2024 Annual Quality Report (Institution)
CASE STUDIES RELATED to
Academic Year September 2022 – August 2023

CASE STUDY 1
Title: The role of institutional culture in fostering evidence-informed practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy graduates.
Theme: Preparing students for professional practice: Supporting graduate capabilities as research-informed clinical practitioners through developing an Institutional Research Culture.
Keywords (2-3 words): Research; Therapy; Evidence-informed.
Short Abstract (optional):

This case study outlines IICP College's approach to developing graduate capabilities as evidence-informed clinical practitioners through an institutional focus on Research Culture that encompasses institutional structures, approaches, practices and activities.

Introduction
IICP College provides a range of accredited and validated courses in counselling, psychotherapy, and related fields, with core programmes providing a route to professional accreditation and additional programmes aimed at upskilling current practitioners. These therapeutic disciplines, in line with practitioners from a wide range of profession[1], are increasingly required to be 'evidence-based' – that is, to ground their professional practice in, and make appropriate use of, research findings. The expectation is that graduates of these training programmes have the capabilities to use credible research evidence, effectively and appropriately, to support and strengthen their clinical planning and decision-making. In order to prepare their students for professional practice training providers in these professions need to ensure that research is woven into programme curricula, and that students are given the skills to evaluate the trustworthiness and credibility of research evidence. However, research knowledge does not automatically lead to evidence-informed practitioners: the application of research in concrete clinical practice situations and context, with specific distinct clients, is not so straightforward (Munro & Turnell, 2018). For therapists working with a particular client, their attention tends to be on that client, and the choices the therapist makes about the course of therapy is intricately connected with how the client describes themselves and their story. It is therefore not surprising that many therapists struggle with the question of how to integrate research evidence into their clinical practice. The difficulty, some argue, is how professionals engage with, rather than know, research; and in particular how they bring to bear the wealth of their theoretical, ethical, experiential, and clinical knowledge as well as their research knowledge on a clinical situation (Munroe & Turnell, 2018). The challenge, therefore, for institutions who teach practitioners is how to include research throughout their programmes in ways that support clinical decision-making and practice. For IICP College, this meant interweaving both research and clinical knowledge, discourses and practices through a focus on institutional culture. This approach reflects and is grounded in the College's history and traditions: the College was founded and has flourished under the auspices of research informed knowledge acquisition, to find ways of thinking about therapeutic phenomena, and to critically read the relevant literature. Research and research training is seen as preparing us to question and evaluate the way psychotherapy and psychotherapy training is conducted.

This case study outlines IICP's approach to developing graduate capabilities as evidence-informed practitioners through an institutional focus on Research Culture that encompasses institutional structures, approaches, practices and activities. This academic year (2022-2023) has seen the introduction of a range of practices and activities, building on structures and approaches developed since the introduction of our current Strategic Plan in 2021 which identifies research as an organisational priority[2]. While this cultural development is at early stages, some reflections by students on different research activities is presented. These reflections suggest that students are

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[1] See for example professions such as Nursing (Lang, 1999), Speech and Language Therapy (Roddam & Skeat, 2010) and Translating science (Shlesinger (2009).
[2] See IICP College Strategic Plan available at https://www.iicp.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Strategic-Plan-2021-2026.pdf, particularly Strategic Area No. 2: Teaching and Learning.

engaging with and enjoying research. Most significantly, the publications and presentations by students over this period demonstrates the wealth of engagement of students in practice based research.

Developing a Research Focused Culture

A key focus of the IICP College's approach to Research is developing an institution-wide research focused culture, where staff and students develop their professional identify as research-informed practitioners through engagement in research-based practice and practice-based research. Research culture, according to Evans (2007), refers to the "shared values, assumptions, beliefs, rituals, and other forms of behavior geared towards the acknowledgement of the value and significance of research practice and its outputs" (p. 2). Drawing on Slade et al (2018), IICP College sees its research culture as operating at a range of interconnected institutional levels:

- <u>Institutional Structures:</u> This refers to the policy, governance and regulatory systems introduced to sustain "a culture of scientific enquiry and evidence-based practice" (Slade et al, 2018, p. 9).
- <u>Institutional Approach:</u> This refers to how the College includes the theme of research in its core business activities.
- <u>Institutional Practices:</u> This refers to the infrastructure, systems, and processes that "promote and support a culture of enquiry and evidence "(Slade et al, 2018, p. 9).
- <u>Institutional Activities:</u> This relates to capacity building through educational activities.

