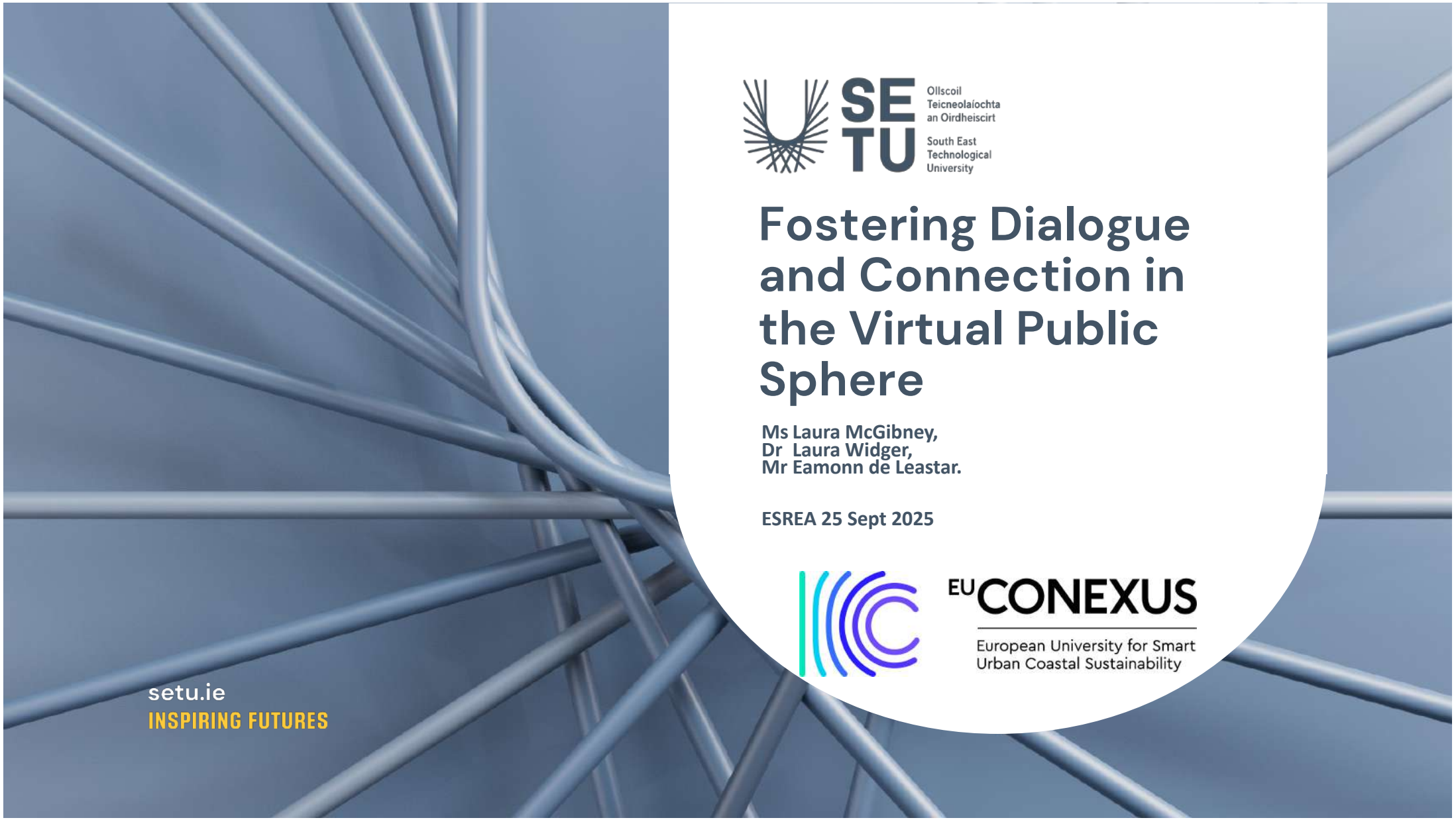


Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta an Oirdheiscirt
South East Technological University

Fostering Dialogue and Connection in the Virtual Public Sphere

Ms Laura McGibney,
Dr Laura Widger,
Mr Eamonn de Leastar.

ESREA 25 Sept 2025

EU CONEXUS
European University for Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability

setu.ie
INSPIRING FUTURES

Why does this matter?

- **Our learners:** fully online, in employment, funded IT conversion course
- **Unique challenges:** balancing work, life and study
- Feelings of **isolation and imposter syndrome**
- Dialogue is essential for **motivation and retention (Garrison et al., 2000; Kahu, 2013).**
  - *Garrison et al: role of social presence in meaningful online learning*
  - *Kahu: why engagement drives motivation and persistence*

Community of Inquiry Framework

supported by

Life Coaching principles

- Garrison et al., 2000
- Meaningful online learning = social, cognitive and teaching presence
- Focus: Social presence
- Build trust, connection, belonging
- Supported by Life Coaching principles
- Active listening, emotional intelligence, goal setting

The problem we wanted to address:

Feeling isolated is known to be a large factor in retention rates.

