broadband (however, only two indicated they didn’t have broadband) while others indicated technology “Will make it a whole lot easier” and “Moodle side – a dream.”
- **Relevancy** – the BSc needed to be relevant for their business and for them personally; some indicated that they saw PBL as providing relevancy: “Rather than having a lecture, everybody is involved in the problem...and rather than telling us the answer – our experience is brought into it,” “PBL is brilliant!...a workman’s way of solving problems,” and “One really is getting to grips with the material – you are learning as you go along, going through the research.”
- **Academic self-confidence** – one individual felt reassured about having the ability to complete the degree after the pilot study whereas another individual indicated that it created a “Tiny element of self-doubt in my mind.”

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT

Throughout the programme development process, the need for both stakeholder involvement and a student-centred approach have acted as guiding principles. This involvement has provided invaluable feedback to the design team, which forms the basis for the model for



programme development, as illustrated in Figure 1 (p. 22). The model represents the integration of the feedback and the creative means by which the design team responded to the initial findings, matching the targeted cohort's needs through a variety of approaches. Earlier in this paper, the role of PBL was examined as one of the innovative approaches employed, the others are as addressed under the following headings:

- The role of a blended learning approach to delivery.
- The role of peer group support.
- The role of induction.
- The role of recognised prior learning (RPL).

### **The role of a blended learning approach**

The choice of a blended learning approach to delivery was a key outcome of this study. Blended learning is attributed to the Open University's model of combining face-to-face support with distance learning (Sharpe et al., 2006), and encourages the development of skills and knowledge through engaging and challenging the learner in different ways. Rather than the traditional classroom-based, teacher-centred approach, the blended learning approach offers a variety of different delivery methods, designed to be more student-centred (Foley et al., 2007). Indeed, blended learning aims to combine the best features of the interaction between student and instructor with the advantages of asynchronous learning. By its nature, asynchronous learning offers the participant the advantage of choice in time and pace of study (Lawless et al., 2000). It is perceived by the team that this mixed-mode approach should have a positive impact on learner retention. In a learning context, Stokes (2001) argued that the following are the benefits of a mix of delivery methods: (1) the enhancement of co-operative learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991), (2) the mirroring of the informal on-the-job approach to learning preferred by micro/small owner-managers, and (3) the accommodation of tailor-made content to suit individual needs.

However, there are issues connected with distance education as identified by McAlister et al. (2006) and Sherman and Beaty (2007) which must be addressed by the course design team such as technology and its support, broadband availability, learner IT skills, reduction in

student engagement, staff resourcing and commitment, staff expertise, and course design. Further, one drawback of online learning is that, on occasion, a participant may fall behind schedule, whereas the blended approach reduces this risk by decreasing the isolation of the participant by building in a social element, thus accommodating peer group support (cf. Garrison and Kanuka, 2004; Rovai and Jordan, 2004; Morgan and Tam, 1999). In the section to follow, this aspect of the role of peer group support is outlined in further detail.

### **The role of peer group support**

The group support offered by the blended approach is particularly pertinent in light of previous research which has highlighted the isolation suffered by many geographically dispersed micro/small tourism operators (Braun, 2002). Indeed, Morrison (1998) argued that peer support offers both relief from the isolation often encountered by these owner/managers (particularly home-based ones) and reduces the potential risk of an introverted approach to business management. In response to these concerns, the blended learning approach offers the students the opportunity to access resources and actively engage with other students without leaving their businesses<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, studies have shown that interaction between multiple participants in a learning environment, increases diversity, and their diverse experience contributes to exploration learning<sup>14</sup> and to the development of new knowledge (Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Moorman and Miner, 1998). This is further supported by Ausburn (2004, p. 329), as in her meta-analysis of the literature, she related that “Among instructional design elements of distance courses online, the research evidence favours interactivity, communication, and ‘bonds’ or ‘connectedness’ as important features of course design, with elements such as chat, e-mail, discussion boards, group activities, and learning communities typically drawing positive responses from students”. Moreover, Sheldon (1989) in her study on tourism professionalism, specifically highlighted the role of socialisation through education and training in enhancing levels of professionalism (an overarching goal of the BSc programme).

