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Partnership – Student Affairs

Partnership - creating meaningful opportunities for connection, belonging, wellbeing and community engagement.

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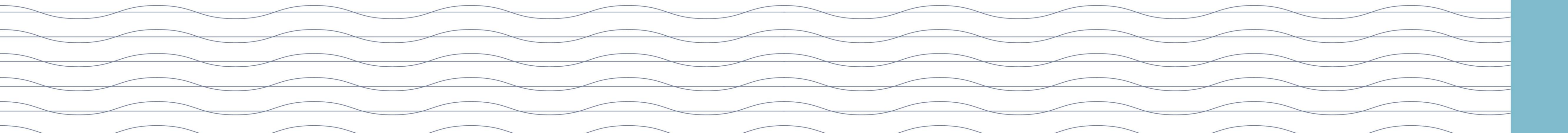


Background and Purpose of the Presentation

- This presentation highlights the challenge of ‘silo thinking’ in the delivery of student services/support.
- It also emphasises the importance of partnership to student affairs practice.
- It outlines the importance of partnership and its role in creating meaningful opportunities for connection, belonging, wellbeing and community engagement.
- The presentation outlines and explores three examples of projects on the ATU Mayo campus that illustrate the power of partnership.

Why Belonging Matters

- Research consistently highlights the importance of belonging in higher education. Students who experience a strong sense of belonging are more likely to engage with their studies, persist through challenges and achieve positive academic outcomes (Strayhorn, 2019; Thomas, 2012).
- This is particularly important in regional campuses where many students commute rather than live on campus. Commuting students can often arrive immediately before class and leave immediately afterwards, reducing opportunities to build relationships and connect with university life.
- Our approach has been to create simple, accessible and welcoming opportunities that encourage interaction and connection through collaborative student-staff partnerships, reflecting evidence that belonging is strengthened through engagement and participation (Thomas, 2013).





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Collaboration – Student Affairs

ATU Mayo campus

823 – Total student number

582 – Full time undergraduate



ATU Mayo Approach

The three projects discussed today form part of a wider ecosystem of support at ATU Mayo.

- A key feature of this approach is partnership. Students are not simply recipients of services; they actively contribute to planning, delivery and promotion. This reflects research highlighting the value of student partnership and shared ownership in fostering engagement and belonging (Thomas, 2012; Thomas, 2013).
- They also represent partnerships and collaborations between students, staff external funders and stakeholders.

What Partnership Looks Like in Everyday Practice

- Students as partners
- Staff as partners
- Collaborations with Civic society
- Collaborations with other Higher Education institutions
- Partnership with external stakeholders



Breakfast Clubs

Creating Spaces of Belonging

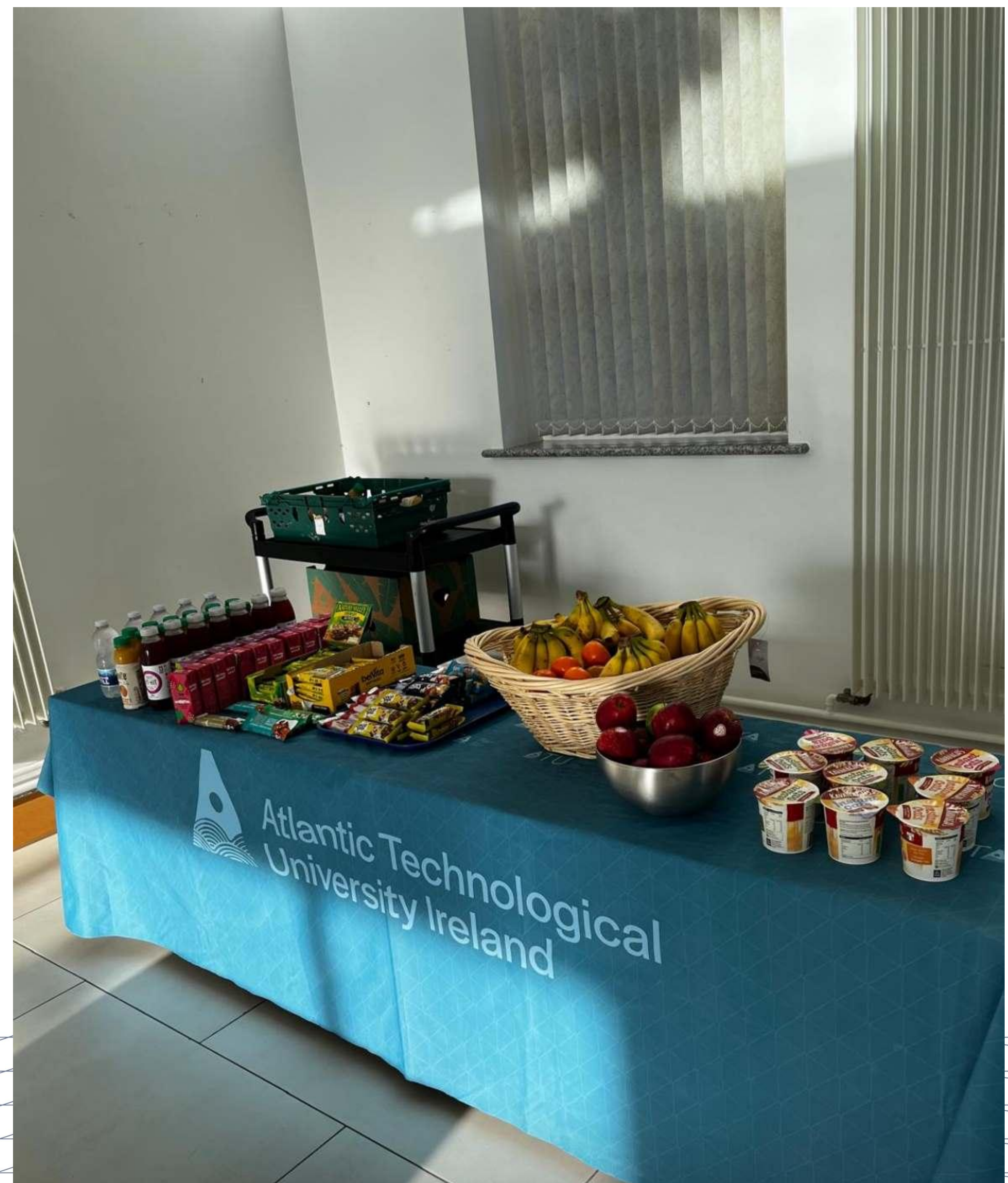
- The Breakfast Club was established as a practical response to student needs.
- Many of our students travel significant distances to campus each day. The Breakfast Club provides a free breakfast in a welcoming environment and offers students the opportunity to meet others before classes begin.
- Breakfast Clubs create informal opportunities for conversation and connection.



