



From the margins to mainstream - a universally designed and inclusive approach to access and participation in UCD

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Abstract

This paper describes UCD - University for all – an initiative to move access from the margins to the mainstream. It outlines the implementation of a universally designed and inclusive approach to access and participation, and charts progress to support to inclusion of under-represented students. The paper grounds this initiative in the associated access policies, summaries the relevant academic literature, describes the actions and progress across key institutional dimensions, and shares the learning thus far.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the higher education sector in Ireland has endeavoured to respond to a more diverse student population, and to open opportunities to under-represented groups, including students with disabilities, adults, those from communities experiencing low progression, part-time/flexible learners, further education award holders, members of the Traveller community, and refugees/asylum seekers.

The vision for access in higher education is that the student population will reflect the diversity of Ireland's population¹. This is a key element of the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011) and the HEA *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019* (2015). This access policy document sets specific targets to increase the participation by target under-represented cohorts². Crucially, it also identifies integrating and mainstreaming access as a key goal. Acknowledging the priority attached to the establishment of access infrastructure in higher education institutions (HEIs), the HEA states that “the next step is, to integrate the principle of equity of access more fully into the everyday life of the HEIs so that it permeates all faculties and departments, and is not marginalised as the responsibility of the designated access office” (HEA, 2015, p. 25).

Internationally, inclusion and mainstreaming have also been a consideration: Education for All (EFA) urges the development of inclusive education systems (UNESCO, 2010). The Bologna Process is aligning system components including the implementation of a two-cycle system, credit ranges, quality assurance, student mobility, and the social dimension, though the slow pace of implementation of this latter component is recorded (European Commission, EACEA, & Eurydice, 2015).

There is also an increasing academic literature on the need for changed institutional practice as a key feature in ensuring access and participation of under-represented

¹ <http://hea.ie/policy/national-access-plan/>

² students with disabilities, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, mature, and part-time undergraduate students, and further education award holders.

groups in HE (Bamber & Tett, 2001; Callaghan, 2000; Clarke, 2003; EAN, 1999; Gorard et al., 2006; HEA, 2006c; Osborne et al., 2007; Skilbeck & O'Connell, 2000; Verbeurgt, 2014; Wagner, 2002; Woodrow, 1999). Some studies specifically point to the impact of institutional culture on widening participation and suggest that developing awareness of its influence on these issues is a prerequisite to creating a more inclusive institution (Greenbank, 2004, 2007 Wray, 2013). Awareness and understanding of access by leaders also arises as crucial to the development of inclusive education (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002; Foucault, 1972; Pasque, 2010; Pasque & Rex, 2010; Bourdieu et al., 1994; Burke, 2012; Butcher et al., 2012; ECU, 2014).

Frameworks to support inclusion, and embed and mainstream equality of access in higher education are also evident (Baker et al., 2004; Blythman & Orr, 2002; Bohle-Carbondell & Dailey-Hebert, 2015; Clayton-Pedersen et al., 2009; Duvokot, 1999; EUA, 2008; Garvey & Treanor, 2011; Hill & Hatt, 2012; Jones & Thomas, 2005; Kelly, 2017; Layer et al., 2003; Lynch, 2005; May & Bridger, 2010; Schroeder, 2012; Shaw et al., 2007; Thomas, 2011; Thomas et al., 2005, 2009; Thomas & Tight, 2011; Tuitt, 2016; Univeristés du Maghreb: Enseignement inclusif, 2014; Williams et al., 2005; Woodrow & Thomas, 2002). Among the areas highlighted are institutional vision, leadership, culture, structures, staff development, policies surrounding admissions, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, student supports, in addition to targets, data collection, and resource allocation.

Nationally and internationally, there is evidence of agreement on the need to integrate the principle of equity of access into the everyday operations of higher education institutions. However, the implementation of this goal offers significant challenges. As Osborne, Gallacher and Crossan (2007, p. 10) observe, "it is not simply a question of the preparedness of students for the HE experience, though clearly many are not prepared for the demands of a still largely inflexible system, but it is also the degree to which institutions respond to the challenges of diversity".