However, group composition and dynamics represent issues that must be studied and addressed by the course design team. Further, as distance and geographic spread were highlighted for particular attention in the post-pilot interviews, the online component of the

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<sup>13</sup> The learner’s time and work balance issues mentioned earlier also benefit from the learner’s ability to remain in their workplace.

<sup>14</sup> Holmqvist (2004) described exploration learning as an element of experiential learning, incorporating such behaviours as experimentation, trialling, innovation and risk-taking.

programme will be all the more critical as an additional means of addressing or allaying these concerns. A further component in the design team's response to this study's findings is the recognition of the importance of a tailor-made programme induction, as detailed in the section to follow.

### **The role of induction**

Previous research has shown that although non-traditional students such as the BSc's targeted cohort may be highly motivated, their transition into higher education can be problematic (Tait and Godfrey, 2001; Barron and D'Annunzio-Green, 2009). The non-traditional student who is entering higher education has several concerns connected with his/her entry:

- Feelings of isolation and lack of identity.
- Lacking in academic self-confidence.
- Fearful of the level of responsibility he/she must take for their own learning.
- Lack of knowledge concerning teaching, learning and assessment methods.
- Level of work expected from him/her.
- Time management.
- Work/life balance.
- Study skills.
- Teamwork skills.
- Ability to cope with higher academic level.
- Financing his/her study.

These aspects were mirrored in the current study's findings, in addition to the authors' own experience with the targeted BSc cohort which also indicated that writing skills and IT skills may also be of concern. Nevertheless, Barron and D'Annunzio-Green (2009) determined that students will work through their difficulties as they expect the "first few weeks to be

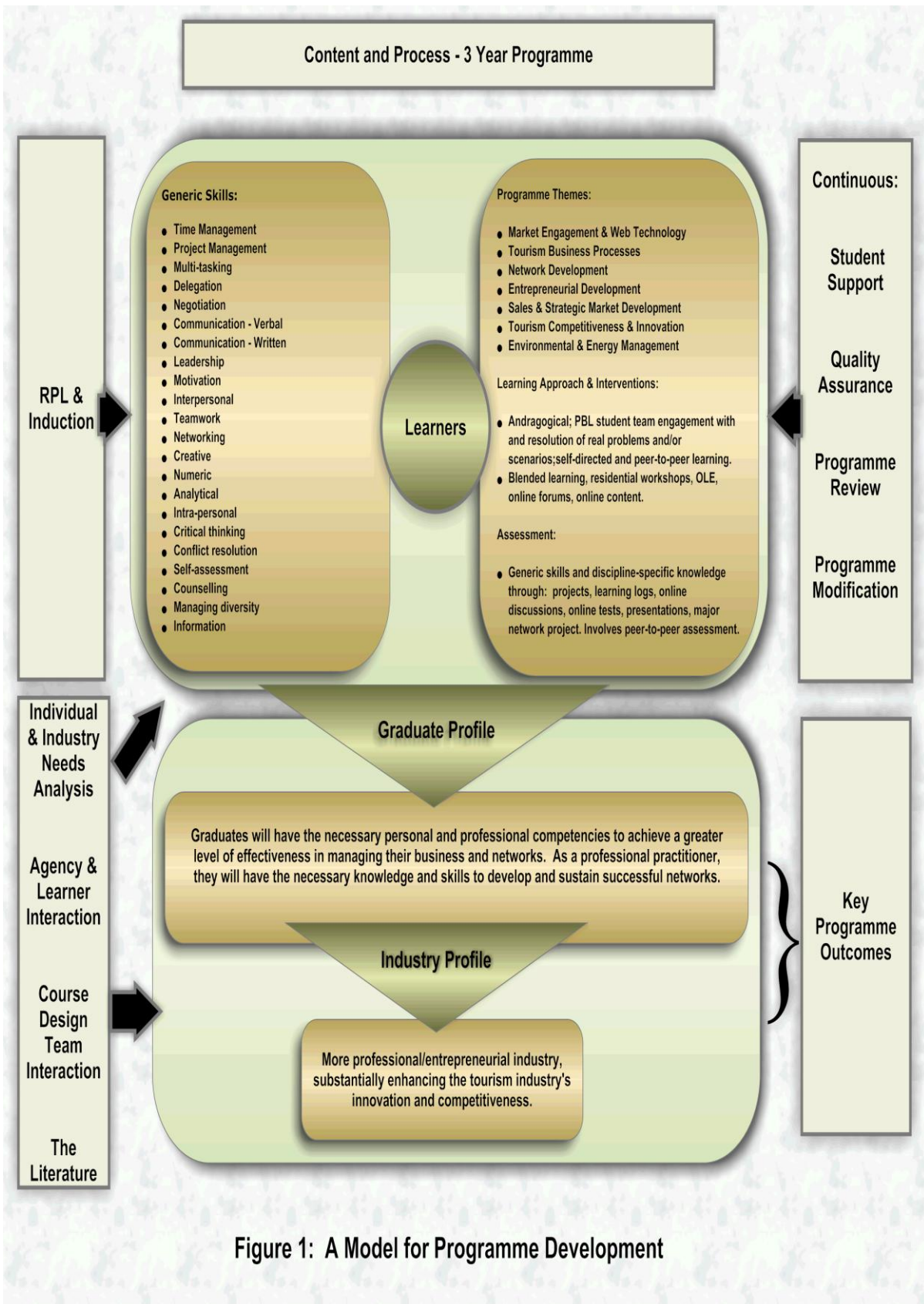
difficult” but learners also expect that support will be forthcoming from academic staff – a major finding of this study was the necessity of an early intervention by the educational institute in order to enhance the learner’s academic self-confidence. Research has indicated that, in order to enhance the quality of the student’s learning experience, an induction programme which addresses the foregoing concerns is critical. Similar to the literature where induction has been acknowledged as an “ongoing process throughout the degree programme” (Tait and Godfrey 2001, p. 260), the induction programmes for non-traditional students offered in the authors’ business school are scheduled for pre-semester delivery as well as delivery, when needed, throughout the first year. This same approach will be utilised for the BSc with further supports added, if and when necessary, through the further two years of the programme. The formal induction will be credited.

