

## Building teaching and learning capabilities in GMIT in response to the global pandemic under the Blended and Online Learning Transformation (BOLT) initiative

### Section 1: Background

At GMIT, we provide our students with a transformative third level learning experience, empowering our graduates to fully contribute to the social, economic and cultural betterment of society. We invest in excellent applied learning, teaching and research environments, reflecting the real needs of business, enterprise and the professions in our region.

Under the COVID-19 Crisis Response Education Award category, this submission focuses on GMIT's rapid transitioning to online teaching and learning and how this was made possible due to the institute wide Blended and Online Learning Transformation (BOLT) approach initiative. Overall, the initiatives outlined in Section 3, refer to the enormity of what was achieved in GMIT, in a short space of time through dedication, collaboration, and innovation in moving teaching, learning and assessment online. Extraordinary goodwill was demonstrated by those who learn, teach, support and lead in GMIT, and much was learned for the future in digital transformation development.



### Section 2: Challenges faced

COVID-19 fundamentally changed the way we all live and work, and this impacted enormously on the teaching and learning experience in GMIT. The physical closure of our five campuses in GMIT, forced everyone online in a hurry and transitioned our learning, teaching, assessment and administration activities to a new platform. In early March 2020, the challenges with a sudden transition were mounting and the COVID pivot started impacting GMIT in several ways:

- GMIT was scrambling to provide continuity of learning;
- Academic staff grappled with the intricacies of learning-management systems and unfamiliar online teaching and meeting technologies; and the challenges with managing new protocols for coursework and assessments.
- Managing communication and well-being, also became centre stage, and how GMIT would reach out and collaborate with 1,000+ staff teaching and working remotely, and 7,000+ students learning remotely.
- Technology equipment deficiencies for staff to deal with and remote and virtual access issues.
- Varying levels of digital capabilities among the teaching community to teach, learn and assess students in an online environment.
- Many staff were not familiar with working remotely and engaging with virtual learning environments and digital teaching and learning resources.
- There was a fear factor in approaching online teaching and engaging students effectively.
- The challenge of moving the practical and active learning elements, central to GMIT programmes to an online environment, was also critical to responding to the COVID remote learning crisis.
- Staff and student challenges in accessing library services in the remote teaching and learning environment.

The transition has been challenging, but it also presented a number of opportunities for digital transformation at GMIT. In responding to the COVID crisis, several initiatives were established and this is outlined in Section 3.

### Section 3: Initiatives



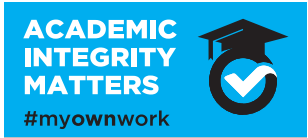
- The establishment of the GMIT BOLT initiative (Blended and Online Learning Transformation) and steering group. The steering group included: A Chair, member of the Executive Board (COVID Officer); members of various academic departments; academic affairs administration; the Teaching and Learning Office; IT Services; and the Student's Union.
- The advances in Microsoft 365 education suite and the seamless integration of Moodle and MS Teams by GMIT IT services, enabled the rollout of an online class facility within 24 hours.
- The Teaching and Learning Office (TLO) in GMIT developed a digital education rapid response programme, that enabled the rollout of a suite of online teaching and learning support services and Ask Me Anything (AMA) clinics, to cater for various levels of digital capabilities. The programme was designed to build confidence among the academic community with teaching and engaging students in the online learning environment.
- The development of a 'GMIT Student Hub' to serve as a 'one stop online shop' for students on all college communications and supports.
- GMIT conducted an audit on technology deficiencies across each department and this resulted in the rapid provision of a laptop, screen and relevant software to enable all staff to engage with training provided and deliver online teaching. This technology toolkit proved invaluable to all staff, to help cope with the new working environment.
- Implementation of a 'remote lab' solution across all GMIT campuses where physical laboratories include 55 labs to date and incorporating 1140 PC's. making them all available for online and remote delivery of teaching and learning, through the Eiricom Connect Software platform.
- The TLO support team expanded with the recruitment of Learning Technologists/Instructional Designers to support the academic community design and deliver online learning programmes.
- TLO conducted a review of various digital tools to enable online delivery. Investment was made in Menti, Padlet and Camtasia for institute wide access to support student engagement in the online classroom.

