

## **GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER! THE IMPACT OF (VIRTUAL) GUEST SPEAKERS IN A BUSINESS CLASS: A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE**

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### **Abstract**

This research explores students' perceptions and expectations of the impact of guest speakers on their educational experience. This approach identifies the benefits and contributions made to students' learning experience. The rationale for this research is to examine and identify the impact of guest speakers on student learning and understand how this experience can act as a portal to a deeper understanding of how students' learn. The inclusion of guest speakers is important as it integrates the universal design for learning framework with different teaching approaches appealing to the phenomenon of multiple intelligences. From January to May 2022 and 2023, guest speakers presented to postgraduate students in the module EC6622: Global Business Strategy and Business Relationships. A mixed methods approach was adopted to incorporate both quantitative and qualitative elements within the survey. Results suggest that 59.1% think they "always or often" benefit from attending guest speaker presentations. Just over 10% reported that having guest speakers present in the module was very "relevant and useful". Finally, the thematic approach revealed that some of the students found it beneficial to have in-person guest speakers as they were "more valuable and interactive". They reported they felt it was "easier to ask a question" as opposed to delivering the presentation virtually. Findings suggest that students see guest speakers in the classroom as beneficial but do not always see the relevance of their presentations to the module material. This suggests that, while guest speakers lead to a more rounded learning experience, more work may be needed to link the speakers' content to the taught material.

**Keywords:** *Educational experience, multiple intelligences, mixed methods.*

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### **1. Introduction**

Having guest speakers in the classroom is a form of scholarship known as experiential learning, whereby guest speakers are invited to provide invaluable insights, perspectives and experiences of the workplace. This creates opportunities for students to engage with real-world experts. Guest speakers offer the opportunity of diverse viewpoints with practical applications of their experiences which exposes students to insights to which they would not necessarily be exposed to in the traditional classroom.

The inclusion of guest speakers as a teaching tool is important, regardless of the subject being taught, because presenting learning materials using multiple approaches appeals to differences in how students learn, drawing on the phenomenon of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983, 2004). By providing multiple means of representation, engagement and expression, this can enhance the inclusivity and accessibility of the learning environment linking with the principles of Universal Design for learning (UDL). Teaching a topic in multiple ways helps students to understand and build their confidence in the subject matter. In addition, there is a positive externality because conveying the topic in different ways not only bridges the gap between academic teaching and business practice but also reinforces and increases a teacher's mastery of the subject.

Biggs and Tang (2011) emphasise that effective teaching should discourage surface learning and promote an in-depth learning experience. Guest speakers need to be carefully selected to produce depth and granularity in their presentations to benefit the future workforce (Malhotra & Miller, 1999; Cooper et al., 2004). Experienced speakers can often lead to advancement in learning and enhance human capital, generating in the long term a competitive advantage in the global marketplace by producing a well-rounded, experienced student exposed to 'real-life' workplace situations. Exposure to real world business experiences gives student an intuitive understanding of business operations (Roth, 2001). Incorporating speakers can also contribute to the scholarship of teaching by fostering collaboration

between academia and industry while also promoting interdisciplinary collaborations and promoting innovation in teaching methods.

Riebe et al. (2013) highlight the need to select guest speakers carefully to contribute to active learning. Ormrod (2004) highlights that sometimes students can use inappropriate thinking skills or learn insufficient content, while also not fully participating in the experience. Active learning is promoting a community of learning through engagement in the classroom. Having guest speakers in the class provides students with the opportunity to discuss, problem solve and, where possible, actively engage with the teaching material to promote deeper learning and understanding of the material. Engagement is one of the fundamental tools for learning and leads to a better understanding of the topic under discussion. Engagement in the learning process, through activities such as these, is associated with improved learning outcomes, and can help students to retain information as well as have a deeper understanding of concepts. Deeper learning promotes the use of new ideas/approaches and links them to the theory, principles and concepts learnt in class to critically problem solve real life applications (Weigel, 2002). This research examines how invited guest speakers in the classroom (virtually and in person) impact on students' learning.

## 2. Objectives

Therefore, the objective of this research was to explore students' perceptions and expectations of the impact of guest speakers on their educational experience at postgraduate level.