UCD's approach to mainstreaming the principle of equity access

UCD is well placed to address the issue of mainstreaming the principle of equity of access, and has a long and proud history of inclusion and diversification. Cardinal John Henry Newman founded the University in 1854 to provide access to higher education for the Catholic population: access is in UCD's DNA. Today, the University is pioneering the creation of an inclusive campus and is to the forefront in development of systematic approach to mainstreaming access and participation in Ireland. Thus far, the journey to move access and participation from the margins to a mainstream concern has been both incremental and iterative. Progress has been made across some key institutional dimensions, however, this is a complex task; a broad and challenging agenda that requires both institutional and individual change (May & Bridger, 2010). Such change impacts all facets of University life, but when fully

achieved, it has the power to transform the institution (Thomas, 2011a). UCD's journey can be categorised thus:

- **Phase 1** addressed issues of underpinning strategy and structures needed to build a foundation on which to develop a mainstream and inclusive approach.
- **Phase 2** harnessed the commitment and enthusiasm of University staff.
- **Phase 3** is building on progress and focusing on the creation of 'ripple effect' to extend mainstreaming and inclusive practice throughout the campus.

Phase 1 – Building the Foundations

Phase 1 addressed foundations on which to build an inclusive approach to access and participation, and focused on underpinning components:

University Strategy & Structure

The University's strategy explicitly commits to the University becoming "a pre-eminent diverse and inclusive scholarly community of students, faculty and staff" (UCD, 2015). A fully inclusive university entails all aspects, including the educational experience, student supports and facilities, as well as the built and technological environments, being designed around the needs of all students (Kelly, 2017). Such an approach ensures that access is embedded and mainstreamed throughout the University and, as a result, is promoted, supported and the responsibility of all (Kelly, 2017). Fundamental to this approach is the belief that equality of access incorporates both entry to the University and access to an inclusive learning environment, designed for the full range of students, rather than a perceived notion of a typical, average or so-called 'traditional' student.

The University established the UCD Widening Participation (UWP) Committee. Originally formed five years ago, and re-established in 2016 under amended Terms of Reference, the WP Committee offers the formal university-wide mechanism to oversee, monitor and promote progress towards the achievement of the University's objective of diversifying the student profile to reflect that of general population. The Committee is now aligned with the University's academic programme structures: this alignment constitutes a critical structural change that ensures equality of access and participation is embedded in the academic structures.

A student data system that captures widening participation data, including entrant category, progression and completion data for all equity groups, is also in place. The University also established key performance indicators: by 2020 it is intended that 33% of undergraduates will be drawn from target equity groups (HEA, 2015). UCD recorded 29% in 2017.

Specialised services for students with disabilities, adult students, part-time students and those from communities experiencing disadvantage were reconfigured to reflect the *student lifecycle* model, i.e. preparing for and entering higher education, graduating successfully, and progressing their career, postgraduate study and personal goals. Services, which had been developed separately in response to the particular needs of discrete student cohorts, are now consolidated and located in the Access & Lifelong Learning Centre. The overarching mission of this Centre is to be the 'bridge to inclusion' offering connections, engagement and building relationships between communities that are 'distant' from higher education, and the University community.

Built and Technical Infrastructure

The University's building programme addresses all related issues including accessibility requirements. Accessibility issues that concern existing built infrastructure were identified and prioritised through a campus accessibility audit. The development of accessible signage is underway also, including information and orientation signage at main entrances, accessible wayfinding to principal destinations, and identification signage at principal destination, along with building identification. UCD student accommodation developed a system to prioritise and reserve accessible accommodation for students with particular requirements, such as students with disabilities. Work is also underway to ensure the accessibility of the technical infrastructure. In 2014 IT Services examined key infrastructure aspects, including the accessibility of IT services, the assistive technology supports needs, and the navigation systems on campus.