- A digital resources directory and online alternative assessment 'how-to guides' were developed by the TLO, to assist colleagues design and implement online assessment strategies.
- A GMIT Digital Academic Champion team was established and trained and coordinated by the TLO to mentor colleagues across 5 campuses and 14 departments on their engagement with a digital education online learning platform and suite of LTA resources.
- GMIT established a partnership with Coursera, that assisted staff in upskilling and provided an opportunity to engage and learn about how online courses and discipline content/materials work in the online environment.
- A self-directed and accredited digital teaching and learning programme was developed by TLO and made available to all GMIT staff. This provided a menu of options for colleagues to upskill over the summer months, in preparation for the 2020-21 academic year.
- The GMIT library service converted the campus-based offering to a fully online e-library service for staff and students.
- Investment in a variety of @GMITHealthy campus programmes to support student and staff well-being.
- GMIT established a Company Portal – a mechanism to provide staff with access software remotely including Adobe products, Camtasia, Java etc.
- GMIT invested in a range of supports to help students study and learn remotely including online counselling, academic writing and maths support and well-being initiatives.
- Various grants and emergency student assistance funds were made available for students to access through Student Services and the Students Union.
- The establishment of a COVID Officer (member of Executive Board) to manage HSE and health communications, chair on-going response activities across all functional areas, including a 'COVID Return to Campus' committee.
- Recruitment of Graduate Student Mentors to troubleshoot issues in each faculty and create a sense of belonging in the online learning environment.
- The development of a **Virtual Open Day**, visitor platform for each campus (1st in the country to lead out on an engaging online conference type environment). See <https://openday.gmit.ie/>
- Rollout of an online **Careers Module: Employability Toolkit** available to all GMIT students as **an alternative to work placement**.

**A summary of the initiatives that have played an important role in responding to the COVID teaching and learning emergency in GMIT include items 1-17 outlined in Table 1.**

**Table 1: COVID Rapid Response Initiatives implemented in GMIT**

| Response Initiative   | Description   | Who benefited?   |
|---|---|--|
| <b>1. Digital Teaching &amp; Learning Knowledge Platforms</b> | Digital Teaching and Learning education platform on GMIT Learnonline (Moodle, Virtual Learning Environment) housing the BOLT teaching and working remotely courses/resources, and on DigitalEd.ie that provided access to digital learning pathways, a discovery tool, digital stories, a digital resources directory, a digital champions network and a digital education forum.   | Lecturers and professional services staff in GMIT<br><i>It is also accessible to the higher education sector under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share Alike 4.0 International Licence.</i><br><b>5,000+ visitors recorded to date (as at Feb. 2021)</b> |
| <b>2. AMA Clinics – Ask Me Anything Clinics</b>               | Online One-to-One Clinics with the TLO team of Learning Technologists to troubleshoot online teaching challenges with Moodle, Teams and more and to assist in redesigning of a module or assessment for online delivery.  | All Lecturers in GMIT<br><b>150+ AMA clinics to date (as at Feb. 2021)</b>   |
| <b>3. Graduate Student Mentors</b>                            | Student mentors to assist the students with online engagement and to follow up where there is lack of engagement.   | All Students in each academic Dept. in GMIT<br><b>18 Graduate Mentors in place supported by BOLT</b>   |
| <b>4. Digital Academic Champions</b>                          | A programme developed to allow digital champions, who have undertaken formal training in digital teaching and learning to mentor their colleagues in online delivery in each academic department.   | All Academic Dept's in GMIT<br><b>18 Digital Champions in place as a mentor in their academic department since April 2020.</b>   |
| <b>5. PASS Student Leadership Programme</b>                   | <b>Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)</b> are designed to help first year students cope better with all aspects of life at third level and focus on student integration, engagement, support, empowerment, and leadership to help students quickly adjust to third level life. As a response to COVID, PASS moved to online delivery to include an online PASS Leader Training Programme which included more than 60 student leaders trained to deliver weekly online PASS sessions. A PASS Academic Champion team, mentor PASS Leaders across the institute and first year students promoting engagement with first year PASS study sessions in an online learning environment. | First Year Students<br><b>60 student leaders leading weekly timetabled online PASS sessions on MS Teams.</b>   |
| <b>6. Student Hub – Online Portal</b>                         | From Sept. 2020, GMIT established a central student portal 'one stop online shop' where students can gain access to a variety of student supports and information on studying, online assessments, IT services, campus information, health and wellbeing, student life, finances, student rights and responsibilities, and planning for the future.   | All Students in GMIT<br><b>Supported by the BOLT initiative serving all students.</b>  |

