

College: Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology
Location: Letterfrack, County Galway, IRELAND
Practice: The Furniture College at Letterfrack
 Improving design and the use of technology in Ireland’s furniture industry, and boosting the local economy

<i>Year Started</i>	1989
<i>Budget IE</i>	£1 million (staff salaries included)
<i>Program Participants</i>	85
<i>College FTE</i>	104
<i>Target Sector</i>	Furniture
<i>Target Population</i>	160 students by 2002
<i>Staff Size</i>	3 FT staff, 20 PT staff
<i>Structure</i>	Satellite campus of Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology
<i>Key Outcomes</i>	New businesses started Improvements in productivity in existing companies Expansion of new economic activity in region

Introduction

Letterfrack is a small, poor community located in the scenic but depressed mountains on the western seaboard of Ireland’s County Galway. Connemara West Plc., a community-owned and managed rural development company in Letterfrack, approached the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) in 1986 about creating a furniture college at Letterfrack to help both the industry and the area. Connemara West (CW) chose the furniture industry for the following reasons:

- Importance to the nation (600 companies and 5,000 employees)
- High incidence of local ownership in an

economy dominated by branch plants

- Low use of technology and design in the industry

CW believed that better educated workers could make the industry more competitive, and that furniture could become an economic development niche for the community.

Community Background

Prior to the formation of Connemara West in 1971, the area had poor roads and transportation, inadequate public services, and infertile land. Its population then was about 1,800—but dropping as

Program focus	Sector specific	Economic condition	Economic base			Target populations
			Mfg	Agr	Svc	
Technical education	Yes	Distressed	N/A	N/A	N/A	Small firms, youth/students

<i>Service Area</i>	<i>County Galway</i>
<i>Total Population</i>	189,000
<i>Median Household Income</i>	N/A
<i>% Below Poverty Level</i>	N/A
<i>% Unemployment Rate</i>	N/A
<i>% Minority Population</i>	N/A
<i>% Rural Population</i>	N/A
<i>% High School Graduates</i>	N/A
<i>% College Graduates</i>	N/A

young people quickly left. Very few of its young people graduated, from secondary school, much less went on to third-level education, and the unemployment rate was 22 percent (according to local officials, the true rate was probably closer to 50 percent).

The counties of Galway and its neighbor Mayo (which make up the service area of GMIT) had a combined population of just over 300,000 in 1996. The largest city and economic hub, Galway had a population of 57,000 people. The per capita income for the two counties in 1997 was at about 91 percent of the overall Irish average, but with large disparities within the two-county region.

Ireland's furniture industry is located mostly in the northern half of Ireland, particularly in Navan, Monaghan, and Dublin, but it represents the third largest industrial employer in County Galway. The sector is composed of relatively small companies producing almost exclusively for domestic consumption. Most of the nation's 600 companies are small and managed by their owners—entrepreneurs with some expertise in manufacturing, but little in management or marketing. Indeed, Ireland's furniture sector, though important in the domestic economy, is not a high-growth or even a very competitive industry. It is not noted for design quality (few companies employ professional designers), and it lacks the elements of a cluster that produce synergy—interdependent companies, social infrastructure, flow of information and innovation, and sense of common purpose and vision. Yet it is considered quite important because of its significant scale and high degree of local ownership in an economy that is heavily dominated by foreign-owned branch plants.

Program Description

The program began with a plan to establish a furniture college for youth. The goals were to expand economic opportunities for youth, stimulate the local economy, and invigorate the Irish furniture industry by infusing creativity, design, and entrepreneurial energy into the industry through these newly trained young workers. The focus on furniture builds on programs started in 1980, when the Irish Development Authority helped purchase a number of craft centers, including one for wood-working and furniture restoration. Two years later the Irish Youth Employment Agency (YEA) established a craft training center in Letterfrack to generate interest in, and provide potential school leavers with, skills for the construction industry. In 1986 support from YEA ended, and Connemara West decided to expand into programs that might lead to employment as well as improved performance in Ireland's larger furniture production industry.

Consequently, Connemara West partnered with GMIT to develop a high-quality, two-year tertiary (post-secondary) program in furniture design and manufacture. GMIT certifies the program and is responsible for academic content and quality, as well as management in cooperation with CWC. The goal of this expanded program is to make the college a nationally, and perhaps internationally, renowned center for skills in modern furniture design and technology. Specifically, its National Certificate Program aims to:

- Provide for the local community, region, and nation a base for the development of the Irish furniture industry
- Create a market awareness of quality furniture made in Ireland
- Enable its graduates to contribute to and influence the design and manufacture of modern furniture in ways that are innovative, creative and responsive to social and economic need
- Provide the seed ground for the development of an indigenous approach to furniture making and enhance the influence of Irish design

In 1995 the Furniture College added a Bachelor of Science (BS) degree program to accommodate those who wanted higher-level skills and credentials. The BS degree has a different aim—"to equip students with the theoretical and practical tech-

niques which will enable them to function as professionals within the furniture manufacturing industry.” Requirements for admission are a National Certificate or Diploma with distinction or merit in furniture, or demonstration or evidence by mature applicants of required academic skills and relevant experience. Bachelor’s degree students are additionally required to complete a four-month work placement during the summer following the first year.

