An Analysis of the Implementation of National Access Policy to Integrate and Mainstream Equality of Access in Irish Universities - through the Lens of Inclusive Design

Introduction

This is a study of the implementation of national access policy to integrate and mainstream equality of access in Irish universities - through the lens of Inclusive Design. Situated in the field of Inclusive Design for Education, it investigates the implementation of the national policy objective to

> integrate the principle of equity of access more fully into the everyday life of the Higher Education Institutions (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).

Two definitions are central to understanding in this study. 'Access' is understood as the participation of under-represented students beyond entry pathways, to include access to an inclusive learning environment, where pedagogical practices, student services, and operational elements are designed to meet the needs of a diverse student body (NQAI, 2003; HEA, 2008; Lee, 2010; Burke, 2012). Under- represented students typically include those with disabilities, mature students, those from communities experiencing low progression, part-time/flexible learners, further education award holders and members of the Traveller community (HEA, 2015). '**Inclusive design**' grew out of the Universal Design movement, and places emphasis on inclusion **and** adaptation of education systems to individual differences (Rose & Meyer 2002; Gordon & O'Leary 2015; Goodman 2016; Treviranus 2016).

This research study further developed this definition for application in higher education. In this context, 'inclusive design' is understood as design for full range of human diversity, rather than perceived notion of typical, average or so called 'traditional' student. This approach applies to all aspects of higher education (HE), including built and technological environments, educational experience, student supports, and ensures that they are designed **inclusively**, to meet needs of all. In so doing, access is infused and embedded throughout HE, and is promoted, supported; the responsibility of **all**.

Ireland has a well-developed policy approach to access (HEA, 2004, 2008, 2015); nevertheless, implementation has yet to be fully realised (HEA, 2006, 2010, 2014). Over the past decade, the higher education sector in Ireland has endeavoured to respond to a more diverse student population, to create inclusive learning environments, and also to open learning opportunities to underrepresented groups. The sector is no longer universally seen as the sole preserve of an elite group (Walsh, 2014). **Institutional compacts** are now the means by which national policy targets are monitored: one of which concerns **Participation, Equality of Access, and Lifelong Learning (HEA, 2013)**.

Research Design

Drawing on the work of Van Horn and Van Meter (2009), the views of the leaders of Ireland's seven universities were gathered. Twentyone leaders, including University Presidents/Provosts, University Registrars/Chief Academic Officers, and Student Union Presidents were invited to participate, of which nineteen (90.5%), agreed to be interviewed. Five University Presidents participated and a further two nominated representatives. Four University Registrars took part, and an additional three designated representatives. Six of the seven Student Union Presidents took part.

A semi-structured interview approach was adopted, using a mixture of question formats (Robson, 2002; Dillman, Smyth and Christian, 2009). Participants were assured that their anonymity would be protected (Sieber, 1992).

Findings

In general, this study found early signs of mainstreaming and embedding equality of access, but it also found an absence of institution-wide policies and practices to foster and inculcate inclusion and diversity. More detailed findings are set below.

Institutional Priority

All university strategic plans contained a commitment to equality of access, as well as specific targets for the equity groups, as specified by the HEA. While strategic plans represent the institutional aspirations, they also arguably signal the organisation's intent and, in this context, they conveyed both the institutional perspective and established equality of access as a stated institutional priority. However, the leader interviews revealed that the equality objectives that featured in these strategic plans were not among the named key university priorities.

Twelve different priorities were mentioned:

1. educational experience
2. research
3. international recruitment
4. engagement
5. enterprise and innovation
6. non-traditional students
7. ranking
8. campus development
9. resources
10. Irish language
11. curriculum development
12. institutional autonomy

When these were ranked by the number of mentions in the interview transcripts, University Presidents identified educational experience and research as the main priorities, while Registrars named research and resources, and SU Presidents were unanimous in their view that increasing the number of international students was the top priority. It is noteworthy that each interviewee received, in advance, a written invitation explaining the nature of this

study, in addition to copy of the interview questionnaire: thus leaders had time to reflect on the information sought and the emphasis they wished to give. Hence, it might be assumed that interviewees would frame their responses to more favourably reflect the researcher's area of inquiry. Based on these responses, this does not appear to be the case.

