



From welcome to progression - fostering first-year success: A case Study from AnSEO and the Teaching and Learning Unit at Munster Technological University

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ABSTRACT

Growing concerns around student retention and progression rates in Ireland have sharpened institutional focus on the first-year experience and the need for targeted, transition-focused support. This case study examines how Munster Technological University’s (MTU’s) award-winning teams, AnSEO (an Irish language term for ‘here’), the Student Engagement Office, and the Teaching and Learning Unit (TLU), are shaping first-year student success.

Drawing on MTU’s post-merger context, the paper outlines how AnSEO and TLU have evolved from small, agile teams within the Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) to become key drivers of student success practice across the University. Together, the units deliver a coordinated suite of initiatives that integrate academic support, coaching, skills development, student–staff partnership, structured feedback, peer-led engagement, employability development, and teaching and learning innovation. These initiatives are grounded in best practice in student engagement, transition pedagogy, and academic coaching. There is also a strong emphasis on belonging, confidence, and progression during the crucial first year of study.

The paper reflects how two integrated teams have developed scalable and adaptable teaching, learning, assessment, and student engagement (TLASE) strategies during a period of institutional transformation. It concludes by identifying practical lessons for practitioners and institutional leaders seeking to enhance first-year student belonging and success, particularly within diverse and evolving tertiary education settings.

Keywords: academic support, student voice, student–staff partnership, peer-led initiatives, employability, Teaching, Learning, Assessment and Student Engagement (TLASE) innovation

Introduction & context

MTU was established in January 2021 following the merger of Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) and the Institute of Technology Tralee (ITT). Enabled by the Technological Universities Act (Government of Ireland, 2018), this merger formed part of a national shift in which several Institutes of Technology were consolidated into new technological universities across Ireland. This legislation responded to system-level challenges such as fragmented regional provision, limited research capacity, and the need for a more coherent and regionally responsive higher education landscape (Collins & Griffin, 2024; Government of Ireland, 2018). MTU now spans six campuses across Cork and Kerry, with more than 18,000 students and over 2,000 staff (Munster Technological University, 2023).

The transformation from two Institutes of Technology to a Technological University has brought both opportunities and challenges. The former institutes had a long-standing mission of supporting access and regional development, evolving from policy initiatives in the 1960s and 1970s aimed at expanding the skilled labour force and attracting foreign direct investment (Ferriter, 2004). Today's Technological Universities have a broader remit to foster high-quality learning environments, support increasingly diverse student cohorts, and address persistent inequities in participation and progression. While national progression rates remain strong overall, substantial disparities persist across disciplines among underrepresented groups, underscoring the need for targeted, evidence-informed approaches during the first year of study (Higher Education Authority, 2025).

The first-year experience is recognised nationally and internationally as a critical period in shaping engagement and persistence (Upcraft et al., 2004). Research highlights the vulnerability of this transition point and the importance of intentionally designed support structures. Kift's (2009) transitions pedagogy advocates for a whole-of-student, whole-of-institution approach to first-year curricula, support, and learning environments. Thomas (2012) emphasises the importance of early belonging, shaped by relationships, pedagogical practices, and institutional culture. The early weeks of higher education are especially significant, with proactive engagement and timely support shown to influence outcomes (Krause, 2005; Krause & Coates, 2008). Tinto's work (1993, 2012) highlights the importance of academic and social integration, while subsequent studies show how students' experiences are shaped by the relationships, cultures, and teaching practices they encounter (Bovill, 2020; Felten & Lambert, 2020; Thomas, 2012).

MTU is committed to strengthening access, progression and student success and AnSEO and the TLU are central to this work. Attached to the Office of Vice President, Academic Affairs and Registrar, both units work together with students and staff to develop proactive and collaborative activities that support student success. This approach aligns with the Students-as-Partners literature, which emphasises the value of shared decision-making and co-creation (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014) and with coaching and mentoring approaches shown to foster reflective capacity, confidence, and student agency (Gormley & van Nieuwerburgh, 2014). MTU has gained national and international recognition for its work in student engagement, progression, and success.

This paper outlines how MTU, through AnSEO and the TLU, has developed a coordinated set of programmes that support first-year transitions, foster belonging, and strengthen student success. Case studies on the Academic Learning Centre, SUCCEED, Good Start and the Student Engagement Associates (SEAs), EDGE Graduate Development and the Combined Funding Call are presented. Across these programmes shared principles of proactive support, partnership, coaching, and evidence-informed practice are evident. The paper positions this work within Trowler's (2010, 2020) model of student engagement to illustrate how

institutional structures, relationships, and practices interact to shape the first-year experience. We now turn to the strategic framework and theoretical underpinnings that inform this work.