Introduction of an Online Engagement Advisor

Working in SETU since 1993

Degree in Computing part-time (7 years by night)



Worked as HR/Office Manager for software company for 2 years (during career break)

Qualified life and business coach

Online Engagement Advisor since Jan 2020

Introduction of an Online Engagement Advisor

Two year fully online ICT conversion programme

- Annual intake approx: 60 learners
- Retention: 60%+ (2019: 38% 2020: 69%)

Slack (communication platform)

Created virtual public sphere via Slack channel **“Life etc”**

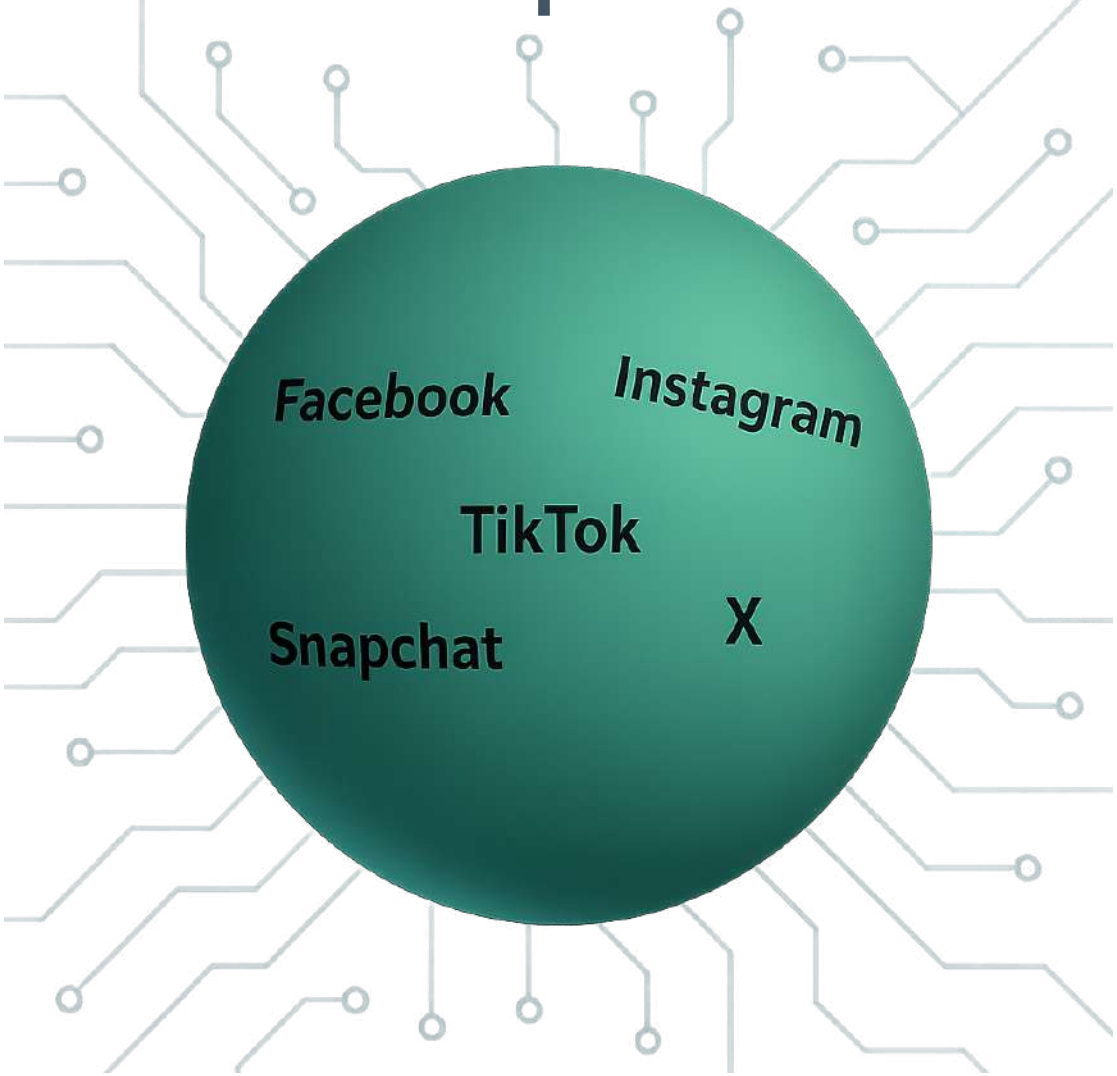
Grounded in:

- Community of Inquiry: social presence
- Life coaching principles: active listening, goal-setting

Intentional design (and open chat)

Virtual Public Sphere Characteristics

Virtual Public Sphere – Social



Algorithm driven

One way communication (echo chamber)

