Towards Inclusion - Impacts, Responses and Resources: The Experiences of Students with Disabilities on Learning from Home during Covid-19 – Trinity College Dublin

Introduction

The full impacts of Covid-19 are still unfolding and will continue to do so long into the future. Numerous surveys and studies have been completed into the effects of Covid-19 on learners across all areas of education (Aristovnik et al 2020). Yet, more research is needed so that we can begin learning lessons for the future, acknowledge difficulties and recognise opportunity among the chaos and upheaval that has visited us all in 2020.

With that in mind, this article summarises the experiences of students with disabilities learning from home during Covid-19. It brings together research on the impact of Covid-19 and the development of online and practical resources that have emerged as a result. Together they tell an emerging story from the initial impacts in March 2020 as gathered by the Students Union (SU) in Trinity College and the AHEAD Survey – Learning from Home during Covid-19; and as a consequence of these impacts, the resources developed by the Trinity Disability Service in consultation with students, academic practice and IT Services.

Feedback from undergraduate students with disabilities on online learning in COVID-19 - SU Disability Officer and Disability Service Trinity College Dublin

While Trinity was embarking on online teaching during the Covid-19 period, the SU Disability Officer (McGrath, 2020) and the Disability Service were keen to get feedback on what worked well and what needed improving.

The responses from 141 students at Trinity during late March and early April 2020 indicated that 49.5% said that their online learning experience was positive, 29% said it was negative, 18% had a mixed experience. Similar responses were given for the accessibility of lectures and consistency. The issues raised were:

- the need for improved quality of online teaching
- the availability of podcasted lectures and transcripts
- training for staff in online platforms

- improved clarity
- and earlier communication on changes to exams and assessments.

When explicitly asked if they found online learning accessible, 45.5% said it was, 27.5% said it wasn't, 17% said it was mixed, and 10% said they were uncertain. Students were asked if their lecturers were consistent in the delivery of online materials. 47% said they were consistent, 33% said they weren't and 20% said they were uncertain.

When asked what could be improved, 24 out of 81 responses recommended improving accessibility, ten students asked for a more co-ordinated approach, and nine students asked for information about assessments. The recommendations are summarised in the table below:

Recommendations	Total replies: 81
Improved Accessibility	24
None	22
Co-ordinated Approach	10
Assessment Information Needed	9
Live Interactive Lectures/Tutorials	6
Uncertain	3
Prompt Communication	1
Provide Flexibility	1
Reweight Assessments	1

AHEAD Survey - Learning from Home During Covid-19: A Survey of Irish FET and HE Students with Disabilities

Following the Trinity survey, AHEAD carried out a nationwide survey, '**Learning from Home During Covid-19: A Survey of Irish FET and HE Students with Disabilities'** (AHEAD, 2020). This survey was completed by 601 students between April 9th and 27th, 2020. While there were many similarities in the Trinity and AHEAD surveys' findings, the main difference was that Trinity students responded more positively to their overall experience compared to the AHEAD survey. The overlaps found were:

- the reporting of worry and uncertainty
- staff or college communication issues
- a lack of structure and motivation
- problems with technology and home spaces

The key findings of the AHEAD survey were:

- more than half of the respondents either disagreed (35%) or strongly disagreed (17%) with the statement **'I am coping well with learning from home'**.
- Just over one-quarter of the respondents (26%) said they used Assistive Technologies (AT).

The biggest challenges or concerns related to:

- new forms of assessment
- demands at home
- uncertainty about exam accommodations
- internet issues.

24% of responders with access to a laptop said they shared it with another person.

Trinity Disability Service Tech Kit Online Learning Survey

In August 2020, in advance of a new academic year with the anticipation of a radically different return to learning in 2020/21, the Disability Service in Trinity College surveyed 1,385 students with disabilities to gauge their needs for learning from home. Students were asked four questions (detailed below) and were invited to add a comment to accompany their answers if they so wished. 106 students completed the survey, with those who indicated that they required additional support being contacted.

Q1. Do you have access to your own device (laptop/macbook/tablet/ipad) to do your college work on? (One that no one else in your family needs)

- **88%** 93 of 106 students responded 'yes'
- Of the **12%** 13 students that responded 'no' 11 left additional comments.
- 4 students said they were sharing a laptop with other family members. 2 students said that the laptop/device they were using was old or unsuitable for online learning. 1 student reported having no device at home, while 2 students stated that they could not afford the required device.

Q2. Do you have a quiet place in your home where you can concentrate on your studies?

- **78%** 83 of 106 students responded 'yes.'
- Of the **22%** 23 students that responded 'no' 15 left additional comments.
- Six students said they did not have a quiet study space at home due to multiple factors, including siblings, children, and overcrowding. Seven students indicated that they would benefit from study spaces being made available on campus, highlighting the library's reduced capacity as a concern.