| Response Initiative  | Description   | Who benefited?  |
|--|---|---|
| 7. <b>GMIT Healthy Campus</b>                              | <p>A committee of staff and students established since 2019, to promote health and wellbeing throughout the Institute's mission, strategy, policies, plans and practices wherever possible.</p> <p>As a response to COVID, <b>Healthy Campus</b> launched a series of online services and activities that students and staff can avail of to include virtual staff and student choirs, online fitness classes, mental health training programme for staff, online Smart Consent training programme for students, and various online campaigns and promotions addressing healthy eating, physical health, mental health &amp; wellbeing, and sexual health &amp; identity.</p>   | All Students & Staff in GMIT  |
| 8. <b>Student Success – Online Learning Support Guides</b> | <p>In response to COVID-19 a range of resources were developed by TLO to support students learning online, and include: A short animation explaining the <b>steps to success in online learning and student engagement in GMIT</b>.</p>  <p>A short guide for students is also available <a href="#">at this link</a> covering steps to success and some practical advice for GMIT students learning online during COVID-19 (published in March 2020).</p>  | All Students in GMIT  |
| 9. <b>GMIT's Digital Learning Charter</b>                  |  <p>GMIT's Digital Learning Charter outlines our mutual responsibilities and provides a framework for managing our communication and behaviour in a digital world. It should be taken as a statement of our shared values rather than as a rule book. It illustrates the way in which members of GMIT staff and students should work collaboratively so that everyone can benefit. GMIT will aim to support all our learning community to engage in a safe and responsible manner when engaging in digital learning.</p> <p>GMIT Digital Charter is <a href="#">available at this link</a><br/> GMIT Digital Communication Principles <a href="#">animation video is available here</a>.</p> | All Students in GMIT<br><b>Supported by the BOLT Initiative.</b>  |
| 10. <b>Academic Integrity, GMIT Student Guide</b>          | <p>Student Guide to Academic Integrity in GMIT developed by TLO is available <a href="#">at this public link</a> and <a href="#">here on the Student Hub</a></p>    | All GMIT Students and Staff   |
| 11. <b>GMIT Library Online</b>                             | <p><b>The Library developed an online library support service for flexible online learners:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• LiveChat implemented since April 2020</li> <li>• Help FAQs implemented since April available 24/7</li> <li>• Communication via generic library email: <a href="mailto:library@gmit.ie">library@gmit.ie</a></li> <li>• Regular online newsletters</li> </ul> <p>Note: The services are staffed by all library staff online across all campuses.</p>   | All GMIT Students and Staff   |
| 12. <b>Remote Teaching Technology Toolkit</b>              | <p><b>Each member of the academic and professional services community in GMIT</b> was supported through the BOLT initiative with a technology toolkit to enable online teaching and remote working and student engagement.</p>  | All GMIT Staff<br><b>Supported by the BOLT Initiative.</b>  |
| 13. <b>Online Labs/Practicals access via elabs Eiricom</b> | <p>GMIT investigated and implemented a solution across all our campuses where our physical laboratories including 55 labs to date and incorporating 1140 PC's are <b>available for online and remote delivery of teaching and learning through the Eiricom Connect Software platform</b>.</p> <p><a href="https://elabs.gmit.ie/EiricomXml/index.html">https://elabs.gmit.ie/EiricomXml/index.html</a></p>  | All students and staff partaking in lab based practicals across all campuses – allowed students to access computer labs remotely.<br><b>Supported by the BOLT Initiative.</b> |
| 14. <b>Return to Campus Group</b>                          | <p>A Committee was established to manage the safe reopening of GMIT to include communicating updates with regard the planning for the next academic year to all staff and students, implementing the 3 Step Process prior to returning to campus, and other works (e.g., extra cleaning, installation of extra hand washing stations, completing risk assessment of each area, modifying some workspaces, signage). The aim is to have a safe working environment for staff and students and to keep GMIT COVID-free.</p>   | All GMIT Students and Staff<br><b>Supported by the BOLT Initiative.</b>   |

| Response Initiative                            | Description   | Who benefited?  |
|--|---|---|
| <b>15. Online Proctoring Project</b>           | In 2019-2020 a pilot of online proctoring with PROCTOREXAM (EU company) took place in GMIT School of Business in collaboration with the TLO. The outputs from this pilot were presented in an experience report and case study and this led the way for the Exams Office in GMIT to establish rapid response solutions to high stakes online assessments/exams during COVID-19. | GMIT School of Business in 2019/20 and wider impact rolled out in 2020/21 for GMIT high stakes assessments.<br><b>Supported by the BOLT Initiative.</b> |
| <b>16. First Year Student Induction Course</b> | Developed by the TLO in partnership with Student Services - GMIT students completing this course will become familiar with GMIT expectations: <b>who we are; what we do; and how we can help you throughout your time in college.</b> This course can be <a href="#">accessed here</a> .  | First Year GMIT Students<br><b>Supported by the BOLT Initiative.</b>  |
| <b>17. IT Skills Course for GMIT Students</b>  | Developed by IT Services, GMIT students successfully completing this course will have the IT skills required to fully engage with distance education in GMIT over the academic year. The IT Skills course can be <a href="#">accessed here</a> .  | All GMIT Students<br><b>Supported by the BOLT Initiative.</b>   |