The development of Research-focused Institutional Structures and Approaches were considered preliminary actions required to provide an institutional context in which a research strategy could be developed and implemented. The structures and approach that have been developed continue to be reviewed in light of the evolving Research Strategy, and we envisage that change to these approaches will continue to emerge as a result of the implementation of this strategy.

From Research Strategy to Practice

Key elements of the evolving Research Strategy include the following:

1. <u>Institutional Structures.</u>
   Changes to Institutional structures aimed at developing IICP's Research Culture included:
   i. The development of research-focused policies.
   ii. The introduction of additional governance arrangements, in particular an institutional wide ethics review process.

   IICP College has put in place a range of policy and governance initiatives intended to support high quality, ethical, practice-based student and faculty research. The policies cover areas such as Research Supervision and Research Ethics, and are student facing. The aim of the policies and structures is to include students as partners in research, modeling good practice not only in how research is conducted but also the institutional context in which research occurs. They attend in particular to the complexity of practice-based research, where students take on the dual role of researcher and clinician.

2. <u>Institutional Actions.</u>
   Institutional actions to support the development of a Research Strategy have included:
   i. Strategic Planning.
   ii. Programme review, curriculum change and alignment with QQI Science Awards Standards.
   iii. Developing research-focused statements of graduate attributes.

   The College's Strategic Plan, developed in 2021, places research at the center of teaching and learning. This has been the lynchpin grounding college wide activity, in turn supporting an

institution-wide action of developing the research focus of its core professional programmes. Since 2021 the College has embarked on a review of its core programmes with this in mind, mapping the revised programmes against QQI Science Awards Standards and revalidating as Science Awards.

Associated with these revalidations were:
- An explicit statement of graduate attributes as including key generic skills for research informed practitioners, such as information, digital and ethical literacy.
- Supporting research-mindedness through curriculum changes. In the undergraduate programme, for example, an early module "Evidence Informed Practice" (EIP) was introduced, in order to engage students from the very outset of their learning journey with the key concepts and practices of gathering, ordering, assessing, and using data, evidence, and information. EIP provides opportunities for students to question, exercise their curiosity, understand hierarchy of evidence, engage in critical thinking, and explore how research informs practice and practice informs research.

In addition, the College developed its approach to ethical review of research at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. As part of their research, students are required to engage in an ethical review process where they anticipate and manage ethical issues. This is to ensure that there is in place a robust and transparent research ethics review system that strengthens the College's research infrastructure.

3. <u>Institutional Practices.</u>
Research-focused institutional practices developed over the academic year 2022-2023 included:
   i. The introduction of a dedicated research leadership role.
   ii. The formation of a dedicated research supervision team.
   iii. The introduction of support structures for the research teaching and supervision team.

In 2022 a senior academic leadership role, the Head of Academic Studies [HoAS] was extended to include a clear remit to champion, lead and manage the research activities across undergraduate, graduate and faculty groups. This senior leadership role signaled the importance which the College placed on research, and has resulted in research development of institutional activities throughout the College.

A dedicated cohort of "Research Supervisors", many new to the College and all with highly developed research skills, was assembled and lead by HoAS. This team was primed with the research focused ethos of IICP and continues to meet on a regular basis to reflect on and develop their supervisory practice. Mentoring from senor team members is a key feature of the Research Supervisors team. At Masters level "Supervisor Briefing Sessions" consider, for example, methods for motivating and sustaining students' curiosity and inquiry, exploring new and emerging methodologies, and encouraging exploration of applying results. Drawing on insights from McCallin and Nayar (2012), experienced supervisors are encouraged to support and mentor less experienced colleagues.

An explicit Strategic Action was adopted by faculty to encourage and prepare students doing research to publish both nationally and internationally. Success of this approach is evident in the newly established Research Register, which shows the growth in publications from the College community over the last few years.

4. Institutional Activities.
   The development of research activities on the ground has been particularly exciting, drawing in many cases on inspirational ideas from students and staff, and supported by institutional structures and approaches. Some examples include:
   i. Dedicated research Teaching and Learning activities.
   ii. An explicit focus on students publishing and presenting research.
   iii. Recording of student publication and presentation of Research in an Institution-wide Research Register.