## 3. Methods

During semester 2, from January to May 2022 and 2023, guest speakers presented to postgraduate students in the module EC6622: Global Business Strategy and Business Relationships, with a class size of approx 91 national and international students. This module aims to introduce students to methods of understanding competitive dynamics, the interactive nature of players in the market, including stakeholders such as government. National and international business relationships are explored, including cooperation, conflict and ethics. Strategic decision making in a global setting is examined in order to produce learning outcomes around how to analyse the nature of business relationships and explain firm flexibility in conditions of uncertainty as well as assessing game theory for understanding strategic interactive decision making. The course material and case studies take a broad cross-sectoral and international approach, and the module is worth 5 credits (2 hours per week) out of 60 credits in Part 1 of the MSc in Business Economics in University College Cork, Ireland (Part 2 being a dissertation).

Preparation is key, so speakers were invited at least three months in advance in order for us and them to prepare well in advance of the presentation to maximise their impact, as recommended by Ostorga and Farruggio, 2013. In preparation, we agreed to provide some guidance to speakers, ranging from helping to prepare their slides, to identifying a relevant topic, to possible student questions. We also released a document in advance of the presentation to the students, to briefly explain who the guest speaker was and the type of business in which they operate. This advance preparation was done to try to construct a more active learning environment. The pre-confirmed guest speakers were chosen in order to demonstrate diversity in terms of their demographic characteristics, the size and location of the private firms and organisations (Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC)) and the range of services offered to different customers. There were four speakers in total: *Mr Ger Brady, Head Economist IBEC Dublin (virtual & in person)*, *Ms Sandra Cardoso, CEO Primeslot Portugal (virtual)*, *Mr Ed Donovan, CEO Heart Aid Cork (in person)*, and *Mr Jack McGrath, Director of Strategy & Change Ingenium Australia (virtual)*. Two of the speakers were previous graduates of the Department of Economics in UCC. Having at least two of these presenters from UCC was important from the Departments' perspective to demonstrate quality and success.

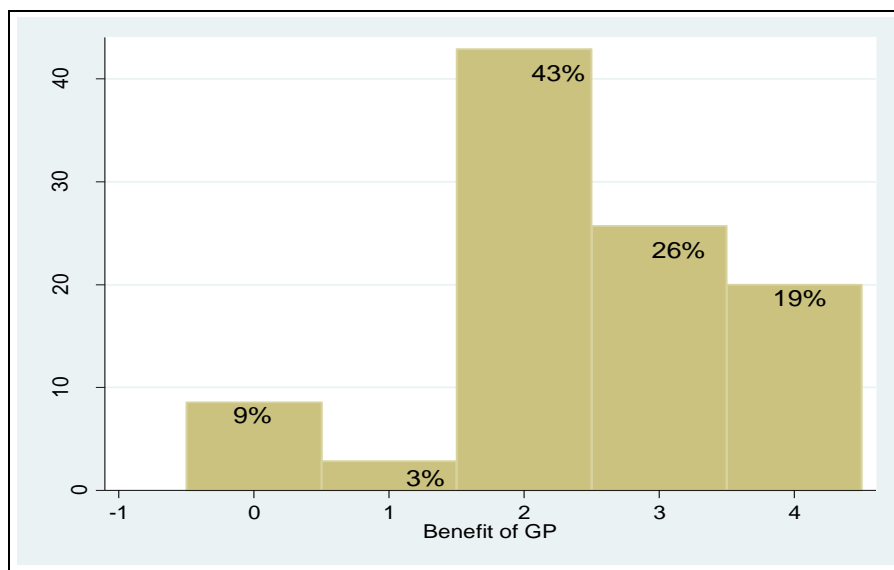
Within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning literature there is an emphasis on the need to consider both quantitative and qualitative approaches by adopting a mixed methods approach (Zhou, 2022; Sammons & Davis, 2017). There was a mix of open and closed questions included on the survey disseminated to students on the 8th of May 2023 measuring the impact of all four guest speakers on students' educational experiences. When designing the questionnaire, a matrix question was also included, using a Likert scale to determine the level of agreement. The low response rate and consequent small sample size (n=36) affected the type of analysis that could be applied. However, descriptive statistics were produced. Open questions were included to ensure richness in response. With the qualitative data, a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied in order to determine the main themes emerging from the responses and support the research findings. The proposal obtained ethical approval from the Social Research Ethics Committee in UCC.

#### 4. Discussion

The respondents comprised of 61% male and 36% female students with a further 3% preferring not to say. The average age of the class was 24 years old (standard deviation 2.4). Within the class 47% were Irish, 50% were International/Non-EU students and 3% were International/ EU students. A question on employment was also included, with 43% not working, 11% working a 40-hour week and 46% working between 6 and 35 hrs per week. 57% planned to seek employment in Ireland with the remaining 43% having secured employment in Ireland, planning to emigrate (with or without secured employment) or with other (unspecified) plans.

