Case Study:

University of Limerick
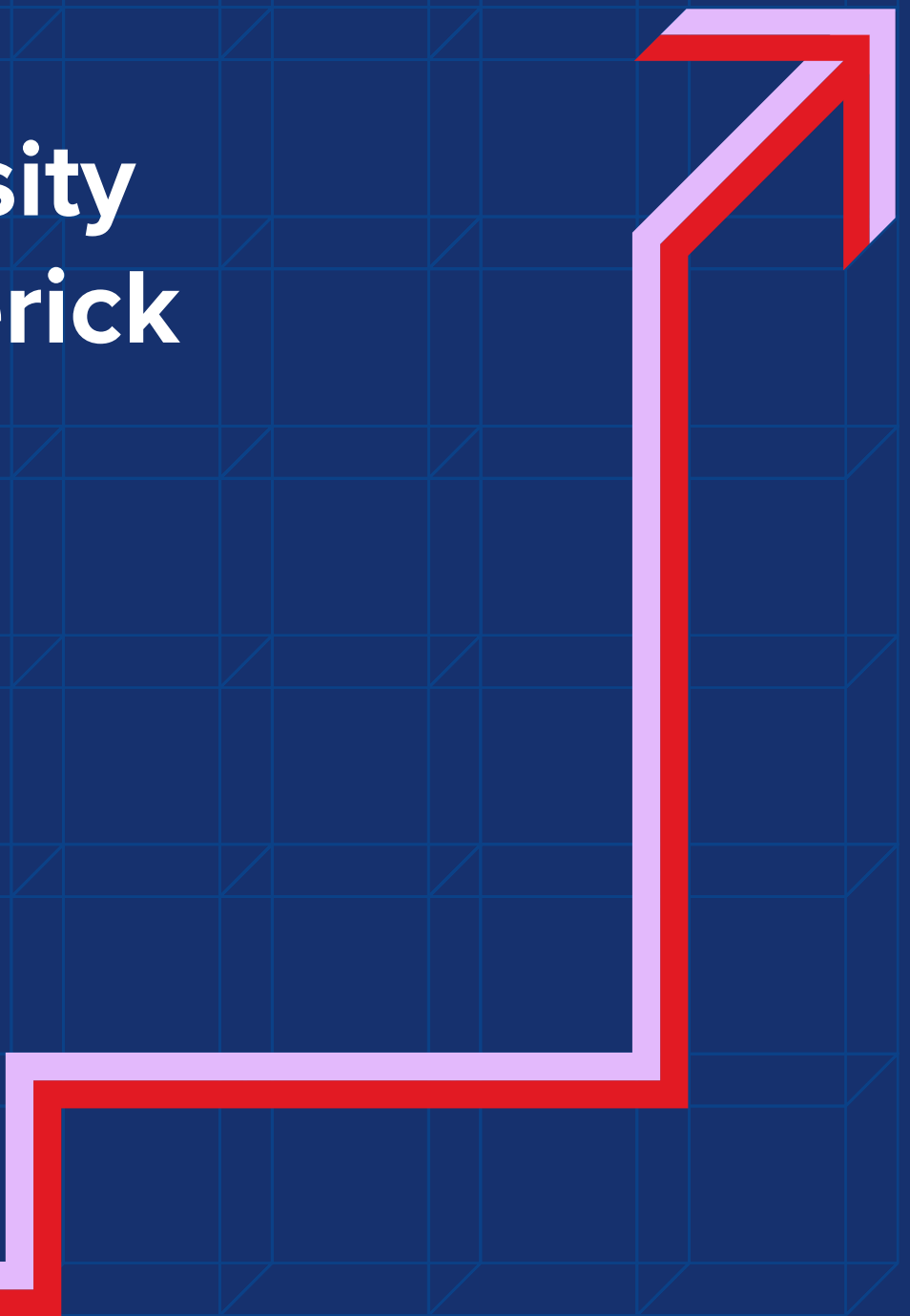
Institution: University of Limerick

Instructor: John Mulvihill, PhD

Senior Lecturer
- Biomedical Engineering

Course Director
- Biomedical Engineering

John Mulvihill shares a great deal of empathy with his students, particularly when it comes to making the transition into higher education. "I was someone who also didn't engage in my first year at college," he freely admits, acknowledging that it can be an overwhelming time.

He's cognisant of the jump his learners will be facing: "It's key to remember the jump in speed that they're coming into—the quality and quantity of learning can be daunting, and it can be too much."

John is also mindful that his module isn't the only priority for his cohort. "Yours isn't the only one," he comments. "They have other things going in their lives. They need to structure their time, so instructors also need to be structured to give them the best chance."

On account of these considerations, John had strong opinions on what he wanted his course to look like when he inherited an introductory Engineering module with a relatively high failure rate. With a cohort size of around 350-400 students, he had several ideas on how to offer realistic, student-centred support to his first-year group.

## Consideration: Building a course for today's student

Talking to the diversity in his learners, John shares that despite them coming from very different backgrounds and nationalities, they are typically united in their expectations and their wishes.

