Comments on Annual Tutoring Unit Report of IST 2012/13

General Comments

The unit appears to have two distinct, if closely related, remits – support of students from the perspective of student integration and retention, and support of academics in improving pedagogy.

I believe it would be useful to clearly identify the 'mission' of each/both units. This may already be in place, but could usefully be incorporated into the report to facilitate a mental benchmarking – 'does this (activity) contribute usefully to our mission – of any activity.

2011/12 appears to be a critical point in the evolution of the unit – with significant change of activity in this year. It wasn't clear to me what the reasons for these changes might be, but it would be a concern that there may be ongoing effects in the 2012/13 year (and beyond). One issue in particular is the large increase in the tutor/tutee ratio from previous years (.e.g. 6.5 in 2011/12 to ~12 in 2012/13), which may have significant impact on the quality of service to individual students, on the motivation of current tutors to stay involved and the 'reputation' amongst potential tutors of the workload involved.

Care is needed with the results of surveys from the participating group if they are self-selecting, as they are not representative of the average student. Response bias may also be an issue – i.e. those who have issues (including the possibility of those with unrelated frustration!) are in general more likely to respond to surveys than those who don't.

The tracking of students through 'underachieving moments' is a good initiative, but it was difficult for me to interpret the data in table IV without knowing the numbers of students on each course and also some information on any differences in the intake profile. Larger numbers (e.g. LEIC-AL or MEC) may be due to larger class sizes, different intake calibre/profile, mismatched expectations and/or pedagogical structural differences.

The recommendations on pages 10 and 15 all seem to be sensible and progressive.

Specific Comments and Comparison to Trinity College Dublin

Motivation of teachers to enrol and stay involved

This is a challenging problem. I suspect, based on experiences in my own institution, that a majority of those successfully involved will be doing so because of a sense of altruism. It may be possible to pressurize or coerce more staff to be involved, but this is likely to cause resentment and lead to a minimalist service. Substantially increasing participation will probably require incentivisation – either directly through financial reward or indirectly through linking it to the promotions system. Another possibility would be through recognition of their effort in a workload model – e.g. those acting as tutors might get reduced administrative/teaching responsibilities. Some minor success may be achievable through simply providing formal recognition through an award or commendation system – possibly based on student feedback. In any system however it would be very important to ensure that quality is measured/maintained, so that it doesn't simply become a 'box-ticking' exercise.

Motivation of students to get involved

A fundamental question needs to be asked, which relates to my earlier point about 'mission'. Would success be that every student is involved? Does every student need to be involved? Assuming that there are at least some students who should be involved, but are currently not self-selecting, the question becomes what potential motivating tools/factors are available. Some universities have had success with making such modules mandatory for credit. A better, in my opinion, approach is to begin with the question – 'How, very specifically, does this benefit the student' and then to look at crafting the message to communicate this to the relevant

students. Competitions where the students work in teams may provide a useful context – for example, the course on 'Time Management' appears to be by far the most popular. This is presumably because the students see direct benefit to them. If such a course were tightly linked with a course group project (particularly if prizes were available), students would be incentivised to take part. That initial participation/engagement could facilitate better relationship building between tutors and tutees.

Tutors directly teaching tutees

I see positives with this in terms of motivating students to get involved and 'form a connection' with their tutor. However I would have concerns that it could lead to wide quality variations in the teaching quality, and the consistency of the learning outcomes. Also, I would imagine that students will easily perceive it as a vehicle for forcing contact with the tutor and tutee and may devalue the learning itself as a result.

Differences in practice between TCD and IST

Based on my understanding of both systems, the following differences could be observed:

- The IST system is in general more structured and seems to be much better resourced. There also appears to be a lot more monitoring and measurement/assessment of outcomes. All of these are positives in my opinion.
- It is in general, in TCD, the policy to NOT have tutors teaching tutees where possible. The reasoning is to provide a degree of independence between the needs of the tutor (in their general academic duties) and the tutee, to avoid conflicts of interest. I think this is beneficial, but the price paid is less direct engagement possibilities as experienced in IST. I am undecided as to which system would be preferable overall.
- We have in TCD, in recent years introduced a large component of design in the first two years of our engineering programmes, where the students work in teams, with a degree of competition between teams. It is our experience that the students really enjoy such activity and find it a help in contextualising their learning – i.e. why do we have to learn about X? It also facilitates integration in a social sense (with their teammates) and in an academic sense (with regular direct interaction with teachers helping them to form personal relationships and to gain 'soft' understanding of how the university system works). It appears (depending on Google Translate!) that most teaching in IST(I have used the course in Mechanical Engineering as a comparison) in the early years is of the more traditional 'podium' teaching, vis:
  https://fenix.tecnico.ulisboa.pt/publico/degreeSite/showDegreeCurricularPlanBolonha.faces?degreeID=2761663971467&degreeCurricularPlanID=2581275345320&executionPeriodOID=3856880634067&organizeBy=groups&showRules=false&hideCourses=false&contentContextPath_PATH=/cursos/memec/curricular-plan&_request_checksum_=fb1755f1093867b6c9c786d956a042995b857a3c
- We have a policy in TCD of providing a degree of informal tuition in each module through our 'tutorial system' (distinct from the tutor system!) – typically for every 3 lectures there will be one tutorial, where the students are encouraged to explore the subject in more detail, in smaller groups, with the assistance of a 'teaching assistant' (these are typically PhD students who are paid to undertake this duty). This will usually be through the provision of worked examples, sample problems etc, where the students are encouraged to attempt the material in advance of the tutorials, and then explore the solutions with the teaching assistant in the subsequent tutorial session. Student feedback indicates that there is considerable ancillary benefit (in terms of academic integration) from these tutorials – presumably as the students find it easier to relate to the teaching assistants rather than their professors. I'm unsure to what degree similar activities take place in IST, but I make the suggestion as a potentially useful 'channel' through which to reach the students. In particular, a number of schools in TCD present an annual award for best teaching assistant, which motivates the teaching assistants.