Q3. Do you have any Assistive Technology needs to support your online learning?

- **82%** 87 of 106 students responded 'no'
- Of the **18%**, 19 students that responded 'yes' 10 left additional comments.
- Three students said they would benefit from captions or subtitles being provided for online lectures. 2 students said they required the use of Grammarly. 1 student asked for the use of text-to-speech software. 1 student asked for a notetaker. 1 student asked for a laptop and AT software. 1 student requested extended assignment deadlines.

Q4. Do you have any learning/disability support needs to support your learning online?

- **80%** 85 of 106 students responded 'no'
- Of the **20%** 21 students that responded 'yes' 15 left additional comments.
- 2 students said they required assistance with organisation, structure, and time management. 1 student requested access to lecture slides in advance. 1 student requested extended assignment deadlines. 1 student asked for extra exam time. 1 student stated that they required an adaptive seating solution and AT software. 1 student asked for captions or subtitles for online lectures or access to pre-recorded material in advance.

Online learning resources developed by the Trinity Disability Service

In response to surveys and to the needs of many students and staff who contacted us individually, the Trinity Disability Service developed online learning and assessment resources (Trinity Disability Service, 2020a) to assist and support students and academic staff during the period where teaching, learning and assessment was conducted remotely. This consisted of moving our practices and communication online while also providing resources for students and staff to do the same. The intention was to create an accessible learning environment for students and staff.

Adaptation to remote Disability Service delivery

The Trinity Disability Service Team adapted quickly in March 2020 when Covid-19 closed the University. Our digital

transformation plan helped our future move to a new [Trinity disAbility Hub](#) in Printing House Square (Trinity Disability Service, 2020b). We continued to meet with students in person, via MS Teams, phone, or email. Students were provided with full contact details and the facility to [book an appointment](#) online with Disability Service Team members. An in-person drop-in service has yet to be made available for face-to-face meetings due to the restrictions of Covid at levels 3 to 5. However, drop-in appointments continued to be provided online via a scan QR code system.

In response to the on-going COVID-19 restrictions in place and recognition of the changing ways in which we connect with students, the Disability Service devised online meeting guidance to clearly outline the formats and procedures related to Disability Service student meetings for the academic year 2020/21. Also, for students who are not regularly on campus for disability-related reasons or other reasons such as off-campus locations or placement/internship, we will again be using these alternative meeting formats in the future.

'Learning to Learn Online' module for Trinity students

This student-facing module was developed collaboratively between the Centre for Academic Practice, Student Learning Development, the Disability Service, the Transition to Trinity Officer, and the IUA Enhancing Digital Capacity Project (Trinity Disability Service, 2020c). The Learning to Learn Online module delivered through the Blackboard VLE platform provides resources designed to prepare all students for hybrid learning in Trinity. Content is organised into four blocks: Block 1. Getting Started for Learning Online, Block 2. Working Together Online, Block 3. Becoming an Effective Online Learner and Block 4. Thinking about Assessments when Learning Online. The Disability Service provided practical guidance that focused on activities within the student role such as managing mental health, engaging in good study routines, setting up a study environment, and assisting with technology to support remote learning. A series of workshops and webinars provided by the Student Learning Development complement module material.

'Adapting our Teaching for Learning Online' module for academic staff

This module was designed by the Centre for Academic Practice in Trinity to support staff engaged teaching and learning in preparation for the blended learning model adopted during the first semester of 2020/21 The module was primarily aimed at staff without significant prior experience of designing or facilitating teaching in a hybrid learning environment and is delivered in three blocks: 1. Adapting existing content for learning online, 2. Fostering student engagement online, and 3. Assessment in online environments. The Disability Service provided guidance on ensuring accessibility of module materials (e.g., access to alternative formats) and delivery methods (e.g., captioning and subtitling). To enhance both modules, the Disability Service worked with College services to implement two strategies: automatic captioning of audio-visual material created within Panopto, and integration of Blackboard ALLY, a file transformer application.

Online Assessment

In response to the impact of Covid-19, in April 2020, the Deans of Undergraduate and Postgraduate Studies set up a working group tasked with moving exams online. The Disability Service Director was a member of this group and assisted with ensuring an accessibility check took place with all exam proposals. Reasonable accommodations were provided for all types of exams, and any additional disability supports such as assistive technology and any human supports were teased out. There was a mix of continuous assessment, take-home assessments, and online

examinations. To assist staff and students in understanding and preparing, the Disability Service developed [Guidelines for students and staff to modify online examination and assessment](#) (Trinity Disability Service 2020d).

Nationally, Trinity Disability Service undertook a review of all HEI's online examinations and produced a report for the Disability Adviser Working Network (DAWN) leading to revised and nationally agreed on guidelines for the academic year 2020-21.