"Every student from every different country has different wants and different desires. What's consistent through all students, though, is that they know the book is going to give them what they need. But even if I gave them the book for free, they want it shortened; they want to know what they're being asked to do," he shares.

How McGraw Hill's Connect platform helps

It was 2019 when John was introduced to Connect and quickly he was able to see the value it could add to his course.

When it comes to how he uses it, John highlights that he breaks everything out into topics, and believes that this is visually helpful for his students who won't see a great deal of information all at once.
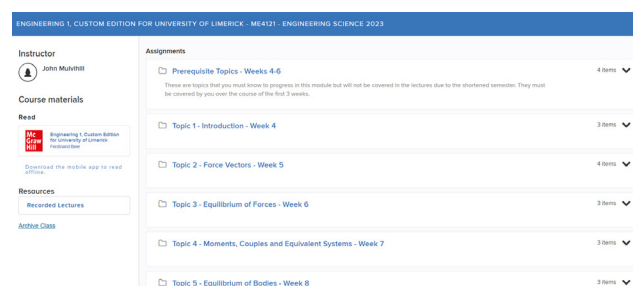
John's course, viewed as a student, showing the topic breakdowns.

"What Connect allows me to do is break down a lot of information into small packages of 10-15 minute activities.," he says.

It has really helped his students realise that he is "not here to catch you out and punish you."

"They can see how the structure works and they understand how each topic is packaged up and what'll be covered in each chapter."

On the back of using Connect, John has also adjusted the weighting of activities that make up his learners' final grades.

Historically, they had 70% of their mark based on the end of term exam, with 10% of marks being allocated to the mid-term test, lab reports and assignments.

John has shifted this to suit his learners, believing that there should be greater focus on consistent effort throughout the term.

He now apportions just 15% to the end-of-term exam and weights the quizzes at 25%. Beneficial Connect assignments are given 15% and lab reports 45%.

Consideration: Giving students freedom to fail in a low stakes space

This is a crucial facet to John's course and something he feels passionately about. "No matter the content, no matter the course - facing the first big assignment can be really stressful," he says.

Cohorts coming through over the past couple of years have had highly disrupted learning, and many won't have sat formal, high-stakes examinations. For John, it's important to ease students into this by familiarising them with the format and environment with smaller, low-stakes tests that grow their confidence all while providing important formative feedback both to them and to him as instructor.

Where Connect helps

In the section above, we saw how John's course has been broken down into smaller sections so as to avoid overwhelming students with a high volume of information. Under each of these four topics comes adaptive tracked reading assignments, plus separate curated quizzes designed by John. These quizzes come pre-built from the question bank within Connect, though can be and often are adjusted by lead instructors.

For John, these quizzes afford his learners a big advantage. "It gives them the opportunity to fail without huge impact too and it really helps for them to experience what is coming up." Not only do they expose students to the software and therefore practically prepare them for the exam, they are also very useful for helping students understand their own strengths and weaknesses, and crucially to get instant feedback that allows them to correct. "It isn't like they got told they're wrong and that's it. That's incredibly important."

Consideration: Insight into progress

Before John started using Connect, he shares that the method he had in place for checking in on how his students were performing wasn't effective. "It might have been a mid-term or a final exam and that would be when I would understand how my students were doing. There were students not engaging with the content at all and looking at their assignment scores and seeing if they turned up to face-to-face time was all I had to go on."

John explained that he would identify those to see if they needed support but accepted that some would not make it to the end of the course. Nevertheless, John hoped for more. "There's always some who'll drop out regardless of intervention but there are some who can be helped."

How Connect helps

"Folding in regular quizzes and assignments gives me a real time view into how I'm doing and if what I am saying is resonating with my learners," John explains. "It is like having a lens into my teaching. One example showed that quiz scores for one particular quiz were way below the rest, and that showed to me what I need to do differently."

Consideration: Being able to deliver on the research part of his role

Another pillar to John's drive to build out a course that would engage his learners whilst supporting him was time management. He was keen to ensure that despite his teaching responsibilities, he had time to work on the research part of his role. With his large cohort size, John shared that it can be "difficult to be an effective and engaging teacher. The course itself just really eats into the time you have to do research. I didn't want to sacrifice either."

Where Connect helps

John shares that Connect has helped him be more efficient. Without Connect, he admits that the quizzes—that form such an integral part of the course—wouldn't be possible. "It would take too much time to mark each one. I'd need the team to support and that would really impact them."

Additionally, having spent time building out the course once, when it comes to the start of a new term, "everything is done! I just hit play! It has given me the structure so I can focus on the research part of my role."

Summary

John was clear about what he wanted to achieve with his module with beliefs that were borne from his own experiences and his strong desire to spend some of his time delivering on his research goals.

Asked if he felt that he had accomplished what he set out to do, it's a resounding yes!

"I can grade within the day and it increased the engagement with my students. It just gave me more structure and consistency. Connect just improves how you do things."