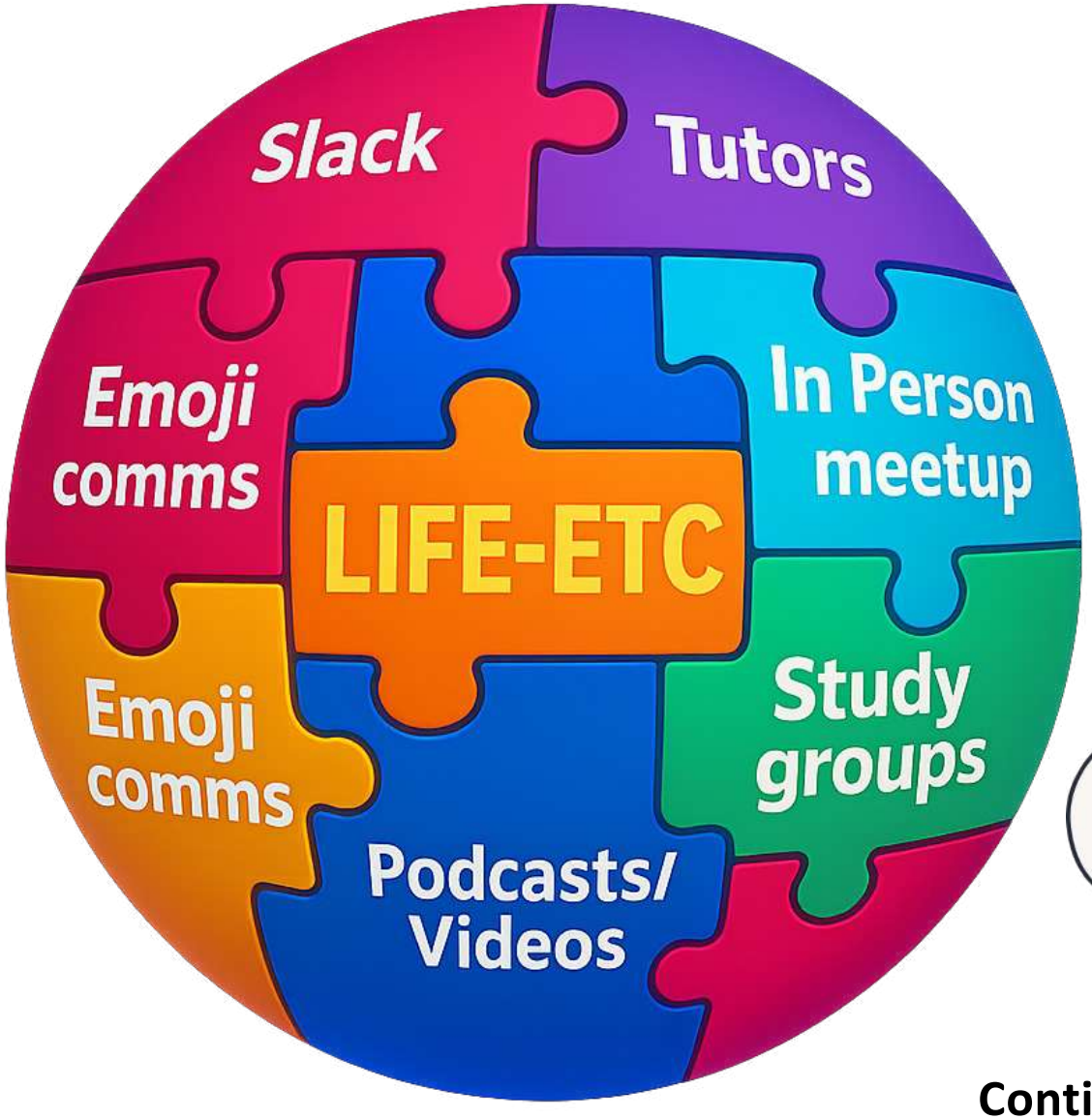
Virtual Public Sphere – Educational



Dialogue driven

Two way communication

Our Virtual Public Sphere Palette

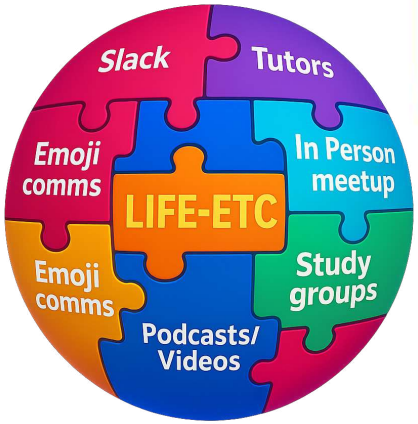


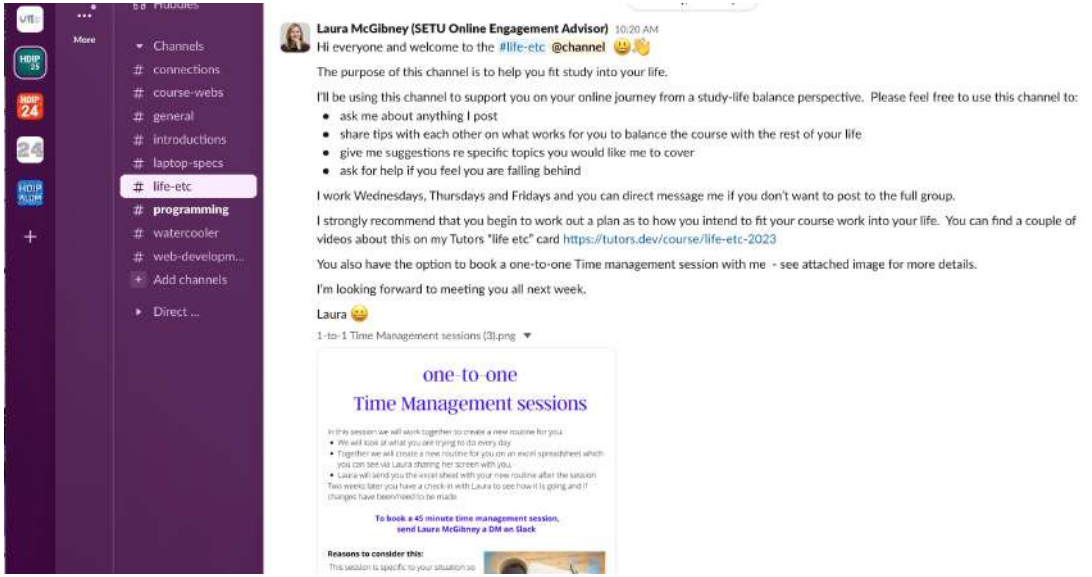


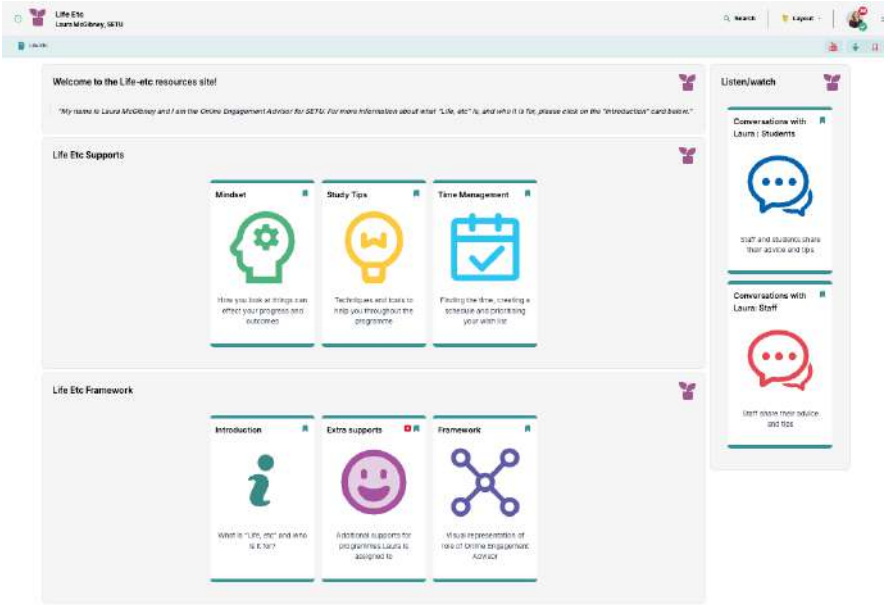
Continuous ideation

Our Virtual Public Sphere Palette:

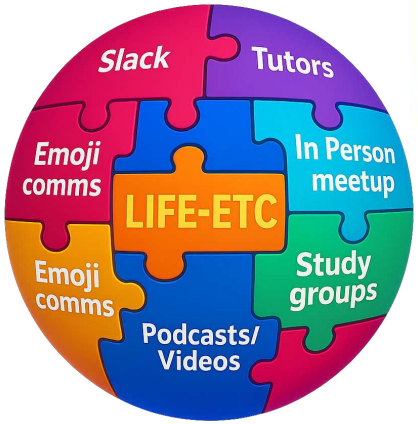
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  Dedicated channel on Slack (life-etc)
  Dedicated space on Tutors (learning platform)







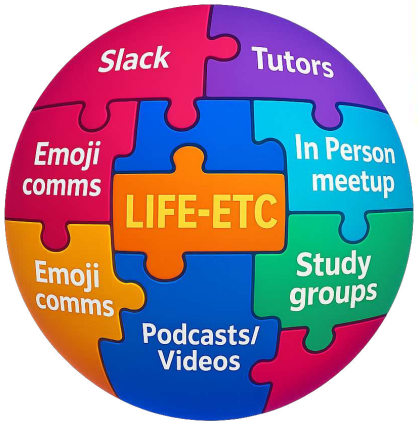
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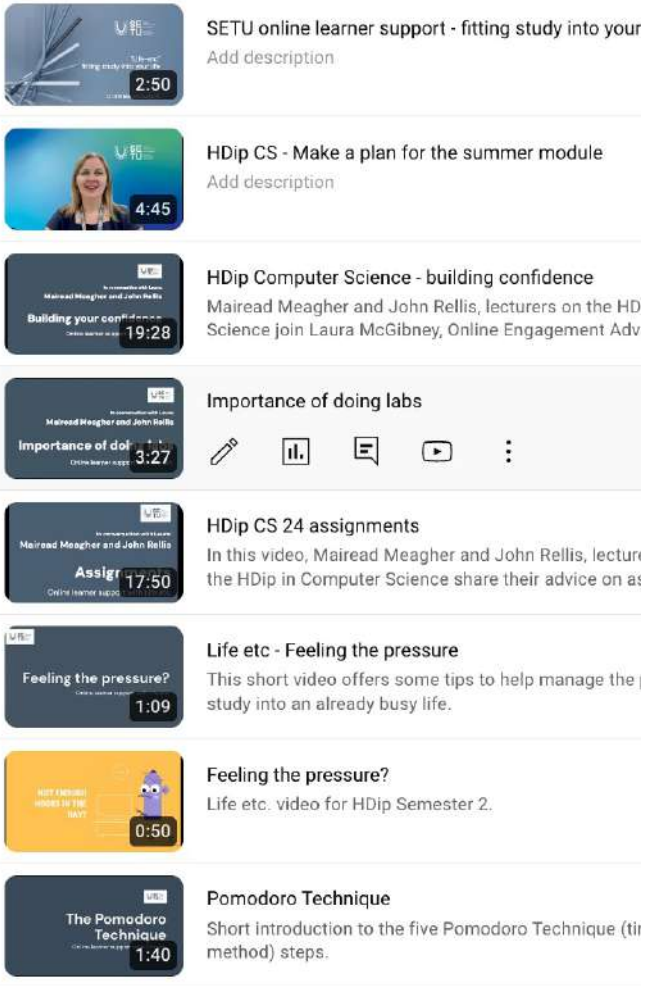


