
Thirty Years On - Disabled Students in Post-School Education: Some Personal Reflections on the Innsbruck Conferences 1992 – 2013

Introduction

Recently I met with friends I had made at secondary school in Bolton in the 1950s and 1960s. During our reminiscences, our old school song “Forty Years On” was mentioned (This is the school song of Harrow School, a famous private school in England which our school also used.) The first four lines of this rousing anthem are:

Forty years on when afar and asunder, parted are those who are singing today

When we look back and forgetfully wonder what we were like in our work and our play

It struck me that changing the first word from Forty to Thirty presented an appropriate opportunity to look back at events at the end of the previous millennium and in particular the series of triennial international conferences on higher education and disability organised by the University of New Orleans and hosted by the University of Innsbruck which started in Summer 1992.

The conferences’ beginning – a short history

My work with disabled students started around 1976. During my early career and to the best of my knowledge there were few, if any, possibilities to meet with colleagues working with disabled students in other countries and to share experiences and examples of good practice. This changed in 1992 when a small group of disability services staff representing universities from several European countries and the University of New Orleans (UNO) in the USA, began to work together with the aim of removing barriers to entering post-school education for people with disabilities. The University of New Orleans and the University of Innsbruck (UI) had a Friendship Agreement. This formal partnership allowed for an exchange of educational opportunities and established the Center Austria at UNO and the Center New Orleans at the University of Innsbruck. These developments pre-dated the first International Conference on Higher Education and Disability but it is this Friendship Agreement that allowed the International Conference on Higher Education and Disability to take place. **It must be noted too that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which became law in 1990, was in the early stages of implementation in 1992.** The ADA would remove many barriers to higher education for people with disabilities in the United States. At that time, many European countries did not have the benefit of such a law but were interested in removing barriers to higher education in their countries. Oliver St. Pé, the founding director of the Training, Resource and Assistive Technology Centre (TRAC) based at UNO, and several European colleagues discussed the possibility of a forum on higher education and disability in Europe.

In 1991 Mr St. Pé met Dr Friedrich Luhan, then Director of the University of Innsbruck, to discuss the possibility of UI being the host site for the first international conference on higher education and disability. Dr Luhan not only supported this idea but also wanted to take the lead in making the University of Innsbruck accessible to students

with disabilities. The Friendship Agreement paved the way for the two universities to work in a partnership to accomplish these goals. It was agreed that the first conference would be held in the summer of 1992. Center Austria at UNO had periodically acted as liaison between TRAC and UI, which was very important when leadership at UI changed, introducing TRAC to the new leadership and vice versa.

Developing the Plan

TRAC took the lead in coordinating the conference, locating accessible housing and addressing all additional needs requests. Colleagues from three other European universities were invited to become key players in establishing this inaugural and, hopefully, recurring event. The other disability leaders were Dr Joachim Klaus from the University of Karlsruhe in Germany, Myriam Van Acker from the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium and me. As TRAC's Co-Sponsors for the event, they advertised and publicised it in Europe, solicited presenters from European countries, and gave critical advice regarding cultural, educational and political attitudes towards people with disabilities in Europe. The University of Innsbruck provided resources, staff, the conference venue, and organised very important social events that incorporated municipalities such as the City of Innsbruck and the Province of Tirol, a deliberate and socially aware move that changed the landscape for many disabled people in Innsbruck and possibly in other places in Austria. Other conference sponsors at this early point in time were the Forum Europeen de l'Orientation Academique (FEDORA), Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities in the UK (which had to close in April 2011), the Trans-European Mobility Programme for University Studies (TEMPUS), the European Union's Initiative on Human Resources (HORIZON), Mobility International – USA, and the Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD-USA).