Phase 2 – Harnessing Commitment

This Phase harnessed the commitment and enthusiasm shown by members of the academic community. Principle actions include:

Academic Integration

UCD is also moving from parallel structures and processes to one where all programme-related matters are integrated with the University's academic governance structures. The Terms of Reference of governing Programme Boards assign responsibility to Programme Deans for all programme-related issues, including teaching, learning, assessment, and widening participation.

The University is implementing a series of practical mainstreaming actions to ensure that the needs of students from under-represented student groups are integrated within academic planning and delivery processes. The number of under-graduate entry routes has been expanded significantly. A range of alternative entry pathways are now in place, which facilitate the study requirements of under-represented student cohorts i.e. students with disabilities, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, mature,

and part-time undergraduate students, and further education award holders. The University's enrolment planning process, which establishes the student intake across various student groups, including home students, EU students, International, categories, now includes under-represented student cohorts.

UCD established a curriculum review process to enhance the coherence of the taught programme portfolio. Teams leading this review were provided with inclusion-related training and development covering embedding the principles of Universal Design. The principles of Universal Design principles are now embedded in the UCD Professional Certificate in University Teaching. UCD Access & Lifelong Learning has published the *Universal Design for Curriculum Design: Case Studies from University College Dublin* (Padden, O'Connor, & Barrett, 2017)³, which showcases practical ideas for incorporating inclusive design in pedagogical practices.

University Access courses in Science, Engineering & Agriculture, Social Sciences & Law, and Arts & Humanities are now mainstreamed, and form part of the suite of programmes offered by these academic schools.

Access to part-time education has been traditionally associated with UCD Adult Education. As part of the University's commitment to mainstreaming, this provision has been reimagined as UCD *Open Learning* and this innovative approach has resulted in opening undergraduate modules to those who wish to study on a part-time basis. UCD *Open Learning* is mainstreamed and offered by 25 Academic Schools.

Phase 3 – From 'ripple effect' to University for All

This current phase is building on earlier developments by focusing on the creation of a 'ripple effect' to extend mainstreaming and inclusive practice throughout the campus. *Mainstreaming Champions*, recognised as advocates to support inclusive practice, help spread awareness and enlist support within their spheres of influence to extend knowledge and develop understanding. These *Champions* play a critical role in 'moving the needle' locally and providing the necessary 'scaffolding' to inform the implementation process and extend inclusive practice to the wider university community.

Learning thus far

UCD is on a journey to move access from the margins to the mainstream through the development of a universally designed and inclusive approach. Mainstreaming access in higher education has been a policy objective for some time (HEA, 2004, 2008, 2015). HEIs are slowly evolving into inclusive institutions, though progress remains patchy. Kelly (2017) found early signs of mainstreaming and embedding equality of access, but she also found an absence of institution-wide policies and practices to

³ <http://www.ucd.ie/all/supports/informationforstaff/stafftraininganduniversaldesign/>

foster and inculcate inclusion and diversity. Developing inclusive institutions is dependent on a number of factors. Chief among these is the priority afforded by the institution to this objective, allied to the support of senior leaders. A shared understanding is a necessary foundation for persuading, developing ownership and buy-in. The benefits for all students need to be articulated. Opportunities to share examples of inclusive practice are crucial, as is building and maintaining momentum. Institutional processes and structures need to be fit-for-purpose. A series of mainstreaming actions is warranted across key institutional dimensions. The Inclusive Design Framework proposed by Kelly (2017) offers a useful starting point and highlights four such priority dimensions, i.e. 1) institutional vision and priority, 2) organisational arrangements, 3) teaching, learning and assessment, and 4) research and data collection.

From a policy perspective, moving access from the margins to the mainstream is but one issue, one challenge, one priority, on the higher education landscape. As such, it needs to be marshalled, facilitated and promoted on a sector-wide basis. The pockets of inclusive institutional practice require nurturing, and embedding throughout the higher education sector. Such a strategic approach would enable tangible progress towards the national access policy objective “to integrate the principle of equity of access more fully into the everyday life of the HEIs so that it permeates all faculties and departments, and is not marginalised as the responsibility of the designated access office” (HEA, 2015, p. 25).

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