

# University for All: Embedding and Mainstreaming Equality of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education

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**Abstract.** This paper describes University for All - a whole-institution initiative undertaken by University College Dublin to move student access, participation and success from the margins to the mainstream. This initiative extends access beyond entry, to include access to an inclusive learning environment, designed for the full range of human diversity, rather than a perceived notion of a typical or so-called ‘traditional’ student. The University for All approach requires that programmes, teaching, student supports, and campus facilities are designed inclusively, so that they can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible, by all students, regardless of background, personal circumstances, age, disability, or pace of study. This paper documents the implementation of this whole-institution initiative, offering insights into this change journey, and outlining the lessons learnt and challenges encountered.

**Keywords.** access, higher education, widening participation, mainstreaming, inclusion.

## 1. Introduction

As the 21<sup>st</sup> century unfolds, progress has been made to widen participation in higher education in Ireland [1]. However, this work remains the sole responsibility of access services in many higher education institutions (HEIs). National access policy indicates the need for a whole-institution approach [2]. While Kelly [3] found early signs of mainstreaming and embedding access, she highlighted the absence of policies and practices to foster and inculcate inclusion and diversity on an institution-wide basis. Against this background, University College Dublin (UCD) introduced the University for All initiative as a whole-institution approach, “not only because it reflects our values, but because it is a fundamental requirement for educational excellence and institutional success” (Professor Mark Rogers, UCD Registrar & Deputy President), [4, p. Foreword].

The University recognised the need for a systemic approach that would weave inclusion into the fabric of the institution at every level, and in so doing, move student access, participation and success from the margins to the mainstream. In other words, rather than ‘bolted-on’, it would be embedded and integrated, and considered as everyone’s business.

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## **2. Aim of University for All**

The aim of University for All is to extend access beyond entry, to include access to an inclusive learning environment, designed for the full range of human diversity, rather than a perceived notion of a typical or so-called ‘traditional’ student. In other words, it requires that programmes, teaching, student supports, and campus facilities are designed inclusively, so that they can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible, removing all barriers. Students should be able to access, participate and succeed, regardless of background, personal circumstances, age, disability, or pace of study. In a University for all, every student will feel that they are welcome, they belong and are valued.

University for All is underpinned by practice that allows students to decide whether or not to identify or categorise themselves. This is their right. Therefore, it is important to design higher education institutions to ensure that as many students as possible can undertake their programmes of study without the need to self-identify. The development of the University for All approach was influenced by, and draws on, work in ‘universal design’ [5][6], ‘inclusive design’ [7][8], and ‘design for all’ [9]. It is concerned with ensuring accessibility to as broad a range of students as possible. It is recognised, however, that the needs of the entire student population may not be met in full, and that inclusive higher education is not a ‘one size fits all’ approach. There will always be a need to offer bespoke solutions to meet the requirements of particular students. University for All ensures that such solutions are offered in an integrated mainstream way, and do not result in students being marginalised or ‘othered’.

As this initiative began, the views of students were canvassed and unsurprisingly, the essential components of an inclusive university were crystal clear. For example, one highlighted the need to “get around without needing to wait for someone to open a door or go the long way around away from my friends and other students”. Another emphasised the need for “simple things: slides on Blackboard [virtual learning environment], emails answered and everyone comfortable enough to talk in class”. Yet another said that there would be “no discrimination and nothing to get in the way of anyone who wants to go to college”. Another added, “no matter where you come from or what your disadvantage might be, you have the option to avail of the same opportunities as everyone else and the help you need to do this is readily available”.

University for All impacts all facets of campus life. It is a broad and challenging objective requiring both institutional and individual change, and when fully achieved, has the power to transform the institution, eliminate discrimination, and embed equality [10]. Osborne, Gallacher and Crossan [11, 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.