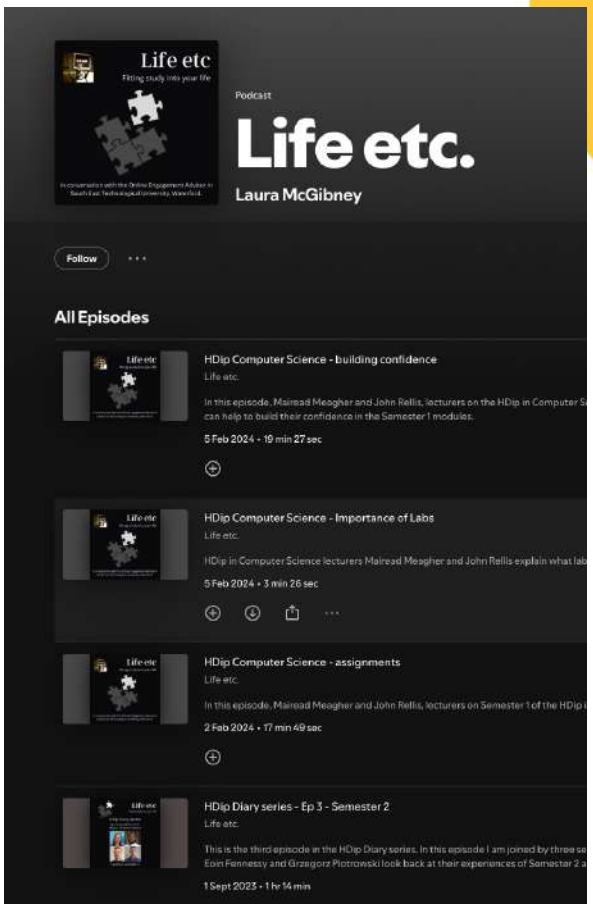
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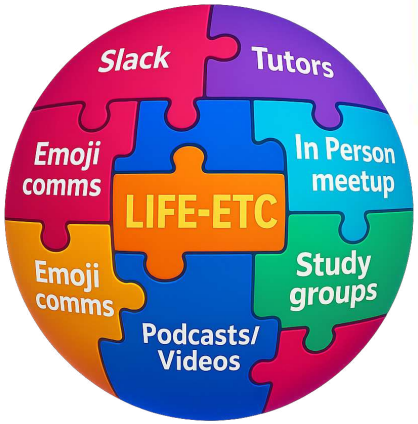
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- “Life etc” sessions at on-sites
- Virtual meetups
- Study groups
- Podcasts and video interviews with students and staff


Life etc
Fitting study into your life
SETU
HDip virtual meet up
Interested in a cuppa and chat with fellow HDip students? Join Laura on:
Thurs, 9th March at 8pm
Zoom link will be posted in Slack jbefore the call


2:50
SETU online learner support - fitting study into your
Add description
4:45
HDip CS - Make a plan for the summer module
Add description
19:28
HDip Computer Science - building confidence
Mairead Meagher and John Rellis, lecturers on the HD
Science join Laura McGibney, Online Engagement Adv
3:27
Importance of doing labs
17:50
HDip CS 24 assignments
In this video, Mairead Meagher and John Rellis, lectur
the HDip in Computer Science share their advice on as
Feeling the pressure?
1:09
Life etc - Feeling the pressure
This short video offers some tips to help manage the
study into an already busy life.
0:50
Feeling the pressure?
Life etc. video for HDip Semester 2.
The Pomodoro Technique
1:40
Pomodoro Technique
Short introduction to the five Pomodoro Technique (ti
method) steps.


Life etc
Podcast
Life etc.
Laura McGibney
Follow
All Episodes
HDip Computer Science - building confidence
5 Feb 2024 • 19 min 27 sec
HDip Computer Science - Importance of Labs
5 Feb 2024 • 3 min 26 sec
HDip Computer Science - assignments
2 Feb 2024 • 17 min 49 sec
HDip Diary series - Ep 3 - Semester 2
1 Sept 2023 • 1 hr 14 min

Our Virtual Public Sphere Palette:



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- Virtual meetups
- Study groups
- Podcasts and video interviews with students and staff
- Coaching

Coaching



one-to-one
Time Management sessions

You can book a 30 minute time management session with Laura via calendly (see link in text)

In this session we will work together to create a new routine for you:

- We will look at what you are trying to do every day
- Together we will create a new routine for you on an excel spreadsheet which
- aura sharing her screen with you.
- ou the excel sheet with your new routine after the session
- u have a check-in with Laura to see how it is going and if
- /need to be made.