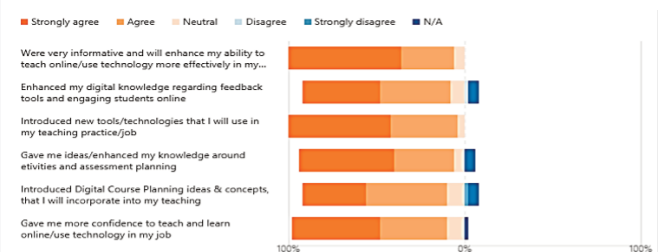
## Section 4: Collaboration

To support the digital transformation challenges emerging in March 2020, GMIT Executive Board (EB) established the Blended and Online Learning Transformation (BOLT) initiative, to provide for a suite of COVID-19 rapid response supports, that would impact every functional area in the institute and manage a return to campus response plan. The BOLT steering group was established to develop a plan for remote learning in the 20-21 academic year commencing in September 2020. The steering group included: A Chair, member of the EB; members of various academic departments; academic affairs administration; Teaching and Learning Office; IT Services; and the Student's Union.

The Teaching and Learning Office (TLO) in GMIT led out on the design and coordination of a range of rapid response initiatives to support staff and students and collaborated with colleagues across all disciplines and IT services in GMIT. TLO addressed specific needs of 6 different Academic units (including Engineering, Science, Business, Galway International Hotel School, Design & Arts, Agriculture and Nursing) on 5 geographically disbursed campuses with students sent to the 4 corners of Ireland. In addition, a multi-discipline team of Digital Champions collaborated with TLO and supported peers in each academic department, through facilitating online panel sessions, sharing best practice in digital teaching and remote learning and providing 'show and tell' clinics.

Key collaborative initiatives that gained great traction and engagement among the academic community was the digital education workshops and webinar series than ran online each month from March 12th with the TLO. The sessions provided a valuable online space for all staff to learn at their own pace and peer learning opportunities arose across campuses, where colleagues shared experiences. The resources made available through the TLO enabled colleagues to engage with digital learning, on a number of different levels including, how to use the various online teaching platforms (e.g TEAMS), assessment guidelines, pedagogical considerations, deployment of online exams, assessments and more. Figure 1 presents overall staff feedback on the clinics/webinars provided by TLO and how staff benefited from the engagement and collaboration. The majority either agreed or strongly agreed that sessions positively enhanced their knowledge and skills and increased their confidence levels in their ability to teach online or use technology more effectively.

**Figure 1: Benefits to attending the TLO Digital Education development sessions**



## Section 5: Innovation

Several unique efforts and strategic initiatives that arose out of the pandemic are presented in Table 1. A selection of key innovations that stand out include:

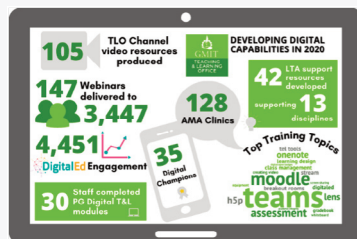
- The creation of the GMIT BOLT initiative, that provided an institute wide approach to managing the COVID-19 response plan.
- The development of BOLT remote teaching and learning online resources on Moodle, provided for a 'one-stop-online shop' for colleagues to access training resources and a gateway to digital education platforms such as DigitalEd.ie. The BOLT Teaching Remotely Moodle course, TLO SharePoint site, TLO media channel and the DigitalEd.ie platform resources, provided guidance to hundreds of staff during the pandemic. TLO and IT Services created a suite of specialist LTA and technology resources to support colleagues from beginner, intermediate to advanced level.
- A suite of self-paced learning courses was offered to all staff and reviews of digital tool resources and special Blog posts and articles was published on the DigitalEd.ie platform. Various digital experts in GMIT contributed to the knowledge bank of resources throughout the COVID emergency. Published outputs were also shared on various GMIT social media platforms.
- The GMIT Digital Champion programme, has been an innovative engagement strategy, that has proved to be an invaluable initiative, that has enabled digital practice to be embedded at a departmental level.
- GMIT TLO developed a Level 9, Certificate in Digital Teaching & Learning to ensure that all the digital champions had the required skills and accreditation to provide an excellent digital training/advisory service to their colleagues across 14 departments in GMIT.