Universities operate in a challenging world of growing demand for higher education, public policy emphasis on access for underrepresented groups, and significant resourcing constraints (RTE, 2013b, 2013a). A balance is required between competing needs, priorities and opportunities. Some university leaders seemed reluctant to be seen to lead on equality of access; as one Registrar remarked, 'we would not want to particularly brand ourselves as the university for non-traditional entrants because, actually, that stigmatises non-traditional entrants and actually makes it harder for them to progress'. Were all universities to proactively prioritise access and inclusion, the challenge and potential for stigmatisation could be diminished. The Provost of Trinity College Dublin, Professor Prendergast, interviewed on RTE radio by Seán O'Rourke said

> I believe everybody should have access to a university education if it's what they want, if it suits their talents, access opens up university education for all. I firmly believe that: regardless of means (RTE, 2013b).

Support of Senior University Leaders

In general, university leaders were favourably disposed to positive discrimination; University Presidents and student leaders stated their support most strongly, while Registrars' support was qualified and more nuanced. Many leaders emphasised the importance of diversity, ability and the context in which learning was achieved, identifying a need to

> level the playing field in regard to using the Leaving Certificate as a criterion for entry

Being exposed to the particular circumstances of people or communities helps to sensitise perceptions and responses, as demonstrated by one University President, who was well disposed to positive discrimination, and rated that support at the highest level, saying,

> It mightn't have been so high before I became more aware of it. I've seen what the kids can do, so it's… I've learnt

However, some leaders expressed fears that positive discrimination could lead to tokenism, and ideally, it should not be needed. Arguably, university leaders are central to their institutions' mission, endeavour, and ultimate success. Their personal commitment to equality is important, and

Their beliefs and values act as a catalyst to subsequent leadership on equality and diversity (ECU, 2014, p. 3).

This current study found that responsibility for the implementation of access policy is assigned at the most senior organisational level. Typically, these senior academic executives hold the position of Registrar/Chief Academic Officer/Vice-President for Academic Affairs, Vice-President of Student Experience. It is noteworthy that access was understood and interpreted differently. The institutional arrangements tended to mirror the distinction drawn between part-time students, and other target groups. Part-time students were not generally regarded by the University leaders as part of access provision which may point to a misunderstanding of the breadth of national access policy (HEA, 2004, 2008, 2015), or the overall status of these students, who do not attract state supports. Mixed messages emanate from policy makers regarding the importance, priority and funding of flexible provision:

> By 2016, full equality of provision and support will have been achieved in higher education for all students, regardless of time, place or pace of study (HEA, 2012, p. 33).

Universities are increasingly encouraging academic staff to support the participation of non-traditional students. Many leaders offered examples in areas such as, creating supportive environment, the role of teaching and learning, development of policies and guidelines, and the role of specialist staff. In addition, the work of university committees (e.g. equality), participation targets, and the personal commitment of staff, also featured in the examples offered. The impact of equality legislation was evident in the range of examination accommodations identified for students with disabilities. The role of teaching and learning and associated schemes such as, teaching and learning awards, and staff development funding, were all considered to foster innovative practice and build competencies. One university leader, however, observed that changes in the teaching domain are

> more of a slower shift in approach, and everything to do with pedagogy has to be that way … So that has to be a developmental piece of work.

While some leaders identified examples of inclusive practice, expressed broad satisfaction with the progress made, and acknowledged staff commitment, a systematic coherent approach to inclusive teaching and learning was not evidenced. Embedding inclusive practices is not without it challenges, as recounted by one Registrar who said,

> That kind of thing would be done at a department level. The departments are, I think like most universities, they're very autonomous here. So, they design their own programmes and they design their own teaching and assessment strategies.

The competing missions were alluded to by a Student Union President who said,

I think academic staff may even feel under pressure in a lot of third level institutions in Ireland, to focus more on research rather than around the students.

University Processes

The development of access strategies shows early signs of mainstreaming, with some 'joined up thinking' emerging. Examples offered included, the importance attributed to the development of access culture, which is evident when

> the leader of the organisation keeps talking about it

rethinking organisational design to enable

> learning support services [to be] more widely available on a needs basis, as I say rather than on a category basis

or to

> treat students as students and we need to be thinking of every student as an individual with individual needs

Some universities have begun to

> ensure that there has been a rule run across it [policy] in terms of diversity and the equality agenda and that the policy aligns with it

Institutions too are working with their academic staff, who are

> briefed on what is meant by an inclusive learning environment, or an inclusive teaching environment, an inclusive assessment environment, [which] promotes that culture and that awareness within the

departments right across the university

However another said

> You said in terms of inclusive design and that's something that we have not really even talked about a lot, it's something in the background and occasionally the words are used but I don't think the reality of what that means across programmes and pedagogy has really sunk in yet. The big difficulty will be persuading people that it's not a resource-intensive change, it's a change and that takes effort but it's not more work to deliver in steady state

The access objectives articulated by leaders underpinned the early signs of an institution-wide approach and included six themes:

1. participation targets
2. quality learning experience
3. admissions systems
4. changing the perception of the university
5. creating a diverse campus
6. financial resources

Leaders were concerned that students were not only admitted, but also enabled to progress, and some thought that access students required

> more one to one support, more input, more accommodations, if people are going to succeed

A more inclusive perspective was also enunciated by one University President who said,

> The overarching first goal of the university is to provide an outstanding student experience for every one of our students.