### **The role of recognised prior learning (RPL)**

This study found that the major concern of the targeted cohort appeared to be time to complete a degree - the recognition of prior learning was one means of addressing this concern. Recognition of the participants’ prior experience and competence aids in ensuring the programme helps individuals to learn rather than imposing prescribed solutions on them (cf. Deakins and Freel, 1998; Gomez et al., 2004). Indeed, many higher education providers have recognised that learning “occurs in many contexts including work, involvement in social and community activities, or learning through life experience” (Sheridan and Linehan, 2009, p. 1), hence there has been a growing formal recognition of this learning by third level institutions. In line with European Union policy concerning lifelong learning, the recognition in Ireland has been driven by the Irish government as evident in its RPL guidelines published by the Irish National Qualifications Authority in 2006, hence the formal recognition of prior learning is relatively new. Because of its recency, the course design team had little

knowledge of what RPL entailed – this then represented an area of research for the team and meetings with WIT’s registrar’s office in order to incorporate RPL into the BSc. The award of credits for RPL enables the School of Business to offer the three year full-time programme in a part-time mode, thereby easing the learners’ study burden and making formal education more accessible – time for study and work-life balance are issues that have been identified previously in this paper as being of major concern for the BSc’s targeted cohort.

In Figure 1, not only are RPL and induction recognised as key components, but also the expected programme impact in terms of the professional graduate and industry profile are highlighted. It also illustrates in particular the programme themes, content and expected generic skills resulting from both the PBL approach and the overall blended learning format. Space issues do not allow the authors to discuss in detail the assessment aspect of the programme development, however it is envisaged that this will encompass the use of a variety of techniques aligned with the expected learning outcomes (including learning logs, projects, online tests and presentations), but also with practical application and relevance for the micro/small tourism operator.