## **3. Context**

Higher education is increasingly home to students from different backgrounds and experience, and it is time to capitalise on these opportunities. Page [12], argues that diversity is more important than individual ability and suggests that “organizations, firms, and universities that solve problems should seek out people with diverse experiences,

training, and identities that translate into diverse perspectives and heuristics” (p. 173). HEIs have tended to rely on the commitment of particular academic faculty, who often assume the role of ‘access champion,’ or on specialist staff to provide support for under-represented student cohorts. This often leads to widening participation work being ‘owned’, by the few, rather than the many. This approach runs counter to access policy, which envisions the student population as reflecting the diversity of Ireland's population [13]. In line with this vision, the HEA recommends 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” [2, p. 25].

There is an increasing academic literature that discusses the institutional perspective on access, participation and success in higher education [11], [14]–[24]. Some studies specifically point to the impact of institutional culture on such issues and suggest that developing awareness of its influence is a prerequisite to creating a more inclusive institution [25][26][27]. Awareness and understanding of access by leaders is also considered as crucial to the development of inclusive education[28]–[36]. The academic literature also includes ‘frameworks’ to support inclusion, and embed and mainstream equality of access in higher education [10], [37]–[56]. Among the areas highlighted by such ‘frameworks’ 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.

#### 4. Journey to University for All

University for All has its genesis in decisions taken over the past decade. A renewal process was undertaken to give fresh impetus to access and inclusion<sup>2</sup>. Uniquely among Irish universities, UCD integrates the continuum of access-related strands, resulting in the establishment of UCD Access & Lifelong Learning (ALL) in 2009. This brought together the previously stand-alone strands of access and adult education-related activity, including supports for students from low income households, those with disabilities, mature student, as well as those studying part-time. UCD’s Strategic Plan at that time committed to broaden the range of opportunities for diversity, to offer flexible options, and consolidate existing access initiatives [57].

In 2012, the ALL unit was the subject of a quality review, which highlighted the need to embed the access agenda, and reposition the unit as supportive of, rather than constituting the main component of UCD’s widening participation work. Over the next several years, its purpose, role and structure were re-imagined. Today, it is a centrally positioned hub that profiles inclusion, offering support both for under-represented students, and to the University community to enable access to be mainstreamed and embedded [58].

Another important step in this journey concerned part-time education: access to this has been traditionally associated with UCD Adult Education. Over the past four years, this provision has been mainstreamed through Open Learning. This innovative approach

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<sup>2</sup> Professor John Field, Professor of Lifelong Learning, Stirling University and Mr. Lewis Purser, Director, Learning & Teaching, and Academic Affairs, Irish Universities Association (IUA), provided external assistance.

resulted in opening undergraduate modules to part-time students. Now offered by 35 Academic Schools, three progression pathways to undergraduate degree programmes have been developed thus far [59].

A key staging post in this change journey was the decision to establish the UCD Widening Participation Committee in 2012, as the formal mechanism to oversee the University's progress towards the achievement of access, participation and success for under-represented students. Professor Brian Nolan<sup>3</sup> was appointed Chair and Professor Colin Scott<sup>4</sup> took over this responsibility in 2014. The appointment of highly regarded and respected members of faculty is an important lever for change, and sends a message to the University community that this work is valued. The Committee was established for a three-year period and membership comprised representatives of the UCD College Principals, as well as relevant Support Services. Following a review, the Committee was re-established in 2016 with new Terms of Reference. Professor Grace Mulcahy<sup>5</sup> was appointed Chair, and it now reports to the University Management Team, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion sub-group. The Committee is now aligned with academic structures, which constitutes a critical structural change that ensures that access is embedded in the academic fabric on the institution. Membership is drawn from all Academic Programme Boards, Policy and Support Services, and Student Access Leaders<sup>6</sup>. UCD ALL plays a key role by providing policy advice, expertise and operational support.

UCD new Strategic Plan 2015-2020 [60] commits to becoming "a pre-eminent diverse and inclusive scholarly community of students, faculty and staff" (p. 9), while Objective 5 commits to "attract and retain an excellent and diverse cohort of students, faculty and staff" (p. 10). Such statements offer a platform to implement and mainstream access: as such they are important change levers. The University also developed key performance indicators (KPIs), committing to 33% of undergraduates being drawn from target equity groups<sup>7</sup> by 2020 [2, p. 34]. UCD recorded 29% for the 2016-2017 academic year.