Most (91%) reported being interested or very interested in the programme, while a majority found it challenging some (58%) or most (36%) of the time. Most expected to achieve a similar grade to their previous year. Students report a benefit from attending Economics lectures sometimes (33%), most of the time (42%) or always (22%).

Figure 1. Number of Guest Speaker Presentations Attended.



Note: GP-Guest Speaker

Table 1. Impact of the Guest speaker from Students' perspectives.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Opinion
The speaker related the theory learnt in class to professional examples discussed during the presentation.	14.3%	62.9%	8.6%	5.7%	8.6%
The speaker made my learning experience more relevant.	28.6%	45.7%	2.9%	8.6%	14.3%
The speaker provided an insight into industry.	45.7%	45.7%	0%	5.7%	2.9%
The speaker spoke about something I didn't know already.	40%	51.4%	5.7%	0%	2.9%
The speaker gave a different perspective on the topic.	31.4%	48.6%	8.6%	2.9%	8.6%
The speaker provided information that will benefit my career plans.	31.4%	40%	2.9%	5.7%	20%

Overall, the majority of respondents either 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with the above statements measuring the impact of a guest speaker on their educational experience (See Table 1). Within the 'strongly agreed' category, the highest percentage of students 45.7%, 'strongly agreed' that the speaker gave them an insight into their industry, with the lowest percentage of students, 14.3%, strongly agreeing that the speaker related the theory learnt in class to professional examples. Within the agreed category, it ranged from 62.9% agreeing that the speakers related the theory learnt in class to professional examples to 40% agreeing that the information will benefit career plans. Those that 'disagreed' or 'strongly

disagreed' with the statements ranged from the highest of 8.6% to the lowest of zero. In the 'no opinion' category 20% had 'no opinion' on whether the speaker provided information that will benefit their career plans with only a low minority of 2.9% having 'no opinion' on whether they provided an insight into the industry and whether they spoke about something they did not know already.

Table 2. Characteristics of the presentations.

	Not at all	Not very	Quite	Very	Extremely
Appropriate	5.7%	8.5%	22.9%	48.6%	14.3%
Informative	5.7%	2.9%	37.1%	28.6%	25.7%
Interesting	5.7%	11.4%	45.7%	20%	17.1%
Necessary	8.6%	17.1%	42.9%	25.7%	5.7%
Relevant	8.6%	11.4%	25.7%	40%	14.3%
Useful	2.9%	11.4%	28.6%	42.9%	14.3%

A majority of respondents felt that the presentations were appropriate, informative, relevant and useful, but there was less agreement about whether they were interesting or necessary (see Table 2). Attitudes were almost evenly split as to whether the content of guest speaker presentations should be examinable. Some respondents felt that, to improve the guest speaker sessions, it was important to have the guest speakers visit the classroom rather than present online (n=6).

There was also an open-ended question included to measure whether students felt there were other ways that guest speakers could impact their educational experience. "Help with finding a future career" (n=3) was cited as having an impact. Students felt that the guest speaker "could engage in practical issues or real-life situations" and "the topics could be more relevant" (n=4). Students also suggested to pique their interest by highlighting "some of the challenges they faced and how they overcame them" (n=1) or to play some games to catch their attention" (n=1).

Finally, a question was included about what the students perceived as the most valuable information learned from the experience. Some reported that they learnt about the 'real world' and it gave them an 'insight into the industry with some practical applications' (n=3). Business development and analytical skills were also identified (n=3), as were career path and life choices (n=2). Interestingly, interpersonal skills such as confidence and flexibility were also highlighted by some students from the experience (see Table 3).

Table 3. Learning outcomes from a student perspective.

Themes	No
Real world experience/Industry insight/Practical application	3
Business development/analytical skills	3
Career paths (and changes)/life choices of past graduates	2
Have confidence in what you do	1
Flexibility	1
Applicability of programme to diverse fields	1
Other	2

## 5. Conclusion

Students report some benefit in guest speaker sessions, but perhaps demonstrate less enthusiasm than expected. They see it as a complement to existing material but not always directly relevant to the material. However, they do see the benefits of having invited guest speakers citing them as useful and providing insights and understanding of the guest speakers' experiences.

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