The 1992 Conference

The first conference was intentionally kept to around 50 participants so that intimate networking could develop a cohesive base for possible future events. The focus of the first and subsequent conferences was on innovative programmes of study, international exchange opportunities, and public policies affecting university students with disabilities. Following this first conference, other topics of mutual international interest were identified including alternative curriculum formats, reasonable accommodations and self-advocacy. The target audience was (and continued to be) disability service coordinators, researchers and faculty or staff with an interest in disability affairs, post-school educators and university administrators who bridge the gap between students with disabilities and institutions' accessibility policy issues. One of the conference's most significant assets was the opportunity for participants to develop social networks that facilitated the exchange of knowledge, procedures and practices. Participants enjoyed and derived value from comparing and contrasting various approaches to accessible accommodations, course design, pedagogy and academic assessment, student support services and the establishment of new legislation in the countries represented at the conference. The home countries of some participants had enacted legislation but lacked the ability to enforce their disability-related laws. Consequently, participants learned about the absence of somewhere to lodge a complaint or bring a non-compliant university to court, and how this restricted students with disabilities' access to higher education. Anecdotally, non-US countries tended to report a belief that institutions of higher education would do the right thing in providing access to students with disabilities without an enforced legal mandate to do so.

Later Developments and the Seven Subsequent Conferences

As time passed, presenters reported that numerous universities had been very proactive in recruiting and

accommodating students with disabilities. The message was that the dedication and advocacy for the rights of students with disabilities by academic staff, specialist disability services, administrators and students can work together to make changes happen even when there was no specific legislation requiring them to do so. In the more recent conferences, there were presentations about what was happening in some of the newer countries of the European Union (EU) such as Croatia and Slovenia, aided by the activities of small, effective but inadequately-funded charities such as IMAGINE in Croatia and DSIS in Slovenia. Both countries have disability access legislation following their membership of the EU.

Other questions regarding international exchange opportunities and the available accommodations at a host university could vary significantly from the students' home country or even from university to university. The conferences provided the opportunity for an exchange of valuable information between colleagues eager to learn from one another.

These conferences provided countless opportunities over the years for North American disability services providers and faculty to 'compare notes' with colleagues from other parts of the world. Such exchanges, of course, are not designed to determine which approach is better but to help all participants understand how a given country is developing wider accessibility for students with disabilities in a culturally-specific way. For example, pioneering conference organiser, Myriam Van Acker, explained her vision for accommodating students with disabilities at the Catholic University of Leuven at the 1992 conference. At that time, she acknowledged that many people found it difficult to believe such a dream was possible. Her vision was to build a fully-accessible student residence that would house students with and without disabilities, all of whom would want to participate in the Assisted Living programme organised by Student Services. In the ensuing years, participants at the conferences heard about the great success of this innovative programme and the establishment of the Romerhuis. Students selected to participate live together and share the various benefits of the programme. From the outset, students with disabilities had 24 hours of volunteer student support coordinated by Student Services. Students without disabilities are provided with subsidised housing costs and the opportunity to expand their social and organisational skills and develop new friendships. However, in the United States and in some other countries such as the United Kingdom, there would be cultural and professional barriers to such an approach including contractual and liability issues.

The conferences owed much of their success to the participation of people with disabilities. The founder of the conferences, Oliver St. Pé was blind. There were other key players involved with the conferences who have disabilities, as well as numerous participants throughout its history. In many ways, the conferences were reflective of what self-advocacy can accomplish.

A Participant's Perspective

The comments and personal reflections that follow are based on my participation in all eight Innsbruck conferences that took place between 1992, and 2013, a qualification which is shared with very few others.

One of the aspects in which I became involved more closely was the planning of the event. In addition to circulating information about the conference throughout the UK, I solicited contributions from UK-based colleagues. The initial proposals from those wishing to present were grouped into several themes such as assistive technology, international exchanges, staff training and professional development, and supporting students with learning difficulties. Next, the proposals were circulated amongst a small team of experienced staff from a number of

countries who then completed a Pro-forma regarding the acceptability of the proposal for inclusion in the conference programme. Feedback was provided, too, about possible overlap and repetition in some instances, a position that was often resolved by asking proposers to collaborate in joint sessions. What the proposal evaluators welcomed were papers from as many different countries as possible. Sometimes, the content might be seen to be about something addressed already in many countries, but my view was that it would be useful for us to be reminded of our earlier struggles and of the progress we have made.