**Figure 1: A Model for Programme Development**

## CONCLUSION

The development of continuing education for micro/small tourism enterprise owner/managers represents a particular challenge; the key focus of this paper is the development of the BSc programme to address their 3<sup>rd</sup> level educational needs in order to enhance the sector's professionalism. In collaboration with the programme design team, Fáilte Ireland identified several content themes, these were confirmed by practitioners in the round-table discussions (captured in Figure 1 in the generic skills and discipline-specific knowledge encompassed in the BSc content). Following on from this interaction and a thorough review of the literature, the design team concluded that PBL offers the optimum balance in terms of meeting the needs of the stakeholders in terms of relevance, practice and theory. Having adopted this approach, the design-team developed a pilot-study to ensure that this approach was suitable for the targeted cohort, results were overwhelmingly positive. Moreover, this paper has outlined provisions made in the programme development to address issues highlighted by the stakeholders, including the use of a blended learning approach, accredited induction and recognition of prior learning.

One major challenge which now faces the course design team concerns the design of the modules to ensure these aspects can be delivered through the progressive development of skills and knowledge over the course of the three years. Furthermore, the design team is currently working in teams to ensure that programme themes will be delivered through a tightly knit and integrated curriculum. A key element of this integration is in the module development, specifically in the design of PBL triggers which are multi-disciplinary (where possible) in order to replicate the real-life problems faced by the owner/managers.

This paper has presented a model of programme development that has incorporated both the literature and an integration of the findings from the study, and specifically highlights the

centrality of the learner and the criticality of the interaction and collaboration between major stakeholders to ensure that the professionalism of the sector is enhanced. The authors' ongoing longitudinal study seeks to evaluate whether or not the new degree programme enhances the tourism sector's professionalism. Hence, this paper represents a key stage in the development of an evaluation mechanism into this educational initiative. Although the model has been crafted for one particular programme, targeted at a particular sector, it is perceived that it should provide guidelines to other educators who are responsible for the development of higher education for adult learners who are owner/managers of micro/small enterprises.



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## APPENDIX 1

Stage 2: Brief Summary of Practitioner Round-table Discussion Comments	
Issue/Concern	Comments made:
Time management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"I tend to wear maybe five different hats in one day, maybe if I could manage my time better and wear just two hats per day."</i></li> </ul>
Project management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"It mightn't even be the task it might be the operation. You're straight in at operation...so you might at different times of the year you will be focusing on different aspects of the business ..."</i></li> </ul>
Negotiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"...I need much better negotiation skills particularly when it comes to trying to get granting and funding..."</i></li> <li>• <i>".. they feel that they're worth x-amount of money and then we struggle to reach that."</i></li> </ul>
Finance/Accounting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"I think the cash-flow is kind of the main..."</i></li> <li>• <i>"...financial planning in general which was obviously the budgeting, pricing, the managing the overall management of cash-flow..."</i></li> <li>• <i>"For finance, for funding, for grants."</i></li> <li>• <i>"Knowing your way through; knowing how to get through the massive amount of forms that you have to fill in and fill them in effectively."</i></li> <li>• <i>"Yea. That's actually quite important – to be able to actually manage them, especially if you're going to the bank or anything like that or a feasibility study or anything like that..."</i></li> <li>• <i>"...how we're going to price ourselves over the next year to two/three years, four years."</i></li> <li>• <i>"Accounting, cash flow and keeping track – which I'm not very good at."</i></li> <li>• <i>A comment made in regards to recession: "So people need to know how to start all over again. Like if you go for a loan today, you're nearly asked your mother's maiden name – whereas a year ago – good man [participant's name] – pay that back, no problem at all. That's all gone out the window."</i></li> <li>• <i>"...people need to plan a little bit better to know their costs; there's a lot of hidden costs when you're in a business that people don't understand, and don't know until it comes up and bites them on the backside...it's controlling your costs, controlling your sales, controlling your cash-flow..."</i></li> <li>• <i>"...I mean the babble that comes through from Europe on a weekly basis. It's still very difficult to find what funding you can actually apply for."</i></li> </ul>
Human resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"...we struggle every year to get someone to be qualified – then because of that they feel that they're worth x-amount of money and then we struggle to reach that."</i></li> <li>• <i>"Sort of around employment and that and maybe from that being able to...with regards to in-house courses and things like that."</i></li> </ul>
Business planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"...development of the business and the direction. I suppose to what direction that we'll be taking at the next step."</i></li> <li>• <i>"...I find planning is the first great point because you have ideas about developing. Say you have property and so on and you'd like to continue on into...maybe organic..."</i></li> </ul>
IT/Web/Social Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"...and record keeping as in databases and things like that."</i></li> <li>• <i>"...how technology could help your business as well. People did refer to Twitter and all that. Personally, I can't stand the stuff but maybe there are ways and means of using those kind of things to develop your business without employing sales and marketing managers; maybe you can do it yourself using these things."</i></li> </ul>
Supply chain management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"I suppose another indication there would be creditors and giving a certain timeframe – some are better than others and their pricing strategy then comes into that..."</i></li> </ul>
Customer service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"...students that come up to the course – they need to know and understand the customer. And you need to go and know what they want...And don't be frightened to ask them what they want. There's too many people that assume what their customer wants and that's their own personal perceptions. Engage your customers and ask them what they physically want."</i></li> </ul>
Conflict management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"I had an experience with staff – having to go and having it resolved – it's quite difficult."</i></li> </ul>