Strategic framework & theoretical underpinnings

One of the most influential frameworks of student progression is Tinto's (1993, 2012) model of student integration, which emphasises the role of academic and social integration in shaping persistence. The model offers a holistic understanding of progression, but its US context, characterised by higher fees, differing political and cultural climates, and different student demographics, limits its direct transferability to the Irish higher education system. While Tinto's (1993; 2012) model is in principle transferrable across national and cultural contexts, our concern is one of best fit and analytical purchase. Tinto's (2012) emphasis on inclusive academic and social integration places the primary emphasis on student adjustment to the institution. In Ireland, there are comparatively lower fees, much stronger public provision of education, and entrenched widening participation agendas that have broad public support as well as cross-party political support. Therefore, we prefer frameworks that foreground inclusive institutional structures, proactive support, and collective institutional responsibility rather than a lens more individually focused, as we will discuss later in this section.

Bean and Metzner (1985) argued that attrition among non-traditional students is driven largely by environmental and practical factors such as financial pressures, family responsibilities, and academic performance, with social integration playing a more limited role. Subsequent research, however, shows that belonging and social connection remain important over time. Thomas et al. (2014) highlight the interaction of social, academic and practical factors, while Davis et al., (2019) found that academic performance combined with social connection strongly predicts first-year success. Pedler et al. (2022) similarly link belonging to increased motivation, academic self-belief and engagement, and to reduced consideration of withdrawal. Taken together, these findings suggest that social, academic, and practical considerations work in combination to influence retention, progression, and success.

Drawing on the work of Trowler (2010, 2020), AnSEO and the TLU view student engagement and retention as shared institutional responsibilities. Engagement is shaped by policies, assessment practices, and institutional culture, rather than by individual learner effort alone. Institutional structures, learning opportunities, assessment practices and support systems therefore play a central role. For example, assessments that emphasise memorisation over critical thinking may limit more meaningful engagement, while more inclusive and holistic teaching and assessment practices foster connection and motivation. Trowler identifies three interconnected domains of student engagement, namely behavioural, emotional, and cognitive, and highlights the institution's responsibility to create conditions that support all three. This aligns closely with AnSEO and the TLU's approach to student engagement in MTU.

This institutional emphasis is consistent with wider first-year experience research. Upcraft, Gardner and Barefoot (2004) emphasise the importance of structured, proactive first year support, while Kift's (2009) transition pedagogy calls for intentionally designed, curriculum- and institution-wide approaches that scaffolds students' early experiences. Together, these perspectives highlight the importance of early engagement, clear expectations and coordinated support.

Trowler's framework is also supported by Thomas's *What Works?* research (2012), which highlights the central role of belonging, and by studies emphasising inclusive institutional structures and proactive support Thomas et al. (2014). This focus aligns with Felten and Lambert's (2020) work on relationship-rich

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educational environments and with Pedler et al.'s (2022) findings on belonging and motivation. Davis et al. (2019) similarly emphasise the combined influence of social connection and academic performance. Kuh's (2009) research highlights the importance of active learning, collaboration and meaningful staff–student interaction. These insights align with AnSEO and the TLU's evidence-informed approach that uses student data to identify strengths, diagnose concerns and guide improvement efforts.

Coaching and mentoring also underpin much of AnSEO and the TLU's work. Coaching literature emphasises the value of structured, strengths-based conversations that help students develop self-awareness, confidence, and agency in their academic journey (Gormley & van Nieuwerburgh, 2014). Mentoring models highlight the importance of relational connection, guidance, and encouragement, aligning closely with research on belonging and relationship-rich educational environments (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Thomas, 2012). Within MTU, coaching and mentoring provide practical ways to translate institutional aims into personalised academic support.

A further development in engagement practice is the growing emphasis on students as partners. Matthews (2016) argues that partnership approaches support deeper engagement, aligning with the work of Bovill (2020), Cook-Sather et al. (2014) and Healey et al. (2014) on student voice, agency, and co-creation. These perspectives support Trowler's emphasis on student agency and collaborative engagement practices, many of which are embedded in AnSEO and the TLU programmes.

Overall, these frameworks and research provide the theoretical foundation for AnSEO and TLU's work across MTU. They combine a holistic understanding of student engagement spanning behavioural, social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, with a commitment to intentional institutional-wide practice that supports student agency, belonging and success. This theoretical base underpins the design and delivery of the programmes outlined in the following case studies.

Programme/initiative case examples

MTU's approach to student success is built on a suite of programmes that support students from their earliest point of contact through their transition into confident, capable learners. While each programme has its own history and purpose, they share common principles shaped by transitions pedagogy, student engagement literature, and coaching approaches: proactive support, meaningful student–staff relationships, opportunities for partnership, and responsive feedback that inform institutional decision-making.

The following case examples illustrate how these principles are enacted across AnSEO and the TLU. Many initiatives began as small pilots in CIT and have since evolved, or are evolving, into scalable practices that address different aspects of the first-year experience. Presented individually, they highlight the unique contribution of each programme; taken together, they show how a coordinated, values-led approach can strengthen belonging, engagement, and progression for first-year students in a complex, multi-campus university.