Since 1992, there were clear changes in topics of major interest. In those early days, the focus was on making reasonable accommodations, a process that in the UK tended to be undertaken once students with a disability had enrolled on a course of study. This changed to there being a much greater concern with anticipating what might be needed and ensuring that it is in place prior to the enrolment of students with disabilities. Thus, attention has shifted to universal design for learning and inclusive pedagogy and this was reflected in conference sessions. Arguably, this might offer increased possibilities for transfer between countries and cultures, especially when accompanied by effective anti-discrimination laws.

Regarding the 'International' dimension of the event, in 2010 for example, 104 proposals were submitted from 20 different countries whilst in 2013 there were 112 proposals from 27 different countries. The largest number usually came from the USA and Canada (64 in 2013) whilst the majority of the remainder were from Europe and elsewhere (48 in 2013). Submissions from Africa, Asia and Australasia were relatively rare whilst I cannot recall seeing a proposal from a Central or South American country. Within Europe, there were also interesting differences. For example, it was rare to encounter both paper proposals and participants from France whilst countries in southern Europe such as Portugal, Italy, and Greece were seldom represented. An underlying reason for this may have stemmed from the conference using English as its first language. The shift in balance between presenters' home countries perhaps indicated the growth of international interest in higher education and disability.

Moving on to explore aspects of the actual events, the first point to note is that it was held at roughly the same time on every occasion. The conference took place over three days, not usually involving a weekend. Choosing dates in July meant that rooms were available for use in the University of Innsbruck since students were on vacation. It meant, too, that many possible participants were free to attend since it was out of term. On the other hand, there were some drawbacks with holding the event in July. Innsbruck is a popular tourist venue and so living accommodation for delegates needed to be secured as early as possible. Also, other organisations chose to hold events in July for the same reasons as those listed above. Finally, and certainly in the UK, as staff were put under greater pressures in their work roles, they were becoming more reluctant to give up valuable free time to attend job-related conferences.



Image of Ann Heelan holding Myriam Van Acker Award

All of the conferences started with an opening plenary session in which the organizers and representatives from the University of Innsbruck addressed the delegates. Sometimes there was a keynote address. One addition to the later opening sessions was the presentation of the Myriam Van Acker Award, which was introduced at the 2004 event following her death. It was given to celebrate the contribution made by an individual to furthering the cause of improved access to higher education for people with disabilities. The first recipient was Amanda Evans, who worked for the European Agency for Special Education; the most recent recipient was Ann Heelan, former Chief Executive of AHEAD Ireland. There was also a closing plenary. At the 1992 event when there were so few participants, the session took the form of feedback from a number of working groups. Sadly, with the increase in numbers attending, this feature had to be abandoned. Another small activity associated with the closing session was the taking of a group photograph of the participants, which had also disappeared as the number of attendees grew.

Given the conference focus, it was regarded as supremely important that people with disabilities (especially students) participated and that they had equal access to all sessions, materials, and activities. Adapted living accommodation could be arranged and personal assistants were welcomed. At least one room used for the small-group sessions had simultaneous typing to aid those who were deaf or hard of hearing. Sign language interpreters were used although sometimes participants were accompanied by their own sign-language interpreters. All materials used by presenters had to be made available in different formats – large print, Braille, etc. – preferably prior to the opening of the event. With the advance in assistive technology that took place alongside the development of the conference, access to content became easier. After the event, all presentations were available electronically.

Turning to consider the small-group sessions, the first point to note is that many of these took the form of mini-lectures. They were of the 'show and tell' kind where those attending had only a passive involvement. PowerPoint presentations were the most common format. However, in my view, attending many of these was challenging for delegates with a low threshold of boredom. My personal preference was (and still is) for a workshop format built around some of the principles associated with effective learning, especially the active involvement of participants, the varied range of tasks, and the learning can be fun' approach. Hence, when considering conference proposals, I looked to support a balance of presentational and interactional styles.