University leadership is also crucial to ensuring the implementation of sustained and practical actions. A meeting of the UCD Governing Authority on May 16th, 2017 was an important juncture. A comprehensive briefing was provided on the systemic approach to building a mainstream inclusive university community. The Governing Authority commended and endorsed the approach taken.

The visibility of University leaders, and their efforts to promote continuous movement and ensure that change actions are implemented and sustained, are essential. For example, sponsorship of University for All is undertaken by the UCD Registrar and Deputy President. A senior member of faculty leads the UCD Widening Participation Committee. The public recognition and endorsement of access and inclusion is evident

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Nolan is Professor of Social Policy at the Department of Social Policy and Intervention, and Director of INET's Employment, Equity and Growth Programme, at the University of Oxford. He was previously Principal of the College of Human Sciences and Professor of Public Policy at UCD.

<sup>4</sup> Professor Colin Scott is Vice-President for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, and Principal of the College of Social Sciences and Law and Professor of EU Regulation & Governance at UCD.

<sup>5</sup> Professor Grace Mulcahy is Full Professor of Veterinary Microbiology and Parasitology, UCD School of Veterinary Medicine.

<sup>6</sup> Access Leaders are students who have undertaken leadership training, which enables them to carry out a range of activities (e.g. orientation, events, campus tours) and to act as access ambassadors.

<sup>7</sup> Students from socio-economic groups that have low participation rates, first-time mature students, students with disabilities, part-time/flexible learners, Irish Travellers.

in the UCD President's weekly bulletin (President's Bulletin #175 - 21 November 2017, Professor Andrew Deeks).

To capitalise on the progress made and to inject further momentum, the commitment to mainstreaming access and inclusion was formalised as University for All and launched by the Minister for Higher Education, Deputy Mary Mitchell O' Connor, T.D. on November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

## 5. University for All Principles

The development of a set of underpinning principles proved an important part of the creation of whole-institution approach to mainstream and embedding access. These were shaped by the views of students, gathered through an online anonymous survey. They were also informed by the European Access Network Dublin Proclamation [62]. These underpinning principles are intended to affirm the ambition of the University, describe expectations, clarify responsibilities, and define those included. The intention is that they would be used throughout the campus and serve as a reminder to all.

1. Mainstreaming inclusion is the job of the entire university community and is the responsibility of all.
2. Everyone has the right to equal participation and engagement in higher education.
3. The student body entering, participating in and completing higher education must reflect the diversity of Ireland's population.
4. Widening participation means ensuring all students can access higher education and that they have an equal opportunity to progress and succeed within and beyond University.
5. To achieve University for All we must engage with everyone - students, faculty, practitioners, community partners, educators, researchers and policy makers.
6. The University believes that excellence is achieved through diversity.

## 6. Implementing University for All

University for All is a holistic or whole-institution approach to mainstreaming access and inclusion. Higher education institutions are culturally complex and layered organisations and implementation necessitates a top-down and bottom-up approach, as suggested by Greenback [26], who stated:

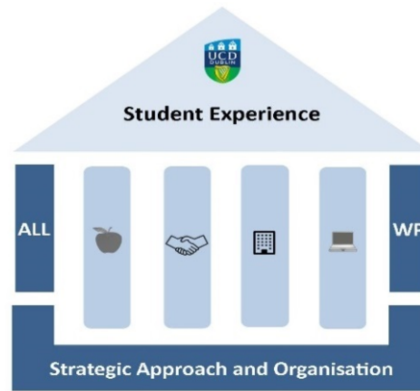
HEIs and organisations such as HEFCE should pay more attention to the way in which widening participation policy is implemented at the micro (i.e. departmental, sectional, etc.) level. Too much emphasis is placed on institutional (or meso) level analysis. This may be less complicated—and therefore easier—but it does not reflect the reality of what happens in culturally complex organisations such as universities and colleges of HE [26, p. 221].