Academic Learning Centre (ALC)

MTU's Academic Learning Centre (ALC) supports students to develop the confidence and strategies they need to achieve their academic potential. It provides subject-specific support, academic coaching and mentoring, and skills-focused workshops. It aims to take the mystery out of succeeding in MTU. Some

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students arrive knowing how university works, while others are still finding their way. The ALC makes this knowledge accessible by offering a relaxed learning environment where students can access support at their own pace and in ways that feel comfortable to them.

The ALC began as the Learning Support Centre at CIT in 2005, funded through the HEA Information Technology Investment Fund (ITIF). Initially focused on providing subject support in Mathematics, Physics, Programming and Electronics, it now also supports Mechanics, Chemistry, Biology, Law, Economics, Accounting, and academic writing.

In 2023/2024, AnSEO brought together its coaching and mentoring (Academic Success Coaching), skills development (Navigate) and subject support services under the ALC to create a single 'one-door' hub. This integration enables students to be directed to the support most suited to their needs and allows staff to develop a clearer understanding of each student's learning journey.

From September 2024 to May 2025, there were 807 attendances for one-to-one academic coaching and mentoring, 308 at writing support and 1,326 subject specific sessions. The team delivered 151 embedded workshops within students' timetabled classes, with a combined attendance of 2,992 students. In total, this represents 5,533 structured interactions with students. The ALC also engages students informally through drop-ins, coffee mornings and a presence in high traffic areas during key points in the semester. These informal interactions often provide important 'in the moment mentoring' support.

The ALC provides a Summer Programme to support students preparing for Autumn repeat exams as well as year-round subject support to students wishing to improve performance or increase grades in specific modules. The ALC continues to raise awareness of these supports through various channels including academic staff, who in turn refer students in need of additional help; through the *Just Ask!* about results phone helpline and results-day pop-up desks, which frequently lead to uptake of mentoring; and through student-friendly social media campaigns, all of which are designed to reduce stigma and promote help-seeking as a positive action.

The ALC's practice reflects the principles outlined earlier. Its proactive approach aligns with transitions pedagogy (Kift, 2009) and its focus on relationships draws on coaching and mentoring literature (Gormley & van Nieuwerburgh, 2014) and research on belonging and relationship-rich educational environments (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Thomas, 2012). Providing flexible, accessible support also aligns with Trowler's (2010, 2020) view of engagement. Although the ALC caters to all MTU students, our proactive approach and emphasis on relationship-rich education make a specific contribution to supporting diverse student cohorts and addressing inequities. Indeed, while relationship-rich education is vital for all students, it is particularly crucial for first-generation students, international students, and students who are neurodiverse (Felten & Lambert, 2020).

SUCCEED (Standardising the Use, Communication, and Capability of StudEntSurvEy.ie Data)

While the ALC focuses on direct academic support for students, AnSEO and TLU also seek to strengthen student success through institution-wide enhancement activity. One example of this is SUCCEED, launched in 2021-22, which is MTU's structured approach to utilising StudentSurvey.ie data, the Irish National Survey of Student Engagement, to inform TLASE enhancement. While the national survey provides rich insights, additional institutional interpretation is required. SUCCEED was established to address this gap by ensuring student voice became actionable and embedded within MTU.

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Over two academic years, SUCCEED standardised StudentSurvey.ie reporting across MTU's organisational structure. Each year, 35 departmental, 11 school, and 3 faculty/campus reports were produced, providing response rates, margins of error, indicator scores, longitudinal trends, and organisational comparisons. These were followed by structured, coaching based SUCCEED Meetings to support academic units in interpreting the data and identifying potential actions. Since its inception, SUCCEED has engaged more than 20 academic units through consultations and has distributed 100 reports. We find that such meetings are a significant strength of the program, as we can offer interpretation of the findings, and advice on how to address any challenges an academic unit might be facing. Crucially, we can also offer structured follow-up assistance to ensure SUCCEED reports are helpful and not simply an administrative task that adds more work to the unit without any benefit.

Although StudentSurvey.ie was paused nationally in 2023 for a review and redesign, SUCCEED continued to draw on MTU's accumulated 2016-2023 dataset. This eight-year dataset provided valuable trend information for first and final year undergraduate and taught postgraduate students.

Between 2021 and 2023, MTU observed improvements in its indicator scores, namely:

- Quality of Interactions: +28%
- Student-Faculty Interaction: +24%
- Collaborative Learning: +10%

Staff described the reports as "a Godsend," and several teams noted that SUCCEED helped inform their thinking in relation to programme development and contributed to DELTA Award successes (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, n.d.). Increasing response rates remains a priority ahead of the survey's reintroduction in 2026 so that data can become actionable at programme as well as departmental level.