Prior to all the conferences, the number of proposals received was far in excess of the time available. Consequently, in order to provide the opportunity for as many participants as possible to have a role at the conferences, poster sessions were organised, often during lunch breaks. In the early days, a room had been set aside for participants to leave any materials they thought would interest colleagues. Such materials became part of the poster sessions although the development of electronic means of communication and use of the Internet rendered this a little superfluous.

For many of those who attended the Innsbruck conferences, it is the relaxed atmosphere and the friendliness of the event that they remember. There was a social programme often including a civic reception hosted by the city and/or one that the University of Innsbruck has sponsored. Also, there was a bus tour of the city to see its tourist attractions. Alongside these were the informal activities that occur on an ad-hoc basis. Many colleagues developed strong links (and personal friendships) with each other as they took the cable car to the top of a mountain or rode the Number 6 tram on the scenic route to the village of Igls.

Since the ending of the Innsbruck event, there have been several other international conferences where the focus has been on disabled students in post-school education – for example, those led by AHEAD and the LINK network in Dublin and by the National Association of Disability Practitioners in London. Whilst there are some advantages to having a venue in a large/capital city, they fail to create the warmth and intimacy of somewhere smaller and more compact like Innsbruck.

I am greatly indebted to the Innsbruck conference for developing my own links with colleagues working outside the UK. Having this knowledge benefited my work with students with disabilities. One outcome of my close involvement was my editing a collection of papers which described policy and provision for students with disabilities in a number of different countries in the 1990s so that colleagues could be aware of developments in other parts of the world. The book, 'Higher Education and Disabilities: International Approaches', was published in 1998 and is now out-of-date so there is scope for a second edition (although it was reprinted in 2020 – goodness knows why!) I also worked with TRAC colleagues to arrange for two students who use wheelchairs to spend a semester at the University of New Orleans, an experience one described as 'the making of me.'

The End of an Era

Sadly, the 2013 event was the last conference. Growing limitations on budgets in relation to both institutions and individuals and increasing pressures on individuals' time, were making for difficulties. Also, some suggested that greater use could be made of developments in information technology. This is an approach with which we have become familiar as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic. Many of us have been involved in sessions using the Zoom or the Teams software. However, what these possibilities ignore are the benefits accruing from face-to-face

interactions and the spontaneity of ideas and thoughts that spring from conversations with colleagues from different backgrounds and cultures. For me, there will always be a need for conferences like that which TRAC at the University of New Orleans created and organised so successfully for over 20 years.

Put points below in a box

A Recipe for a Successful Conference: Learning from the Innsbruck Experience

On the basis of the Innsbruck sessions, and my experience of chairing many sessions, I suggest that future conference organisers could benefit from considering the following:

1. There must be effective teamwork – no scope for prima donnas or ego trips or dilettantes here.
2. The chances of a conference being successful depend on the members of the planning team being committed, enthusiastic, experienced, informed and creative.
3. To assure continuity, there needs to be a clear, publicised strategy for recruiting new members to the organizing team.
4. When considering proposals for plenary and workshop sessions, the team needs to be constructively critical but fair.
5. Thought needs to be given to the dilemma of restricting the number of delegates. I think the maximum number reached at an Innsbruck event was around two hundred and fifty. Perhaps, this contributed to the warmth and friendliness often mentioned by those who attended. On the other hand, if conferences need to secure sufficient income to cover their costs, it might be necessary to allow everyone who wants to come to be there.
6. There should be somebody to act as Chair of the event. Ideally, this person needs to ensure that the session schedule is adhered to with sessions starting and finishing punctually at the published times. If there are sessions where the speaker is willing to answer questions from the audience, the Chair needs to take care that those chosen are randomly selected rather than personal acquaintances. A degree of tact is required alongside a willingness to intervene if appropriate. Sometimes, intervening can be daunting if the main speaker is a person in a position of authority such as a government minister. However, even government ministers need to tailor their presentations to conform to the time allocated. There are also the challenges posed by the handling of questions from the audience. Having stressed the need to keep questions clear and brief in order that as many colleagues as possible can pose questions in what is usually a very limited block of time, it is sometimes the case where the randomly-chosen questioner takes it as an opportunity to tell their life story and to ramble without an obvious purpose. The skill here is to halt the questioner in a fair but polite fashion since choosing a more aggressive approach could deter less confident folk from putting questions.
7. The small group sessions also benefit from having someone to chair them, introduce the speaker/leader and to orchestrate what goes on. This person can also act appropriately if there are problems such as faulty equipment or a need for more seats.
8. The structure and sequence of the day needs to avoid being over-demanding. At Innsbruck the days began at nine o'clock and ended at five – and yet I have been to conferences where group sessions were inappropriately timed. I offer two personal examples to illustrate my point. At a large conference in North America where there were around 800 delegates, one session started at seven-thirty in the morning - actually the morning following the conference dinner. Needless to say the session was poorly attended and those of us who were there really wanted to support the session leader who had travelled a long way

