Mathematics Learning Support in Ireland in 2015

Dr Maura Clancy
8th September 2015
Colleagues

Dr Anthony Cronin

Dr Cormac Breen

Dr Diarmuid O’ Sé

Dr Jonathan Cole
Outline

1. Background
   - The Mathematics Problem
   - The project

2. The results
   - Level and type of support

3. Staffing and tutors
   - Management
   - Tutoring staff

4. User profile
   - User profile

5. Summary
   - Summary
The Mathematics Problem

Mathematics, science, and engineering departments appear unanimous in their perception of a qualitative change in the mathematical preparedness of incoming students.

First UK initiative 1990s
First Mathematics Learning Support Centre (MLSC) in Ireland - 2001
Irish Mathematics Learning Support Network (IMLSN) - 2009
• London Mathematical Society, Institute of Mathematics and its Applications, Royal Statistical Society

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Maura Clancy
Limerick Institute of Technology
CETL-MSOR Conference 2015
Reason for commission

• IMLSNI wants to:
  ⊳ assist MLS practitioners
  ⊳ inform future MLS development

You can't be a big dreamer if you don't know where you are going. You can't know where you are going unless you first know where you are.

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Methodology

• A pilot survey was conducted
• Relevant contacts were identified at 32 higher level institutions (HEIs)
• These were then contacted by email and asked to complete the survey
• Reassurances of anonymity were given
• Respondents were encouraged to complete the survey in two sittings
• Follow-up calls, where needed, were made to encourage participation
• The survey was completed by 31 HEIs
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Limerick Institute of Technology  
CETL-MSOR Conference 2015
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- In 76% of cases the MLS offering is available to all the HEI’s students
Type of support: face-to-face

- 85% of MLS offerings provide some form of drop-in facility
- Two of the centres do not offer drop-in facilities
- 69% provide special workshops for particular topics/modules
- Workshops are organised:
  - (a). following a combined request from students and their lecturer (42%)
  - (b). initiated by the MLS manager/coordinator (38%)
- Other forms of traditional support include: peer-support systems, numeracy tutors, extra classes/tutorials
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<tr>
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<td>12 MLS offerings provide online support of some kind</td>
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<tr>
<td>Links to webpages</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video tutorials</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedicated website</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Email/message board</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
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- No MLS offering provides a virtual drop-in service.
- Only one provides social media support.
- An additional 11 MLS providers said they plan to provide online support in the future.
Type of support - online

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- Forms of online support offered to students
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  - Video tutorials
  - Dedicated website
  - Dedicated VLE
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  - Others

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The results

Type of support - online

▷ 12 MLS offerings provide online support of some kind

![Forms of online support offered to students](https://example.com/figures/online_support.png)

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Level and type of support

Type of support - popular/effective

- 91% listed one-to-one as the type of support most popular with students.
- Three respondents (13%) listed small group tuition as the most popular choice with their students.
- Only one respondent listed web-based support as the most popular choice with their students.
- One stated: end of year survey revealed that 97% of students had not made use of web-based resources.
- 9 out of 13 respondents stated that their students find one-to-one more beneficial than online.
- 65% placed one-to-one as the most effective support for student learning.

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The percentage of MLS offerings with a full-time manager has fallen by 10% in the last seven years. In the same period, the percentage of voluntary managers has fallen from 16% to 12%.
Manager/coordinator

25 HEIs gave details of their MLS managerial arrangements
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Role of manager/coordinator

- Full-time 36%
- Lecturer - Part of duties 28%
- Voluntary 12%
- Other 24%

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Staff types

Note: The following figures refer to staffing numbers exclusive of manager/coordinator.
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- 13 HEIs employ MLS staff of one type only:
  - 10 use only current institutional staff
  - 2 use only undergraduates
  - 1 uses hourly-paid postgraduates only
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Staffing levels

- 5 or less: 60%
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- more than 20: 8%

16% of MLS offerings are run by at most two institutional staff.
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Securing and retaining good tutors is a key issue. When asked how their MLS could be improved, 54% of respondents referred to tutoring staff in various ways:

- more tutors
- permanent tutoring staff
- tutor training

In fact, only two (out of 25 respondents) listed "more funding" ahead of "tutors" as the priority for improvement. Several suggested that tutors be given permanent contracts and a better salary so as to "encourage the good tutors to stay longer and see it [MLS] as a viable career."

A recent UK report by Tolley and MacKenzie [2] noted that senior management from several UK HEIs suggested the need for appropriate MLS training, leading to some kind of professionally accredited status.
Staff issues

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Non-traditional students are key users with one HEI stating that between 61% and 100% of their users are non-traditional
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97% HEIs on the island of Ireland provide some form of MLS
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The nature, scale and range of MLS offerings differ significantly across the institutions surveyed

One-to-one is the type of support most favoured by students

One-to-one is also viewed by practitioners as the most effective support

Many practitioners feel that the profile of MLS needs to be raised

When asked what MLS practitioners most needed from the IMLS, the following quote epitomises several responses:

"Keep raising the profile of MLS and the centres. Keep pressure on institutions and government to recognise the need to properly support us" - Maura Clancy, Limerick Institute of Technology
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45% of centres are subject to annual review

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One-to-one is also viewed by practitioners as the most effective support
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Many practitioners feel that the profile of MLS needs to be raised. When asked what MLS practitioners most needed from the IMLSN, the following quote epitomises several responses:

“Keep raising the profile of MLS and the centres. Keep pressure on institutions and government to recognise the need to properly support us.”

Maura Clancy
Limerick Institute of Technology
Summary

- 97% HEIs on the island of Ireland provide some form of MLS
- The nature, scale and range of MLS offerings differ significantly across the institutions surveyed
- 45% of centres are subject to annual review
- One-to-one is the type of support most favoured by students
- One-to-one is also viewed by practitioners as the most effective support
- Many practitioners feel that the profile of MLS needs to be raised

When asked what MLS practitioners most needed from the IMLSN, the following quote epitomises several responses:

*Keep raising the profile of MLS and the centres. Keep pressure on institutions and government to recognise the need to properly support us*
THANK YOU
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References