Trinity Disability Service work with IT Services to develop Blackboard Ally and Closed Captioning in Panopto

As learning moved online, many accessibility issues required solutions to ensure accessibility needs were being met. Work got underway with Trinity IT Services on two projects, as explained below.

Blackboard Ally is a tool that helps content authors to ensure that the lecture materials that they upload into Blackboard meet accessibility standards. In Trinity, there are typically 6-7,000 live modules in Blackboard in a given academic year, with over 1,000 content owners and tens of thousands of pieces of digital content. Blackboard Ally was launched in Trinity in November 2020 (Trinity Disability Service 2020e) and tags all Blackboard documents with information on the accessibility of their contents. A key feature of Blackboard Ally is the 'file transformer' facility that allows course content to be uploaded in a file and then downloaded in an alternative format.

A significant number of these documents will show up with issues, and this will immediately result in a considerable number of support queries (and calls). The obvious question is, **'who is responsible for fixing the accessibility issues with the materials in Blackboard?'** Is it Disability Service or the content authors? Universities that have successfully launched Ally have done so with an effective awareness campaign, along with an agreement on who is correcting the material; adequate training; and appropriate support structures in place; before going live.

Panopto is a cloud-based software that provides live streaming, lecture capture (recording), and post-processing facilities. It comes with a closed captioning service available to use in Trinity (Academic Practice, 2020b). However, this has not been fully implemented as its disadvantages are a trade-off between quality and price. A low-cost automated version provides poor quality captioning estimated to be between 70 to 85% accurate (many academics consider this un-usable) and a higher quality service that comes with a six-figure sum of the additional cost.

Conclusion

One benefit of Covid-19 from an access and inclusion point of view (while acknowledging that it should have all happened decades ago) is that from the top-down, schools, colleges and universities have been forced to modernise by implementing technological solutions that students with disabilities have always needed and asked for. For those of us who work in the areas of access, inclusion, and support, a health crisis such as Covid-19, with all the disruption and grief that it has caused, brings with it a golden opportunity for change.

For most students, the hybrid model of teaching (or blended learning) aspired to over the summer never materialised. Instead, due to the continued spread of Covid-19 in the autumn, students have been forced to be over-

reliant on technology while fundamental opportunities for academic, social, and personal development have been severely limited and hollowed out. While technology has provided us with many tools to enable us to study and work from home, many of these solutions have created new problems that technology alone cannot solve; loneliness, isolation, anxiety, frustration and boredom. The impact of hybrid learning and assessment on first-year students is unclear and there is a need to keep engaged with this group as a priority to ensure we are not losing students. More in-person classes and supports are critical here.

If an end to Covid-19 and its severest impacts is on the horizon in 2021, we must not lose sight of a vision for accessible and inclusive education. As a return to on-campus teaching emerges, we have an opportunity to strike a better balance between on and off-line teaching and learning. **Disability Services in universities are innovators and change agents. We do this daily when we adapt the learning and assessment environment for students with disabilities. Now we can do this at a systemic level leading to better inclusion for all.**

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Dr. Alison Doyle is a teacher, researcher and educational psychologist. She specialises in guidance and transition planning for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, focusing on the management of transitions between schools, college, and employment. She is currently researching supported transitions to employment for young people with intellectual disabilities, in association with Dublin City University. Alison has published 'Planning Transitions for Young People with Special Needs and Disabilities, a workbook for secondary students and their families' and her second book 'Ready, Steady, Go! Planning the Move to Secondary School' was published in the spring of 2017.

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Declan has been working as a disability officer in Trinity since 2005. Declan has a BA in Psychoanalytic Studies and an MA in Psychotherapy. He completed the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (Disability Needs Assessment) at Trinity and the Certificate of Competence in Educational Testing (BPS). Declan produced a Guide for Students with Disabilities on Placement to support students with disabilities on professional courses. In 2017, Declan completed a PhD in the School of Education exploring if reasonable accommodations provided to third level students with disabilities succeed in removing barriers and impact on the student experience.

Declan Treanor
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Declan has been working in Trinity since the Disability Service was set up in June 2000. He has responsibility for ensuring that the College embeds disability related issues into the core of all thinking and delivery to ensure that the College environment is as accessible to people with disabilities as possible. Declan has an extensive educational history which includes a B Sc. in Science for NUI Galway, a Master's in Social Policy and Administration from the London School of Economics and Political Science and a Post Graduate Diploma in Education, Trinity College Dublin. Declan is the Disability Officer for staff in College and for students who are D/deaf and Students with Autism Spectrum and Asperger's Syndrome. Declan completed the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule Generic (ADOS-G), a direct observational assessment used to assist in the diagnosis of autism, and the Advanced Postgraduate Certificate in Autistic Spectrum Disorder at Queen's University Belfast.