A question that arises is how to ensure that such a mission is realised for all students, particularly

> given the fact that academic staff, to be honest, are promoted on, you know, research, teaching and more often research, obviously, the impact on having to cater for students who are unwell or can't take exams or need special accommodations, which is not measured within the university.

These sentiments point to an apparent contradiction between institutional ambition, and the activity that is measured and regarded. Universities, too, identified a need to effect change in how their institutions are perceived, as part of their access approach. These institutions understandably guard their brands, celebrate the success of high achieving alumni, publicise the pioneering work of their researchers, and mark their contribution to wider society. The task of presenting the university as a place for all is some way off, though some encouraging evidence was forthcoming. Specifically, the related issue of creating a diverse campus was also identified, as part of the access strategies. As one Registrar said,

> we believe that diversity itself is very important on a campus; that adds an awful lot to the value of the campus, for all students and for all teachers; that it creates a better community and everyone learns better from having people from different backgrounds.

Encouragingly, one university leader said,

> we don't see it as damaging our quest for excellence, because we know that the students who come through these routes are also excellent. So, it enhances that excellence.

However, some university leaders were concerned that there is a lack understanding and appreciation of the issues surrounding equality and access, and that there is need to persuade others

> that what we're recognising is achievement relative to the investment, in effect that the individual has had invested in them, be that through the family, through the school, community.

Some progress was reported in aligning the approach to access with student recruitment, admissions, services and supports, and university governance arrangements. A less-developed alignment was evident in human resources. For example, supports for students were found to span an alignment continuum, ranging from those universities who operate specialised, separate services, based on the student categories, to those a more holistic inclusive arrangement. Some universities embraced greater structural alignment and co-ordination of services for all students, with increasing levels of cooperation and collaboration between general student services and access teams. It should be remembered that responses to address the needs of particular target groups emerged over time and, as such,

> they developed in an ad hoc way and there's a very kind of strict divide between the access office or the access students, the international office and the international students, graduate office and everybody else.

Universities who have reshaped and consolidated services, are also aware of the differing student needs. As one Registrar said,

> I think we are aligned quite well … [although] we probably do more for access students than for the average student and part of it is I suppose in recognition that most of them will be first generation entrants.

In contrast, many universities traditionally

> regard access strategies about students and HR policies about staff

thus, the intersection of these two functions has tended to be less clear. One University President observed

> in terms of equality and diversity in the institution, the most important step is that access and HR have a common world view, you know just get them together and then they will reinforce each other's missions.

University Structures

Universities in this study are moving towards the dispersal and accountability for access throughout the academic and professional structures. Many favoured arrangements that spread access responsibilities among a range of academic or service functions: in several instances these were also accompanied by central co-ordination. A dispersed approach to access builds ownership and further embeds access throughout the university, though

> it's not as easy as it sounds. It's challenging. But equally, it encourages a sense of partnership.

Universities also reported that they had made some progress in ensuring that the built environment accommodates the needs of students with disabilities. Progress was also reported in meeting the technology needs of students with disabilities, with some acknowledging that

> it is a work in progress, because we've recognised a need to be compliant and I think we're moving to compliance but we haven't got there in any sense

while others were concerned that

> the university's general IT investment is less than it should be, so our systems and our general web accessibility and so on, is not what I would like it to be.

Conclusion

This study offers signs that Irish Universities are slowly evolving into inclusive institutions. The pockets of good institutional practice need to be nurtured and embedded. Despite the early signs of mainstreaming, an '**inclusion implementation gap**' persists. National access policy (HEA, 2015c) promoting the integration of access into everyday life of the university, remains to be fully realised. From a policy perspective, the institutional dimension of access needs further emphasis. The Inclusive Design Framework such as that proposed by Kelly (2017) offers a useful starting point and highlights four priority dimensions:

1. institutional vision and priorities
2. organisational arrangements
3. teaching, learning and assessment
4. research and data collection

The emergent field of Inclusive Design situates access and diversity in education as central, not marginal, and offers a way forward. It challenges traditional perspectives, offers an approach to redesign and reconfigure our institutions to reflect inclusion and diversity, and find solutions to the many inherent challenges associated with inclusion in higher education. In other words, it offers real and practical ways to fill the 'inclusion implementation gap'.

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