Business writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"The other thing that I find is writing skills. It sounds a bit weird but writing skills – like you need to be able to put something into one line which takes a paragraph – if you can understand what I mean...Like especially if you're applying for funding. They want this bulk statement and I find it quite difficult to bulk things like that. I'm one of those write the book people. So I think really it's an education in itself to be able to put down in a short sentence."</i></li> <li>• <i>"There is a skill to actually filling out application forms and if you haven't done it properly then you get put to the end of the pile."</i></li> <li>• <i>"...so basically it's all about the writing. You know I'd prefer to be doing anything – you know, go down and wash up or do anything rather than do that – funding application."</i></li> </ul>
Verbal communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"...dealing with people...find the level to talk to people...that's a skill that has to be learned individually...You need to instil in people a joy of engaging other people and finding a level..."</i></li> </ul>
Stakeholder management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"...dealing and communicating with the local authorities. It's very difficult to get through to the local authorities and get them to do something for you...they don't seem to want to know you most of the time..."</i></li> <li>• <i>"There's only one way to deal with the local authorities. I think you need to hire someone – the officials to give a tutorial and then they can explain how we deal with them. Nobody seems to know."</i></li> <li>• <i>"...deal with getting to know the councillors to put pressure on the officials to do things for you..."</i></li> </ul>
Marketing knowledge and skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Comment made in connection with writing a marketing proposition: "It's more or less public relations – it's also the same problem would relate to having to do press releases. It's the first line that's the important one."</i></li> <li>• <i>"...also just to put in there with regards to media – if you're doing radio interviews and those type of things...they can put a slant on it differently or whatever so just be aware and to deal with it."</i></li> </ul>
Environmental law/regulations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"And legalities. You'll be just driven demented with the amount of national, European bureaucracy that's coming down the line that's in existence already...you'll never know every single legal aspect of running your business but you do need to be aware of what's there in terms of employment law, waste management, energy laws...it's never ending, but it's never going to go away..."</i></li> </ul>
Change management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"Huge amount of change in the way things are done in terms of planning for a business, getting planning permission, legal aspects, financial – it's all changed."</i></li> <li>• <i>"...continuous change...And being aware."</i></li> </ul>
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"What I think if you're going to be able to create people who are going to go away and improve their businesses and be tourism leaders I think you need to teach them leadership...Delegation is huge. There's too many people as managers cling on to things...Don't be frightened to fail. You need to teach that to students as well."</i></li> </ul>
Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"You need to teach them to be innovative...you need to be creative...They need to experiment – don't be afraid to fail."</i></li> <li>•</li> </ul>
Keeping a positive outlook	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"I think you have to breathe positivity into people – there's too much negativity around. That comes as much from the people that are teaching the courses as it does the individuals that are sitting there taking notes."</i></li> <li>• <i>"Yea, you have to be positive. I'd be positive anyway and I'd take chances and all that kind of thing but when it comes down to the money and financial and the banks and all this kind of thing and all the red tape. Going through all this - you know you get a little bit discouraged."</i></li> </ul>
Strategic perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"They need to have strategic views and views for planning."</i></li> </ul>