The SUCCEED approach reflects key principles from the literature: evidence-informed decision-making (Kuh, 2009), coaching conversations to identify to support action planning (Gormley & van Nieuwerburgh, 2014); and the use of student voice as a driver of enhancement (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Thomas, 2012). Together these support the type of institutional structure and culture described by Trowler (2010, 2020).

Overall, SUCCEED has embedded a sustainable, evidence-informed process that ensures student voice continues to shape student experience, even during a period of national survey transition.

Le Chéile

Le Chéile, a Gaelic phrase meaning 'together,' is AnSEO's student-staff partnership programme. It supports meaningful collaboration between staff and students and strengthens the role of student voice across MTU. The programme originated at sparq@CIT (Students as Partners in Quality), delivered with the Students' Union and inspired by the Scottish sparqs model, which has supported student partnership work since 2003 (sparqs, n.d.). Building on this foundation, Le Chéile now provides a facilitative space where AnSEO helps staff and students share ideas, identify areas for enhancement and work together to improve the TLASE environment. For example, the Department of Accounting and Information Systems in MTU requested Le Chéile focus group sessions for each of the four years of their BBus Business Information Systems programme to gain feedback from its students. The purpose of this was to advise staff of students' positive and negative opinions of the programme to inform their Faculty Enhancement Review and potentially guide changes to the delivery of its modules.

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Core activities include surveys, consultations, staff–student partnership projects and student-led initiatives. During these sessions, the sparqs A, B, C, D model of effective feedback is introduced as a framework for constructive dialogue. AnSEO also produces summary reports outlining findings and possible actions, supporting departments to respond to student insight in a structured and transparent way.

Le Chéile contributes to first-year success in two key ways. First-year students can participate directly, building relationships with staff, developing confidence in expressing their views and gaining insight into how their feedback influences their programme. These experiences support belonging, connection, and engagement. Furthermore, insights gathered are shared with departments helping staff identify strengths and areas for development that may benefit incoming first-year students.

In Semester 2 of the 2024/25, AnSEO facilitated Le Chéile surveys and focus groups with 66 survey participants and 87 focus group participants across several departments. Topics included programme-level experiences, work placement, and the use of Artificial Intelligence, providing timely feedback for enhancement discussions. One of the programmes that engaged in these focus groups was the B.Eng. (Hons) in Chemical & Biopharmaceutical Engineering from the Department of Process, Energy, and Transport Engineering. Students from the first three years of the course were invited to participate in respective focus groups for their year group. They were questioned on topics related to reasons for choosing the programme, expectations from the course, the workload outside of the classroom, the facilities and the modes of assessment. A report for each group was produced and delivered to the Head of Department for review, allowing them to learn the viewpoints of their students in an unbiased, anonymous and independent fashion. Included in this report was feedback from first, second and third year of the Chemical & Biopharmaceutical Engineering students that demonstrated strong motivation and commitment to the programme, driven by positive career prospects, industry relevance and the supportive learning environment associated with smaller class sizes. The students valued the practical, hands-on nature of the programme and recognised the wide range of technical and transferable skills developed throughout their time learning at MTU. However, common challenges emerged across the three year groups. Workload intensity and the clustering of assessments were consistently highlighted as major pressure points, particularly around exam season. The report was able to inform staff that students expressed a strong preference for continuous assessment, practical projects and tutorial-based learning over passive lectures and high-stake exams. Through engaging with Le Chéile, the department gained insights that could be utilised for assessment planning, enhanced interactivity, and stronger staff-student relationships as they were spotlighted as critical to sustaining motivation, performance and progression through the programme.

Le Chéile aligns closely with the Students-as-Partners literature, which highlights the importance of shared decision-making, agency, and co-creation (Bovill, 2020; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014). It also reflects Trowler's (2010, 2020) emphasis on the institutional conditions that shape engagement, alongside research on belonging and relational environments (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Thomas, 2012). By creating structured spaces for partnership and feedback, Le Chéile enables student voice to inform TLASE enhancement across MTU, with students contributing insights that support belonging and engagement for future cohorts.

Good Start, Just Ask! & SEAs

The Good Start programme at MTU supports new students as they transition into higher education by nurturing success, belonging, motivation, and independence. Developing a strong sense of belonging during this early period is widely recognised as essential for first-year student engagement, wellbeing, and retention (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021). Aligned with this evidence, Good Start adopts a holistic approach to the first-year experience, offering a structured induction across MTU's Cork campuses through a diverse range of social, sporting, study-skills and support-focused activities that enable students to meet peers, settle into university life and access key academic and wellbeing supports.