Figure 1 illustrates the elements of University for All encompassing the key pillars of campus life, i.e.

- Programme design, teaching & learning
- Student supports and services

- Physical campus and the built environment
- Information technology systems and infrastructure.

These four pillars are underpinned by the institution's strategic approach and organisation (described earlier). The scaffolding is provided by UCD Access & Lifelong Learning, and the UCD Widening Participation Committee, respectively. The implementation process reveals the elements of scaffolding required, including knowledge, awareness, supports, practical assistance, and training.



**Figure 1.** UCD University for All.

Progress is evident across the four pillars. In Pillar 1, programme design, teaching & learning, training and materials in universal design were provided for teams involved in the curriculum review process. Case studies demonstrating how to design programmes inclusively, have been published [63]. Guidance was provided to ensure accessibility in the Virtual Learning Environment, including the creation of accessible materials, and setting up accessible online tests. UCD ALL worked with AHEAD<sup>8</sup> on the development of a digital badge in Universal Design in Teaching and Learning. This digital badge forms part of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education's professional development framework, and can now be facilitated in any setting: it will be rolled out further in UCD in 2018. The UCD Professional Certificate and Diploma in University Teaching, offered to all faculty, includes guidance on inclusive assessment, accessible curriculum design and universal design in teaching technologies. The principles of universal design have been used to design a new Social Science Programme module. Similar work is underway in a Business programme module.

In the student supports and services pillar, guidelines to produce accessible documents, website material, videos and other visual materials have been developed. Training has also been offered to all student-facing staff and faculty. A wide range of student supports is offered by the University, including Student Advisers, Counselling & Health, Chaplaincy, Library, UCD Sport, Student Desk, and Students' Union. These services are now offered to all, including under-represented cohorts. UCD Access & Lifelong Learning offers supplemental supports, as necessary. Streamlining has taken place resulting in no duplication of effort or resources.

<sup>8</sup> AHEAD, the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability is an independent organisation working to promote full access to and participation in further and higher education (<https://www.ahead.ie>).

Work on the built environment is also in progress. For example, the Campus Accessibility Officer, working with UCD Estates, undertook a campus accessibility audit, which prioritised remediation works necessary, together with the allocation of a dedicated annual budget. 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. A collaborative project between students and staff led to the publication of the *Getting Around UCD Videomap Series*<sup>9</sup>. Student accommodation developed a system to prioritise and reserve accessible accommodation for students with disabilities, and some of the lowest cost rooms are reserved for those from low income households.

The fourth pillar - information technology systems and infrastructure, has seen a move away from the use of note-takers, scribes and other “person supports” for students with a disability, to technology solutions, including Grammarly, Live Scribe pens, Cogi and Dragon Naturally Speaking. The advantage of adopting this approach is that students can use these tools independently and carry them forward to the workplace. A robust system to track under-represented students has been developed. Institution and programme level data are now available. Information on disability supports is available to designated faculty via Class Lists. Applications for financial supports and scholarships have all been embedded on the UCD systems allowing for ease of application and payment.

## 7. Lessons and challenges

An initiative of the scale and complexity of University for All can be daunting and requires courage, perseverance and most importantly, the support of key senior colleagues. The implementation is not a linear process: academic institutions are culturally and structurally complex entities.

When undertaking such an initiative, it is important to begin wherever possible: in other words, to take advantage of opportunities presented, such as development of new organisational strategy, a quality review process, restructuring, etc. For example, the development of an institutional strategy offers an opportunity to embed key components such as the vision for access and inclusion.

The support of key senior academic leaders is essential to the successful implementation of a whole-institution approach. Kotter [64] characterised leadership as setting a direction, aligning and motivating people to achieve success, and overcoming obstacles. Support in navigating institutional complexities, building alliances, and mobilising support is indispensable.