   A Research Register was established, available to all, containing a list of student and faculty published research papers, conference presentations, and books. This has had the effect of capturing not just current work but work of the recent past, providing a rich base of literature, and an inspiration to others to follow. It is an important motivational tool, where students and faculty alike strive to be included not only through the development of but also through the publication and presentation of their own research.

   Lecturers and Supervisors engage at both module and programme level on the value of research in the therapeutic professions. Informal and formal faculty activities highlight the importance of encouraging student engagement with research and the integration of research "mindedness" across all classes. Research is presented and discussed not only in terms of the quality of the research, but also in terms of what it might contribute to clinical work in different client contexts.

   A particularly useful development has been the "Internal Research Conferences" where students present their own work to the College community. These Zoomed events are advertised college wide and attended by senior faculty members such as HoAS, Vice-President and President, as well as Programme Leaders and faculty. This has brought considerable energy to the presentations and generated debate and discussion long after the conference had ended.

   In Postgraduate programmes a new system of "dissertation support" sessions has been integrated into the final year schedule to encourage excellence in undertaking, and writing-up research, and also to encourage publication.

Impact
In the future the College intends to carry out a more thorough review of the impact of institutional change focused on research culture on students' competence as research-informed clinical practitioners. Currently, feedback from students on specific college activities is helping us shape our approach to institutional change

Student feedback at this early stage suggests that they are beginning to feel themselves as more research capable and competent. When asked how well the course content and delivery had prepared them for future research, 95% of first year respondents reported that it prepared them "very well." What is particularly heartening is the evidence of enjoyment and growing mastery of research. Student feedback on their early first module in our undergraduate programme is particularly telling. When asked "What they found most useful from the course?" responses included:

"This class made the subject of research, more accessible."

"The use of real-life examples to put ideas into context were extremely effective in helping me understand concepts."

"The module has been such an eye-opening experience for me. I took all papers as trustworthy never thinking of how the research was obtained or if there may be a hidden agenda's"

"I must confess the mere mention of research switched me off, I can now see a new perspective; it made it relevant."

"A subject that could have been boring was made interesting, and I went to a Conference!"

Another measure of impact is the growth of involvement of students in publishing and presenting their research. Prior to 2021 publications and presentations by students were relatively rare in the College, whereas there have been in the region of 34 so far for the 2022-2023 academic year, with more in train. The range of topics shows the focus on practice-based research, with authors covering diverse practice-based themes such as therapist self-care, therapeutic processes, therapeutic outcomes, and working with different client presentations. A selection of student publications is contained in the Appendix.

Conclusion

The College's Strategic Goals include developing structures, policies and programmes which support learners to engage with, carry out, and use appropriately in their clinical practice, research evidence. The College's approach to developing student's competence in evidence-informed practice has involved changes at strategy, management, resourcing, programme and curriculum levels. Indeed, it has impacted from the highest level of strategic planning to the grounded level of conversations within the College community. Consequently, students are exposed to research inquiry from entry to through to exit from the College. This appears to have engaged the natural curiosity and enthusiasm of our students, and results so far suggest the success of these activities in embedding a research culture in the College.

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Appendix. A selection of student research publications and presentations

- Alessandrini, K. (2023). Small things—'It felt like love'—The experience of being deeply moved in therapy: Clients' stories of the small things that matter in therapy. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 00, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12713
- Lalor, J., & Khoshfetrat, A. (2023). An examination of the association between mindfulness and compassion for others in psychotherapists: A mediating role of self-compassion. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 00, 1– 8. https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12735
- Leonard, J. (2023). Staying in my lane: An exploration of counsellors' and psychotherapists' understanding and use of nutrition in the therapy room. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 00, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12689
- Mills, D. (2023). Applying a neurodiversity affirmative approach to the pluralistic framework. *Counselling & Psychotherapy Research,* 23(3), 627–637. https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12637
- Muckley, L. (2023, November 14). *Pluralistic Approaches with Actively Suicidal Clients* [Conference presentation]. HECA Research Conference 'Sharing an Open Research Landscape', Dublin Business School, Dublin.
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