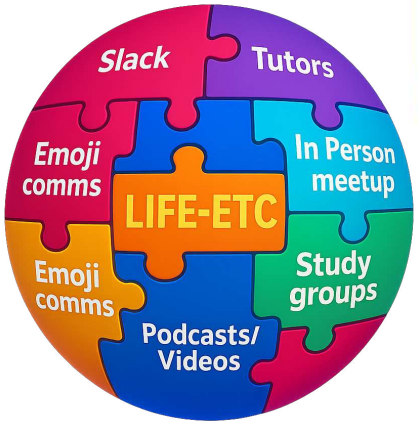
ler this:

- ific to your situation so
- ore successful than a
- uggested plan
- accountability and
- for you.



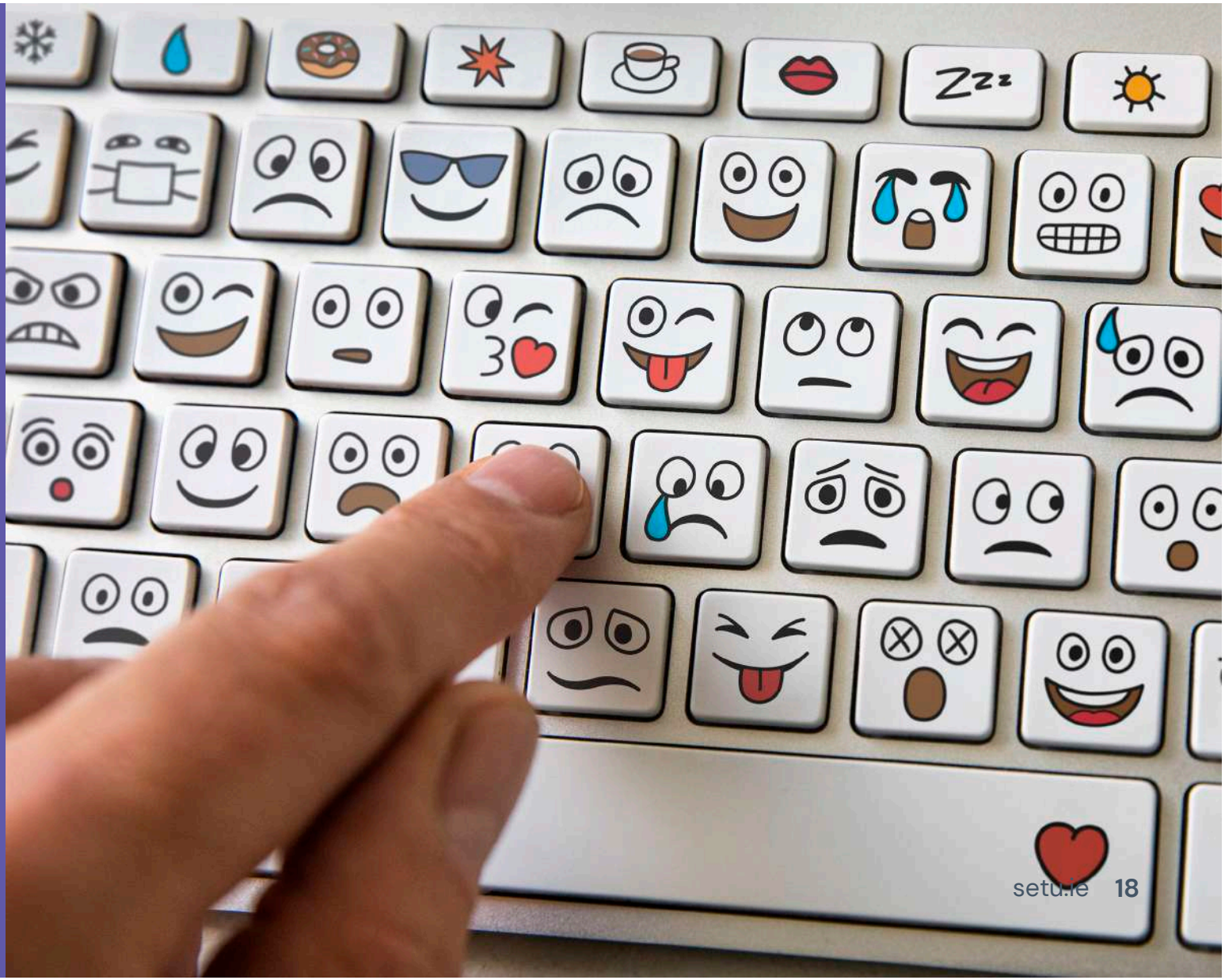


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- Study groups
- Podcasts and video interviews with students and staff
- Coaching
- Emoji communications

Emoji surveys



Trivial?

How effective can emoji surveys really be in addressing these issues?