Good Start is coordinated by AnSEO staff and delivered in partnership with current MTU students. Each academic year, a team of 16–20 SEAs are recruited from diverse disciplines across four campuses. Two intakes of SEAs (one per semester) ensure coverage across all campuses and represent disciplines ranging from engineering and nautical sciences to fine art, music, and international business. SEAs complete a two-week on-campus training programme prior to commencement of the academic year, receiving development in leadership, communication, and teamwork, along with training from MTU support units including disability services, EDI, IT, clubs and societies, and the ALC.

During Orientation Week 2025/26, SEAs helped to provide a welcoming presence to 2,716 new students across all Cork campuses, offering conversation, guidance, promotional materials, and information on available academic support at AnSEO. Throughout the four-week Good Start period, SEAs support AnSEO staff to deliver the Just Ask! Campaign at their pop-up desk on the corridors, interacting with passing students at various points throughout the year, including exam results week. The weekly themes - Finding Your Feet; Belonging; Getting Down to Work; Striking a Balance provide a structure for communications to first-year students and staff through weekly emails from AnSEO, supported by a coordinated social media campaign delivered in partnership with the SEAs. A key engagement activity of Good Start is the Get Connected classroom initiative organised in collaboration with academic staff. Get Connected is an icebreaker session with games chosen according to class and room size, such as *Would you Rather?*, *Desert Island and Hot Potato*, facilitated alongside staff- or peer-led conversations, advice and tips for a Good Start. These in-class sessions help new students interact and have fun together in their first weeks as a class unit, often with the bonus of having their lecturer join in the games. As part of Good Start 2025/26, our SEAs cofacilitated 29 Get Connected sessions, directly engaging 772 new full-time first-year students and their lecturers in classes ranging from 20 to 100, to enhance their sense of belonging and engagement. Together, these arrival activities illustrate the breadth and coherence of the programme's transition support and gives new students the opportunity to hear from current students and ask questions in a safe and supported environment.

This structured, multi-campus approach reflects wider evidence on the importance of coordinated transition frameworks in supporting first-year academic and social adjustment (Morgan, 2020). Good Start exemplifies a cohesive, research-informed approach to transition support, promoting early belonging while reinforcing first-year academic confidence and engagement.

EDGE Graduate Development

EDGE is MTU's graduate development framework and award scheme that recognises, incentivises, and celebrates students' engagement across the student lifecycle in both intra- and extra-curricular activities that build graduateness. The programme supports MTU's strategic vision by promoting engagement,

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fostering inclusivity, strengthening industry and community links, and enabling students to develop transferable skills for lifelong success.

Following its initial development and pilot with Birmingham City University, London-based Potential.ly Ltd was appointed as MTU's technology partner through an extensive tender process. The upgraded bespoke digital platform, launched in October 2024, now features a shareable student folio and enhanced interactive activities at Bronze, Silver, and Gold levels. Students complete a wide range of personal and professional development activities that help them build valuable skills beyond the classroom. At Bronze level, first-year students are encouraged to Discover and Explore MTU through introductory activities, such as joining clubs or societies, which help them transition successfully with an enhanced sense of belonging. This early and structured engagement approach is especially beneficial for first-year students, helping them build confidence, connections, and importantly, a strong foundation for ongoing participation throughout their degree (Munoz et al., 2025). The Silver award encourages deeper engagement beyond the classroom encouraging all students to Experience and Learn practical and transferable skills whereas Gold recognises sustained excellence as students Challenge themselves and Lead through high-impact achievements in university, professional, or community settings.

EDGE's university-wide impact is evidenced by student participation across 37 academic departments and all six MTU campuses, including the National Maritime College of Ireland (NMCI), Crawford College of Art and Design (CCAD), and the Cork School of Music (CSM). To widen participation in this non-credit-bearing initiative, AnSEO has promoted EDGE through class workshops - often aligned with the first-year Creativity, Innovation and Teamwork module-, through academic partnerships, social media, and peer promotion by our SEAs. The programme and digital platform, since its re-launch in October last year, has seen 1612 students engage with EDGE: 719 have completed their full Bronze award, representing a 50% increase in Bronze awards (24/25) compared with the same period in academic year 2023/24, with 2831 activities and 527 Personality Indicators completed on the EDGE digital platform.

EDGE has also attracted strong interest from employers across sectors such as maritime, pharmaceuticals, engineering, agribusiness, and technology. Collaborative projects with staff and industry partners help students connect extracurricular experiences with transferable skills - teamwork, initiative, and communication - enhancing their employability (World Economic Forum, 2025). Further programme developments will strengthen engagement and awareness in digital skills, sustainability, and academic integrity, aligned with MTU's Inclusive Curriculum for a Sustainable Future (Munster Technological University, 2024). Partnering with students in this evolution will embed the student voice and ensure a sustainable, student-centred EDGE Graduate Development Programme from the early stages of transition to university, through to graduation.