to actually be at the event. The session might have had greater appeal had some kind of breakfast or other refreshment been made available. At another conference, this time in Europe, following some non-interventionist chairing at the start of the event, the sessions were so far behind schedule that delegates were kept until at least nine in the evening when the advertised finishing time had been seven o'clock. (I cannot be more precise regarding the finishing time because, along with many other colleagues, I made an early(?) exit – not really very professional I know but serious hunger does have an impact on powers of concentration and attention. In addition, the session used some video films which were rather repetitive and uninteresting and made for a very passive experience.)

9. To try to best meet the range of preferred learning styles of participants, the small group sessions should encompass as broad a range of approaches as possible – and hopefully avoid too much of the 'show-and-tell'.
10. It would be silly not to recognize the potential advantages accruing from using the conferencing software that we have become accustomed to during the Covid pandemic – the savings in time and expense are appealing. It might be that conferences can include some sessions where there is remote access to a speaker/group leader but I think that this does put a greater onus on the speakers/leaders to devise sessions which are interesting, relevant and lively. One of the other advantages(?) of using Zoom or Teams is that it is easy to escape when interest flags.
11. There needs to be some recognition that what happens by way of 'informal learning' can be as important as what is offered in the formal programme so there should be plenty of opportunities to mingle and socialise. This is another reason for keeping to the published timings.
12. The wider environment surrounding the venue and location can be of key significance in facilitating a sense of warmth and feeling welcome. Innsbruck offered an ideal locale with its easy transport links by air, rail and road, its varied and plentiful residential accommodation, and its many bars, restaurants and public parks. All these facilities are easy to reach and mainly accessible to disabled visitors. (Perhaps, it was not such a good idea for the specially arranged city tour to visit the Olympic ski jump given the number of conference participants with mobility impairments! On the other hand, it might have been a valuable way of raising disability awareness amongst staff in the city tourism office – to the benefit of future disabled visitors to the city.)

Closing Comments

Coincidentally, had the triennial event continued after 2013 it would have taken place in 2016, 2019 and this year, 2022. In other words, it would have avoided Covid restrictions. Sadly, this did not happen. Increasing costs had an impact on how the event was to be funded by the two universities although my view is that the impact and value of these conferences in particular was and remains immeasurable. I will say no more other than to remind readers of the old cliché about some folk who know the cost of everything and the value of nothing!

There have also been inevitable changes to personnel. Those of us with the initial enthusiasm and determination to make a success of the conferences have been followed by others with different experiences, interests and priorities as is the routine order in our social life. We have made way for the next generation of activists, both disabled and non-disabled. I hope that they can be as successful as the Innsbruck participants have been in forging mutual links with colleagues, all of whom are working to promote and guarantee the genuine inclusion of students with disabilities in post-school education in many different countries.

My colleagues who became and still are close and valued friends and I have moved on in our careers and in our

lives, and so, to finish as I started, I offer two further lines from my old school song which serve to describe where we are now:

Forty years on growing older and older, shorter in wind as in memory long,

Feeble of foot and rheumatic of shoulder., what will it help you that once you were strong?

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