Emoji surveys



Laura McGibney (SETU Online Engagement) 2:53 PM

Happy Friday everyone 😀👋

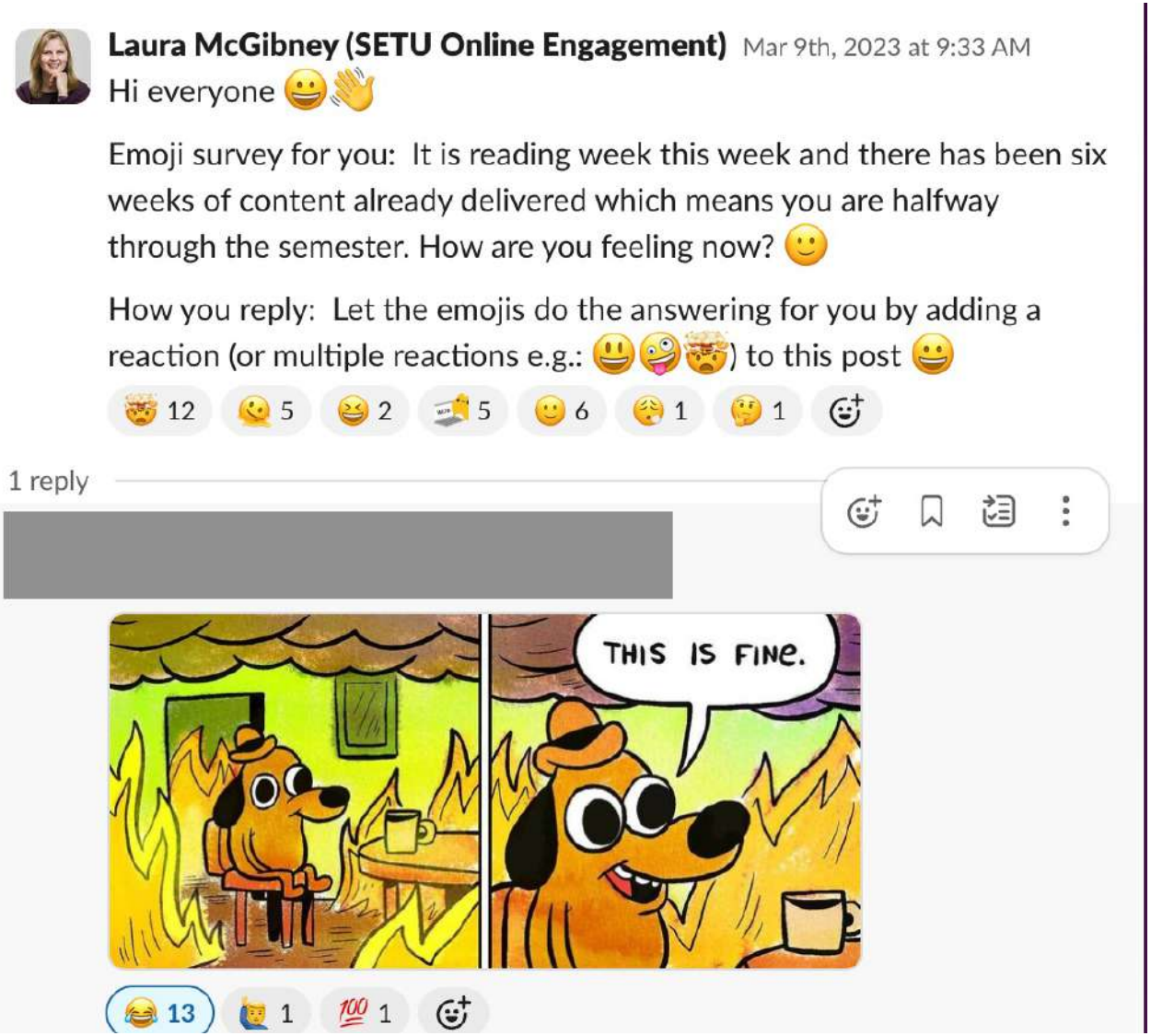
I'd like to introduce you to my emoji surveys 😁

The question is: How has week one gone for you?

How you reply: Let the emojis do the answering for you by adding a reaction (or multiple reactions e.g.: 😃🤪🤯) to this post 😀

😊 18 🙌 2 😏 4 👌 6 😬 1 🥲 4 👷 1 😅 1

🤪 1 🤓 1 🤖 1 👍 2 ⌚ 1 👀 1


Laura McGibney (SETU Online Engagement) Mar 9th, 2023 at 9:33 AM
Hi everyone
Emoji survey for you: It is reading week this week and there has been six weeks of content already delivered which means you are halfway through the semester. How are you feeling now?
How you reply: Let the emojis do the answering for you by adding a reaction (or multiple reactions e.g.:) to this post
12
5
2
5
6
1
1
1 reply
THIS IS FINE.
13
1
1

Emoji surveys (same group later in programme)



Laura McGibney (SETU Online Engagement) Oct 13th, 2023 at 10:20 AM

Hi all 😀👋

Time for an emoji survey - How are you doing at the moment?

Let the emojis do the answering for you by adding a reaction (or multiple reactions e.g.: 😀🤪🤯) to this post 😀
(you can also add comments to this thread if you like) (edited)

🤯 8 🫠 16 3 😴 3 😵 5 ⌛ 5 🍳 1 😜 1

🤓 2 😶 1 1

Laura McGibney (SETU Online Engagement) Oct 13th, 2023 at 10:20 AM

Hi all 😀👋

Time for an emoji survey - How are you doing at the moment?