Combined Funding Call

The Combined Funding Call (CFC) is MTU's unified mechanism for supporting staff-led TLASE innovation. It began with AnSEO's Transitions to CIT Fund in 2017, which initially focused on first-year challenges. As the work evolved, two additional TLU funding streams emerged, the Teaching and Learning Development Fund (2018) and the Learning Community Fund (2019). To reduce complexity for applicants and strengthen alignment between AnSEO and TLU, these three funding streams were merged in 2020 into the Combined Funding Call, which now operates annually across MTU's Cork campuses.

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Open between April and May each year, the CFC accepts staff-led applications but strongly encourages student–staff partnership projects. It provides up to €2,000 per project, with applications reviewed by AnSEO and TLU. Projects typically focus on first-year belonging and orientation, teaching and digital learning enhancements, interdisciplinary collaboration, peer learning, placement preparation, and learning community development. Application volume has grown steadily over the past four years, demonstrating increasing staff engagement and appetite for TLASE enhancement across MTU, see Figure 1.

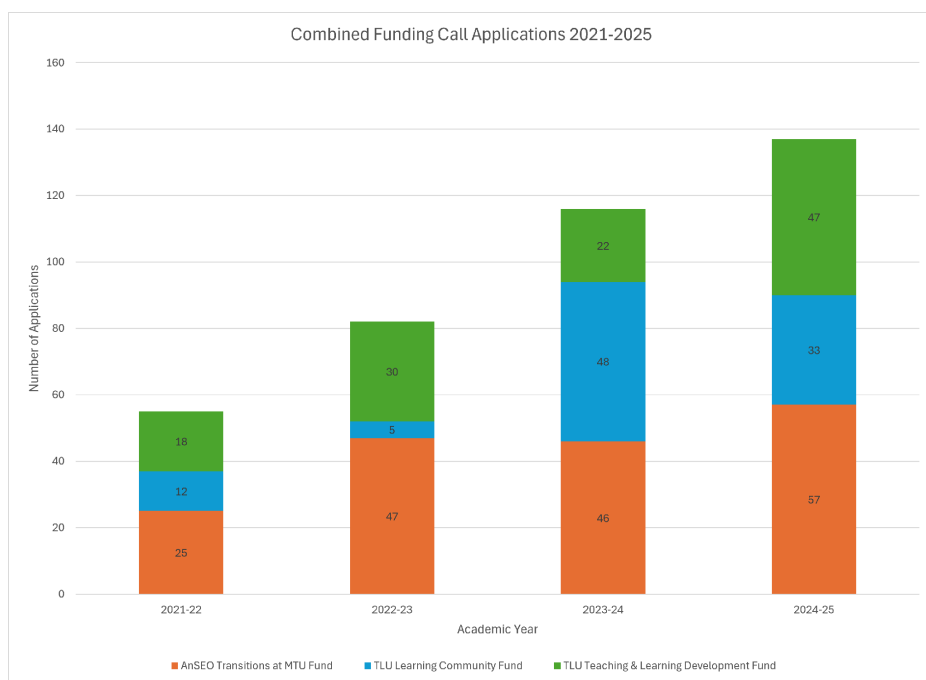


Figure 1 Growth in Applications to MTU’s Combined Funding Call, 2021–2025. Each academic year, the Teaching and Learning Unit (TLU) and AnSEO – The Student Engagement Office invite applications from individuals or small teams from faculty/schools/departments/central services for funding of up to €2000 to develop projects that positively impact on teaching, learning, assessment, and/or student engagement.

Although exact student numbers vary by project, typical class sizes (20–200 students) indicate that each initiative has the potential to benefit substantial cohorts. With more than 100 applications each year for the last two years alone, the CFC reaches several thousand students annually, including a significant proportion of first-year students. Many projects have strengthened discipline identity and belonging, improved clarity of expectations for new students and contributed to a more engaging student experience.

Managing the rising application volumes and ensuring consistent feedback initially created challenges. In response, the review process was streamlined, clearer guidelines and assessment rubrics were introduced, and coordinated support structures were strengthened to help teams implement and sustain their enhancements.

Overall, the CFC is a key driver of MTU’s values-led, evidence-informed approach to supporting student transitions and embedding continuous TLASE enhancement - particularly for first-year students.

Challenges, failures & adaptive learning

CIT's student engagement and learning development work evolved within a multi-campus environment before MTU's establishment, each with its own distinct academic culture, student profile, and operational practices. The transition to MTU added further complexity, bringing two additional campuses with different histories, governance structures, and institutional identities. While the merger created opportunities for collaboration, it also surfaced challenges that continue to shape the evolution of AnSEO and the TLU's work.

MTU remains in a transitional phase. Extending CIT-developed approaches to ITT units has required careful negotiation, adaptation, and relationship-building due to different governance structures and resources. A key post-merger lesson has been that whole-of-institution practice cannot be assumed; it must be deliberately developed and may unfold unevenly across contexts with different histories and structures.