The ability to adapt as the project develops is required. Opportunities, like a change in direction, priority or personnel, may be harnessed and often serve to overcome obstacles. Celebrate small pockets of good practice as they emerge: success breeds success and serves to both encourage and to reassure. Change happens slowly and incrementally in many institutions [48][65]. Perseverance, resilience and flexibility are necessary qualities. The language of encouragement, acknowledgement and collaboration is powerful: that of enforcement is most unlikely to yield sustainable results.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jOXzwqCxBIM>.

Developing an understanding of mainstreaming and inclusion needs to be rehearsed frequently. As Kotter [66, p. 37] argues, change begins with a “sense of urgency”, and “complacency” is the enemy of organisational transformation. May & Bridger [48] underscore the importance of data or evidence in helping to create a sense of urgency (p.46). Accelerating the implementation process can be challenging and a broad view of the work is necessary to identify opportunities of scalability and synergies. Moving access from the margins to the mainstream is but one issue, one challenge, one priority, in the higher education landscape. Key institutional priorities typically revolve around research, teaching, and engagement; finding opportunities to align with these, leads to a whole-institution approach being considered less burdensome and hence more achievable

An oversight committee helps to create institutional ownership. Such a group, drawn from respected members of faculty and professional staff, brings expertise, energy, and perspective, and acts as the ‘guiding coalition’ that steers the initiative and overcomes barriers to progress [65]

Navigating the space between academic autonomy and inclusive practice can also present challenges. Faculty has a high level of autonomy, which enables them to focus on their chosen field of research. Approaching the issue of creating an inclusive institution is more effective when it incorporates a top-down as well as bottom-up approach. A top-down approach sends a clear message that inclusion is an institutional priority, and embedding it in the vision, goals and policy works to set expectations. A bottom-up approach facilitates discussion, debate and allows time to consider issues of inclusion.

Identifying early adopters and publishing these case studies also provides practical advice and offers exemplars of good practice. An inclusion initiative also needs to be situated in the context of equality legislation, which requires parity of treatment for all [67][68][69][70]. Some faculty members may be concerned that increased engagement time with students and scaffolding skill development may leave less time for delivery of content. Emphasising the link between programme delivery and content with graduate attributes can be a useful way to demonstrate the importance of embedding increased engagement, opportunities for expression and interaction in teaching and learning activities. At programmatic review, the key content should be identified with sufficient time allowed for successful delivery, which includes multiple means of action, expression and engagement for students. Emphasising that universal design for learning has been developed based on extensive and ongoing research, can also be useful [71]. The support and expertise of Teaching & Learning colleagues is crucial in helping to address such issues.

In an environment of competing priorities, there is merit in recognising those engaged in inclusive practice, which is sometimes considered as “supplementary” work. There are several ways to reward and encourage good practice. A most effective is through promotion pathways. Ideally, inclusive practice should be embedded in existing pathways, rather than side-lined into a separate pathway. This reflects the goals of mainstreaming inclusion, where all seek to improve the accessibility and inclusivity of their teaching. Other rewards include a monetary or other award, achieved through application or nomination. For example, the University of Newcastle has a series of

awards that recognise outstanding equality, diversity and inclusion work, with separate categories for initiatives, staff and students<sup>10</sup>.

In many institutions, the designated access service holds sole responsibility for outreach to, and support of targeted under-represented student groups. In the context of the development of a whole-institutional approach [2], and increasing student numbers, this role may need to be redefined. Access practitioners are well-placed to support students, as well as providing the expertise to enable mainstreaming and embedding inclusive practice.

## 8. Conclusion

Implementing a whole-institution approach is a necessary step in ensuring that all students, regardless of background or circumstances feel that they are welcome, they belong and are valued. As Tinto [72] observed:

Efforts to increase student success are not new. But even when successful, they have been isolated, sometimes idiosyncratic, and often have not penetrated the classroom. If we are serious in our efforts to enhance college success, much must change. Our students deserve no less [72, p. 8].

The University for All initiative in UCD will continue, as will publishing periodic updates. It is hoped that through this work, a valuable contribution will be made to the scholarship and practice of creating a whole-institution approach to mainstreaming and inclusion in higher education.

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