Governance and Facilities

The Furniture College operates under the umbrella of GMIT, which develops and certifies the programs. Faculty members are employees of GMIT, although some employees of the Furniture Technology Center, located at the college, also teach and work with students. The college is operated by eight full-time staff persons, including librarians, administrators, and furniture technologists, as well as a panel of 20 part-time specialist lecturers, including some from Europe’s most prestigious schools.

GMIT rents facilities from Connemara West in a renovated, abandoned boys’ reformatory. It has well-equipped workshops and design studios with special areas for laminating, veneering, bending, upholstery, assembly, computer-aided design, graphics, and office management. The library contains more than 2,000 volumes, videos, and an electronic information center with specialized software and computer-based access to all of the resources and courses at GMIT. A bus operates between the two institutions.

As the college developed, staff saw an opportunity to conduct research and development for industry and more directly diffuse into the sector the technologies being taught to students. Consequently, CW and GMIT established the Furniture Technology Center in 1997. It is located at Letterfrack, managed by CW, and advised by GMIT and a group of furniture companies. The center, which is currently staffed by four full-time furniture technologists, a part-time senior technologist, an administrator shared with the college, and a half-time consultant from Denmark, offers technical consultation; technical information; courses, seminars, and technology demonstrations; and research and development.

Clients

The program draws students from all over. Only 24 percent are from County Galway, 69 percent are

from other parts of Ireland, and 7 percent from outside of Ireland. Most students learned about the program at their previous school (53 percent), but advertisements were also an effective method for reaching students (19.4 percent), as was family influence (14.5 percent). Applicants to the two-year program are expected to have a good grasp of math and science. Previous work in sciences, computing, engineering, technical drawing, and art are favored qualifications. The minimum entry requirement is successful completion of five “leaving certificate” subjects including math and English or Irish. Admission is based on a combination of points given for six best subjects and points given for demonstrations of interest and ability to work with the materials, which must be presented in a personal interview.

Sources of Revenue

The program began with startup funds from the European Union’s Social Fund. Today the main source of revenue is from state and public funds. However, in 1998 the Minister of State at the Department of the Marine and Natural Resources announced a grant of three million pounds toward the capital costs of further development of the college. In June 1999 the minister announced an additional 750,000 pounds for building and refurbishing.

Outcomes

On Students

The college has had a remarkable record to date in attracting and selecting good students. Applicants far outnumber openings, and the fact that students are drawn from all over Ireland and abroad is testimony to the reputation of the college and the community. The new bachelors’ degree program gives students who earn certificates an opportunity to continue their education, and many now do. Ninety percent of graduates to date are employed; 15 percent have started their own businesses. Students have won numerous national and European awards for their designs. By 2000, the program had 85 students, and 2002 enrollment is expected to reach 160.

On the Industry

It will take time for the college to build productive links with industry, largely because Ireland’s

furniture companies are not well organized. The Furniture College and Furniture Technology Center and the new skilled workers and artisans, however, may eventually change industry attributes and attitudes. The full impact will only be known as more students move out into industry and into management. They already have started many new firms, expanding the industry base.

On the Region

Thus far, the effects on the local economy are mainly attributable to the college itself rather than to the students it produces. Nearly all students surveyed expect to leave the immediate area. That fact is not surprising, since a low proportion of the students came from the county, there are few local companies to employ graduates, and young people often seek employment where there are more social amenities. By expanding the employment base, the population of young people, and the visibility of the village, the college has given the community hope and a basis for economic growth. As the new Furniture Technology Center grows, it also may create opportunities for new businesses in the Connemara region. Nevertheless, there are immediate effects on the community that are quite obvious:

- For the first time, there is regularly scheduled bus service to Galway
- The average age of the community dropped from 57 to 27, and with new sports events, music, and recreational activities, there are more incentives for young people to remain in an area that had been losing an average of 70 percent of its youth each year
- Housing has been renovated and improved to accommodate the growing student body, and the area is now more appealing to tourists
- New full-time and part-time teaching and administrative jobs at the college, as well as new service jobs, have been created to cater to the student body
- Isolated elderly people who rent to students feel more secure

Strengths, Challenges, and Replicability

The college is continuing to grow as its reputation spreads. There is no lack of applicants. Indeed, the capacity of the school and the community are the

college's limiting factors. The college is planning to form its own local furniture company in the community, and, in the near future, CW may consider establishing a business incubator to give students a chance to share start-up risks and establish markets. The college has recently started a new furniture restoration program, which may create new local business opportunities.

The prospects for the industry may depend on the degree to which it becomes a full partner with the college and technology center. At present, an informal partnership exists between the college and the community development organization—with strong industry input on behalf of the furniture companies. A key challenge will be to convince the Irish furniture industry of the benefits of placing more of the production in the region, given the expertise of the college, center, and students. The college's good relationship and reputation with industry are a strong start for meeting this challenge. As industry demand grows, the college may also need to consider formalizing its partnership with the community development organization, to ensure a sustainable foundation for future growth.

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