Engagement with our programmes also varies. Many academics and departments participate actively, while others require time to understand how transitions pedagogy, student voice or coaching approaches align with their priorities. Building relationships and trust have been central to addressing this, requiring sustained engagement, consistency and demonstrating added value over time.

Tracking impact presents another challenge. Many of AnSEO and the TLU's programmes are relationship-based and developmental making outcomes harder to quantify. Improvements in progression or engagement cannot easily be attributed to just a single intervention, especially as multiple supports may have interacted. The development of SUCCEED has strengthened MTU's capacity to build clearer insights and take an evidence-informed approach to TLASE enhancement.

Resourcing remains a further constraint. AnSEO and the TLU are small teams supporting institution-wide, multi-campus enhancement work, often relying on short-term funding for initial programme development and piloting. As demand grows, maintaining consistent, high-quality support across campuses can be challenging. This was evident in 2021, when AnSEO's REACH Academic Mentoring Programme (Morari et al., 2024), MTU's award winning response to the COVID-19 pandemic involving 80 trained academic mentors supporting over 3500 MTU throughout the period of the pandemic, did not continue post-pandemic despite strong outcomes. This highlights the vulnerability of initiatives dependent on short-term funding or limited staffing.

Across these challenges, adaptability has been essential. Programmes have been adjusted for different campus contexts, processes streamlined and partnerships strengthened. Where direct delivery was not feasible, new models, such as self-service resources, online services, and targeted consultations, were developed. This has resulted in a more resilient and realistic operating environment, shaped by reflection, learning and the practical limitations of working in an evolving multi-campus university.

Lessons learned & transferability

AnSEO and TLU have over ten years' experience designing, delivering, and sustaining student success initiatives and have gained valuable insights into what supports first-year transitions in higher education. Although each programme has evolved differently, several shared lessons have emerged.

A key learning is that student transitions are rarely straightforward. Early Transitions Funding work showed students experience multiple "first-year moments" (Thomas, 2012) across the academic cycle, including entry, the first assessment period, post-Christmas, during placement and on returning to full-time study. This highlighted the need for support that is visible, normalised, and easy to access, particularly at times

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when students feel most vulnerable. Peer-led approaches such as Good Start, Just Ask!, and the SEAs reinforce that belonging is developed primarily through relationships rather than information alone, and students respond most strongly to support that feels collaborative and human.

Data-informed practice has been another important learning. SUCCEED demonstrated that data only becomes meaningful when it is accessible, contextualised, and supported. Simply distributing reports or survey findings does not lead to change; structured consultations, particularly coaching-informed conversations, help programme teams interpret findings and identify actions. Triangulating insights from multiple AnSEO and TLU's sources proved essential, while closing the feedback loop ensures that student voice is interpreted, acted on and communicated, thereby strengthening trust and continued engagement.

The transition from CIT to MTU has demonstrated the need for flexible and adaptive programme design. Approaches that worked in CIT required modification for a broader and more diverse institutional landscape. What works in one discipline or campus may require modification elsewhere. Embedding coaching mindsets across AnSEO and the TLU has supported students and staff to build workable solutions. Small-scale funding provided through the CFC has shown that meaningful TLASE enhancements can be supported with modest resources. Piloting ideas in manageable ways has been particularly important during periods of institutional change.

Staff engagement has been central to sustainability and impact. Programmes gained most traction when they were values-led rather than compliance-driven. Cross-team collaboration between AnSEO and the TLU has provided an essential foundation for this work. Many staff have found that engaging with student success initiatives strengthens their professional development, with several applying for Advance HE Fellowships (Advance HE, 2023) and DELTA Awards (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2022). Seeing how their contributions align with national and international professional standards has reinforced the credibility and encouraged ongoing participation.

The relational nature of student voice and partnership has been another key learning. Students place greater trust in the institution when they see tangible action based on their feedback. Partnership work requires time, shared language, and intentional relationship-building. Peer roles, such as SEAs, significantly expand reach and credibility. While this work is time consuming, it is key in fostering belonging and must be adequately resourced.

MTU's transition has provided important learning about expanding programmes across a multi-campus university. At present, EDGE is the only CIT-originated initiative fully embedded across all MTU campuses, while others, such as SUCCEED, are at earlier stages of expansion. This reinforces that whole-of-institution practice does not happen automatically when structures merge; it must be intentionally developed, negotiated, and tailored to different campus cultures and priorities.

In terms of transferability, the value lies less in replicating specific programmes and more in adopting the principles that underpin this work: values-led practice, visible and proactive support, coaching-informed approaches, authentic student-staff partnership and the use of data to make student voice actionable. Small-scale funding combined with structured support can foster TLASE innovation. MTU's experience shows that first-year success depends on a series of interconnected programmes supported by committed staff and students.