Let the emojis do the answering for you by adding a reaction (or multiple reactions e.g.: 😃🤪🥵) to this post 😀
(you can also add comments to this thread if you like) (edited)

🤯 8 🫠 16 🧈 3 🥵 3 😎 5 ⏳ 5 🍳 1 🤪 1 🤓 2 😬 1 🦍 1

3 replies

Laura McGibney (SETU Online Engagement) Oct 13th, 2023 at 4:07 PM

Thanks for all the responses. Exploding, melting and tired heads are normal at this stage of the programme as are most of the others but there are two new emojis to me: 🍳 and 🦍 - I am intrigued 🤔😀

Hopefully knowing that others are feeling the same helps. You are currently at the end of week 5 which means this is where things are hotting up and time management might be getting a bit more tricky. However it also means that next week will be your halfway point for this semester.

To get through the tricky times, try to keep focussed on what you **are** doing, break things down into smaller goals and tick them off as you go and use the supports available to you.
Kieron is trialling "online study time" (see previous post and join the channel #onlinestudytime if you are interested)
and as always, you can arrange a Zoom call with me 🙂

❤️ 1

[redacted]

```
SELECT count(1) as todo_list
FROM HDIP2023
WHERE done IS NULL
```

:))

A bit overvelmed with amount of material this half. My eyes a bit tired as most of the day it is a screen time due to work and then study. I try to ensure that I take breaks from screen.

However I still enjoying the course a lot 🤩

😅 1

Laura McGibney (SETU Online Engagement) Oct 13th, 2023 at 4:32 PM

[redacted]

It's really hard going if your job has you looking at screens all day and then you are back on them to study. It's a good plan to take breaks from the screen, particularly for a while after work. Ideally doing something that gives your eyes a break (like going for a walk and looking at things in the distance) can make a difference. Also maybe consider shorter study stints and where possible, listen to the lecture as a podcast (can also be done while walking, cooking, cleaning etc.).

❤️ 1

Heart – emotional connection



- Emotional connection
- Feeling of being “seen”
- Express how they feel
- Help normalize vulnerability “I feel stupid”
- Emotional solidarity “we are in it together”

Learner quote: *“Nice to know I’m not the only one struggling”*

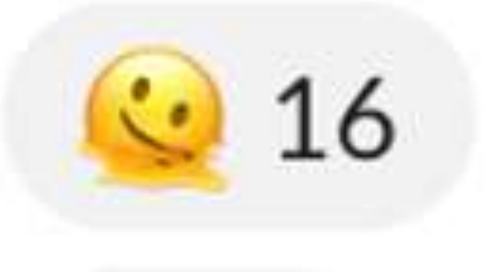


Mind – reflection and awareness



- Prompts internal reflection
- Fosters self awareness
- Often leads to a moment of mindfulness
- Can stop unhealthy thought patterns
- Encourages growth-oriented thinking

Learner quote: *“Feels like we are all in this together”*



Slack – dedicated, intentional space for dialogue



- Allows for asynchronous communication
- One stop shop
- No pressure to explain in words
- Comfortable environment
- Group validation

Learner quote: *“There are days when the chat and support in Slack has kept me going”*



Emoji surveys

Enable the **heart** (emotional connection) and **mind** (reflection and awareness) to be expressed in a shared and intentional space **Slack**

Why it works

- Dedicated space and resource
- Informal space is less intimidating than LMS (Learning Management Systems) forums
- Life coaching supports autonomy and self regulation
- CoI framework is designed for social presence not just content
- **Intentional design**

Student voice

Over 60% of students find the Online Engagement Advisor's role on the course essential with a further 20% finding the role useful.

"The online engagement advisor helped greatly in bringing students together online to create a well-connected online community."

"Just to say your input was much appreciated. In a previous existence as a student such wrap around services were not so readily available. It's wonderful to know that such support is available and when your support is needed I will most definitely call on you. I did look at the videos on time management and making a schedule on the WIT website before starting the course. A gem of a reminder of what needs to be done to keep the show on the road. Thank you."

Virtual spaces can’t fully replace in person contact but intentional design and coaching can build real connection and resilience

Student voice

"My Time Management Experience: I was at point in my course work where I was struggling, to find the balancing act of work, life, college and Covid restrictions. I had no motivation and was contemplating the possibility of deferring as a solution. Laura's timing was perfect, her introduction to time management was super. I made an appointment to zoom with her to discuss how could I get through it. We spent time working on my schedule. By the end of our session we had created a very doable schedule. I went away happy and keen to have structured timetable to follow. It worked, all my projects were handed in on time."

Steps being taken to expand these supports to reach more learners

- Development of Tutors “Life etc” website to circulate to more students in SETU
- Beginning to work with undergrads in the Department of Computing and Maths
- Interested in connecting with people doing similar work ☺

laura.mcgibney@setu.ie

Thank you:

Dr Laura Widger
Mr Eamonn de Leastar

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Laura McGibney
Online Engagement Advisor, South East Technological University. BSc (Hons) in Co...

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