Breakfast Clubs

Creating Spaces of Belonging

- The initiative is supported by both students and staff, who assist with organising and running the programme.
- While providing food is important, the real value often lies in the informal conversations and social connections that take place.
- The programme is made possible through philanthropic funding, demonstrating how external investment can support student wellbeing and belonging.



Wellness Café

- The Wellness Café provides a different type of space.
- Rather than focusing on a specific service, it creates an informal environment where students can connect, talk and feel supported.
- The café is facilitated by trained staff and student volunteers, reflecting a genuine partnership model.
- Throughout the year, themed cafés focus on topics such as stress management, mental health awareness, self-care, exam preparation and positive wellbeing (and activities to encourage engagement).
- The informal nature of the space helps reduce barriers to participation and encourages students to engage in conversations they might not have in more formal settings.



Wellness Café

Themed café's take place throughout the year:

- 4th November - Launch (65)
- 18th November - Lego (50)
- 2nd December - Christmas tree decoration making (40)
- 27th January - St Brigid Cross making (50)
- 10th March - Seachtain na Gaeilge (130)
- 21st April - Easter egg painting (35)



Digital Café

- The Digital Café extends the concept of belonging beyond the university campus.
- In this initiative, student volunteers provide digital skills support to older members of the local community.
- Participants receive help with smartphones, online services, communication technology and other digital tools.



Digital Café

- The project is supported through collaboration with Mayo County Council's Age Friendly Programme and forms part of a wider national initiative involving StudentVolunteer.ie and higher education institutions.
- The Digital Café benefits both groups. Older adults gain confidence in digital skills, while students develop communication, leadership and community engagement skills.
- It also creates meaningful intergenerational connections that strengthen relationships between the university and the local community.

Partnership Model

These initiatives succeed because of partnership.

- At the centre are students and staff working together as collaborators rather than operating in separate roles.
- Around this core partnership are external stakeholders, including community organisations, local authorities and funders.
- Each partner contributes different expertise, resources and perspectives.
- This shared ownership increases sustainability, improves relevance and helps ensure the initiatives respond to genuine student and community needs.



Observed Impact

Although each project has different objectives, several common outcomes have emerged.

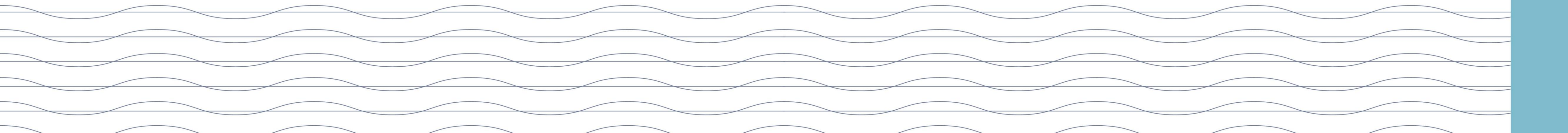
- Students report increased opportunities to connect with peers and staff.
- The initiatives help create a more welcoming campus environment and strengthen feelings of belonging.
- We have also seen the development of student leadership, confidence and volunteering skills.
- For community partners, the projects create opportunities for meaningful engagement with the university and demonstrate the social value of higher education institutions within their regions.



Lessons for Higher Education

There are several lessons we have learned from these experiences.

- First, meaningful initiatives do not need to be large or expensive. Small interventions can have significant impact when they are designed around student needs.
- Second, partnership is most effective when students are genuine co-creators who contribute to decision-making and delivery.
- Third, external partnerships can increase sustainability while expanding opportunities for students and communities.
- Finally, informal social spaces should be recognised as an important component of student success strategies, alongside academic and professional support services.





Thank you





References

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