Conclusion & future directions

MTU has developed a strong TLASE enhancement culture over more than a decade. This paper highlights how this culture has evolved through an interconnected set of programmes that together support first-year transition, belonging, and progression. Rather than relying on standalone interventions, AnSEO and the TLU's work demonstrates that student success develops through coordinated, relational, evidence-informed practice embedded across academic and professional services. The value lies not in any single programme, but in the cumulative impact of the structures, relationships and practices that connect them.

Much of this work has been enabled not by large-scale institutional investment but through early seed funding from CIT, targeted internal support and the ability of AnSEO and the TLU teams to secure competitive external funding (Higher Education Authority, 2021). Some initiatives began as small internal pilots and were later strengthened through external funding; others were externally funded first and then embedded. Testing ideas, securing resources, evidencing impact and scaling what works has been central to the evolution of MTU's approach to student success.

Looking ahead, MTU is entering the next phase of its student success journey. A key upcoming development is MTU Ready, a whole-of-institution initiative led by AnSEO and funded through Technological Sector Advancement Funding (TSAF). MTU Ready is a 10-question online arrival check-in completed by incoming first-year students before they begin their studies. Hosted on the Potential.ly platform, which also hosts EDGE, it invites students to reflect on areas such as academic skills, social integration, transition concerns, and time management/personal concerns. Students receive personalised feedback and signposting to relevant MTU support, giving MTU an early opportunity to provide proactive support and to identify emerging transition needs.

The forthcoming relaunch of StudentSurvey.ie presents another opportunity to strengthen student voice. SUCCEED's standardised reporting structures, combined with insights from MTU Ready, can support more proactive and targeted responses to first-year challenges. Over time, these data sources may offer more coordinated approaches to understanding early student needs, complementing insights gathered through the ALC, Good Start and the SEAs.

As MTU continues to mature as a multi-campus university, embedding student success initiatives across all campuses remains a priority. Ongoing cross-campus collaboration, student-staff partnerships through mechanisms such as CFC Funding and Le Chéile will be essential to ensuring that enhancements remain grounded and sustainable.

Supporting first-year students is an ongoing process that evolves alongside the needs of students and the institution. MTU's experience shows what is possible when values, evidence and partnership guide institutional practice. Despite resource constraints and periods of change, the university has developed a student-centred approach that provides a strong foundation for the next stage of development in a rapidly changing higher education landscape.

Biographies

Linda O'Sullivan is an Academic Project Lead at MTU with a B.Sc. in Computer Science and Statistics, an M.Sc. in Statistics. A Senior Fellow of Advance HE, her work focuses on coaching, professional development, and embedding student voice through data-informed practice and has published research in educational journals.

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Marese Bermingham is the retired Head of AnSEO – The Student Engagement Office, Teaching and Learning Unit and Arts Office at MTU. A strategic and visionary leader, she championed evidence-based practice, student–staff partnership, and the arts to foster student success and an inclusive, dynamic learning environment across MTU and the higher education sector.

Róisín O’Grady is Student Engagement Officer in MTU. She holds a BA (Hons) in Human Resource Management and Accounting, an MA in Guidance and Counselling, and professional coaching training. A Senior Fellow of Advance HE, she leads AnSEO – The Student Engagement Office and has developed its student engagement programmes focused on student success, partnership, and institutional collaboration.

Dr Angela Mc Glynn, a Project Officer with AnSEO, leads MTU’s EDGE graduate programme, established to recognise and enhance student engagement and skills. Angela contributes to other AnSEO initiatives, including Le Chéile student–staff partnership and Good Start programmes, and holds a PhD from the University of Wales with published research.

Deirdre Casey holds an MSc in Mathematical Modelling and a Postgraduate Diploma in Education. She coordinates the Academic Learning Centre at Munster Technological University and lectures in Mathematics. Her work focuses on learning and teaching research, including e-assessment and studenthood, and she currently chairs the Irish Mathematics Learning Support Network.

Rebecca Noonan is a Project Officer at MTU with an MA by Research. She has been published in areas of HCI, Data Visualisation, and Data Physicalization, earning Best Paper at CHI 2024. She is currently working to develop a toolkit for incoming students to support them at university.

Dr Shane O’Mahony is a Project Officer at MTU with over a decade of experience in third-level education in Ireland and the UK. He holds a PhD in Criminology and has lectured at university level, led student engagement initiatives, published internationally, and mentored students from diverse academic and disciplinary backgrounds.

Marian Lawlor is Project Officer at MTU. She holds a BA in European Studies, a Bachelor in Business, and a Certificate in Leadership and Transformational Change. With over 15 years’ experience in the educational travel sector, Marian now focuses on enhancing belonging, engagement, and student success at MTU. She is currently working on the development of a toolkit for incoming first-year students to further strengthen their engagement and retention.

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For information on the Irish national student survey, including the questions, please visit: <https://studentsurvey.ie/survey-questions>