- Throughout the pandemic, the GMIT community availed of various technologies to enable sharing of best practice through the use of Microsoft TEAMS, Moodle Discussion Forums, Social Media channels.
- GMIT and the GMIT Students Union partnered with OpinionX (<https://www.opinionx.co/>), a novel new approach for crowdsourcing ideas and engaging participants in an online setting. The OpinionX discussion platform enabled students to share opinions on what was working well during remote learning and what was not working so well, and offer solutions and ideas.
- A team of Learning Technologists have joined the TLO team and have provided valuable guidance and design support for online courses and programmes.
- Recruitment of a team of Graduate Student Mentors to support and advise 7,000 GMIT students learning remotely across Ireland, has proved to be an excellent initiative in supporting retention and creating a sense of belonging for remote learners.

## Section 6: Outcomes & Results

The impact on staff engagement and the development of digital innovations in response to COVID is wide ranging, and includes the following statistics to date:



- 125+ Ask Me Anything (AMA) Clinics delivered to academic staff covering digital learning and teaching skills.
- 147 webinars/workshops delivered online on digital T&L development strategies.
- 3,447 GMIT staff registrations for online TLO digital education webinars.
- 105 teaching and learning video demonstrations on resources produced by TLO and made available on the TLO media channel.
- 42 Learning, Teaching and Assessment resources/special guides developed.
- 30 GMIT staff completed an accredited level 9, learning pathway in Technology Enhanced Learning or Digital T&L and 18 graduates became Digital Academic Champions, providing one to one and small group mentoring sessions in their academic departments.
- 10 specialist student remote learning support resources and services have been established to help student's engagement with online learning.
- A one-stop shop (online portal) was set up for students called the 'GMIT Student Hub'. There have been 9,009 unique users to the Hub since Sept. 2020 with over 400k page visits to date. The more popular areas of the hub include Exams/Online Assessment Guides and My IT.
- 18 student graduates were recruited in August 2020, to provide mentoring and support to students from first year to final year and create an online sense of belonging to GMIT.
- Top digital T&L topics where academic colleagues sought support and guidance from T&L rapid response clinics and workshops include: Assessment Design and Set-up; Moodle; H5P; MS Lens; Breakout Rooms; MS Stream; OneNote; Learning Design Strategies; Class Management; Structuring and Online Lecture; Creating Video; TEL tools; Gradebook; online whiteboard; student engagement strategies.

- 4,000+ visits have been recorded to the TLO DigitalEd.ie knowledge platform enabling self-directed learning and a range of digital education resources.

Reflecting on the engagement figures achieved, extraordinary goodwill was demonstrated by those who teach, learn, support and lead in GMIT, and much was learned for the future in our digital transformation development journey. A cycle of continuous improvement in digital education is ongoing in GMIT, through action research studies underway on the initiatives outlined in this case study, and from reflective evidence generated from a wide range of stakeholders. This is critical to our digital transformation journey, which is current today, but it will also be crucial in the post-COVID-19 context, in which the use of blended and online learning is only expected to increase in GMIT and across the higher education sector globally.

## Section 7: Corporate Social Responsibility

GMIT is an active member of the Green Campus Programme with the GMIT Mayo and Letterfrack campuses currently holding several green flags. The rapid transition to online teaching and learning resulted in a range of sustainability activities going online, including: Green Campus Committee meetings; sustainability workshops; student society meet-ups; participation in conferences and more. This allowed the Green Team in GMIT to design and pilot a Green Event Protocol, which now requires digital competences for hosting using Microsoft Teams meeting and Live events. In addition, the Level 9 (10-credit) Education for Sustainability module, which is offered to staff as part of the Diploma and MA in Teaching and Learning transitioned to fully online

We are now currently in the midst of two transitions, which are both complementary to each other but are rarely aligned, namely the move towards a low carbon and sustainable society and the ever-evolving digital revolution. In January 2021, GMIT demonstrated a clear commitment to embracing these synergies by announcing the establishment of a Centre for Sustainability, which will work in close collaboration with the GMIT Teaching and Learning Office, GMIT Digital Champions and the BOLT Steering Group, to align with the principles outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Core to this will be supporting and building on GMIT's efforts to date in relation to both staff and student's health and well-being as well as addressing the very real socio-economic issues highlighted during this time i.e., the 'digital divide', need for flexible learning supports, student engagement etc. COVID-19 has shown that it is possible to change and change radically in a very short space of time; so even amidst the immense pain and loss suffered by many over the past 12 months, there does exist an opportunity to reimagine new ways of working and living that more reflect the clear interdependencies, which exist between the natural world, health, economy, and society. As we slowly move out of this crisis, there is a clear opportunity to utilise the lessons learned to transition towards a more low-carbon, circular and resilient economy.

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