

Count Me In: Including Students with Learning Difficulties in Trinity College Dublin

Traditionally, students with learning difficulties were excluded from accessing third level education in Ireland. The purpose of this article is to describe the higher education programme at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) for individuals with learning difficulties.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to describe the higher education programme at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) for individuals with learning difficulties is, entitled the *Certificate in Contemporary Living*. This programme has been developed based upon *Project Interact* (School of Occupational Therapy, 1998) and the pilot programme for the *Certificate in Contemporary Living*. The article will describe the certificate programme and make suggestions for the future.

People with disabilities are the neglected citizens of Ireland. On the eve of the 21st century, many of them suffer intolerable conditions because of outdated social and economic policies and unthinking public attitudes. Whether their status is looked at in terms of economics, information, education, mobility or housing they are seen to be treated as second class citizens.
(Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 1996, p. 23).

This quote speaks volumes regarding the lives, and often the post-secondary school experiences, of individuals with learning difficulties in Ireland. Obtaining the Leaving Certificate and beginning the university experience is, for many, a rite of passage into adulthood (Doyle, 2003; Ferguson and Ferguson, 2000). For approximately 55,224 young adults in Ireland (State Examination Commission, 2005), university is the intermediate step between secondary school and life as an adult.

TRANSITION FROM POST PRIMARY EDUCATION TO ADULTHOOD

Historically, individuals with learning difficulties have not had the same experiences as their typically developing peers in their transition from post- primary education to adulthood. Typically, the future of students with learning difficulties, when they leave secondary school, involves days filled with inactivity,; supported work and supported living,; attendance at day treatment facilities,; or attendance at sheltered workshops (Agran, Snow and Swaner, 1999; Certo, Pumpian, Fisher, Storey and Smalley, 1997). The movement for the participation and inclusions of individuals with learning difficulties in higher education programmes follows in the footsteps of the inclusion movement for students with disabilities in secondary public schools (Doyle, 2003; Grigal, Neubert, and Moon, 2001). Inclusion of individuals with learning difficulties into tertiary

education has become the responsibility of colleges and universities. For the last decade, Trinity College Dublin has provided experiences for individuals with learning difficulties in the third level environment.

PROJECT INTERACT

Trinity College Dublin (TCD) has supported the successful inclusion of individuals with learning difficulties since 1995 via two significant programmes. The first programme, *Project Interact*, occurred between the years of 1995 and 2000. The School of Occupational Therapy (TCD), St John of God Carmona Services and the National Council for Vocational Awards (now the Further Education Training and Awards Council) co-operated in a European-funded, inclusive education programme. The goal of *Project Interact* was to offer mainstream certified education to individuals with learning difficulties. In addition to learning in integrated environments on campus in TCD, achievement in integrated community work settings also occurred through *Project Interact*. Students who enrolled in this programme participated in educational, personal development and life planning courses at TCD. By 2000 fifty-four students with learning difficulties had participated in this programme.

CERTIFICATE IN CONTEMPORARY LIVING

The second programme involving tertiary education for individuals with learning difficulties at TCD was the pilot programme for the forthcoming *Certificate in Contemporary Living*, which occurred between October 2004 and May 2005. This part-time pilot programme provided educational and social experiences for fifteen post-secondary school students. Elements from the pilot programme have been further expanded to develop the *Certificate in Contemporary Living*.

The core values of the *Certificate in Contemporary Living* programme include:

- a belief in the capacity of individuals with learning difficulties;
- respect for the contributions of individuals with learning difficulties;
- equality of opportunity for individuals who experience learning difficulties.

The educational mission of the National Institute for the Study of Learning Difficulties (NISLD), which is responsible for the development of these courses, is to promote the full inclusion of individuals with learning difficulties through developing and delivering an educational programme that promotes lifelong learning. The educational programme is designed to meet the students' educational and vocational requirements, facilitate their inclusion within Trinity College Dublin, and provide them with the strategic skills to become independent self-reliant adults.

Curriculum Content

The ultimate goal of the TCD program is to offer a two-year, full-time certificate programme, to be awarded by TCD, and placed at point three on the national framework for qualifications. Students will receive an award entitled *Certificate in Contemporary Living*. The proposed certificate will be made up of eight modules. The six mandatory modules include:

- English and Spoken Communication
- Numeracy for Contemporary Living
- Information and Communication Technology
- Personal Effectiveness
- Inclusive Studies
- Preparation and Experience for Work.

Students will also choose two of four optional modules

- Drama and Dance
- Music
- Art and Design
- International Awareness

Each module included in the TCD programme is briefly described in this section. The *English and Spoken Communication* and *Numeracy for Contemporary Living* modules cover the basic literacy, communication and numeracy skills required to allow access to modern society and workplaces. These modules will enable the students to develop skills appropriate to their contextual environment, for example, numeracy will involve learning how to run a bank account, rather than requiring students to undertake arithmetic exercises that will be of no real value in the long term.

Information and communication Technology (ICT) will equip the students with the basic transferable skills required to meet the ICT demands of modern society. To allow for skill development and retention this module will run over the two years of the certificate programme. *Personal effectiveness* will consider two areas of importance to individuals with learning difficulties: active citizenship and advocacy. Through the study of both areas the students will be able to represent themselves in society, rather than relying upon their voices being heard through others.

The tertiary learning environment allows individuals to access further learning in areas of educational interest to them. The *Inclusive studies* module will allow the certificate students to access areas of personal interest to them through undertaking an individualized course of study which includes attendance, with a peer support person, at identified junior freshman lectures. *Preparation and Experience for Work* will contain two elements: the world of work and practical skills related to individual career interests. Through a knowledge and understanding of the world of work the students will be able to clarify and reflect on their own expectations, match their personal qualities, interests and needs to future employment possibilities, demonstrate an awareness of the types of work available, gain a knowledge of where and how jobs are advertised, gain the skills necessary to apply for jobs and develop interpersonal skills for use in the work place. The practical skills element will introduce the students to the basic skills required in their particular area of interest and then, with a job coach, to access and gain experience in the work environment, hence allowing the students to apply their basic skills and gain a fuller understanding of the requirements of having a job.

Drama and Dance will allow the students to develop and use skills of creative drama and dance, culminating in the development of presentation skills. The *Music* module will provide the students with the ability to demonstrate an appreciation and knowledge of music through developing their active listening skills, developing the skills to analyse

music, acquire an understanding of music vocabulary and a heightened appreciation of music. *Art and Design* has been designed to offer students an opportunity to experience art and design through expressing themselves, appreciating different forms of work and working practically with media, materials, processes, equipment and technologies in an enjoyable environment.

The *International Awareness* module has been created to offer the students an opportunity to consider cultural, historical and geographical diversity. The students will undertake a study of different global regions and will then undertake a comparative study of Ireland and one other European country, culminating in organizing a visit to the comparison country and making use of the skills gained in their study of other certificate modules.

The modules within the certificate programme will encourage the development of effective pedagogy that is innovative and adaptive, ensuring that the programme is accessible by all the students, but also challenging them to explore their learning and develop their skills. Learning will be undertaken in teaching areas throughout the Trinity campus, to allow the students to integrate fully and to allow access to appropriate resources and teaching space.

Course Delivery

Delivery of each module will be overseen by a qualified educator, but undergraduate and postgraduate students will be encouraged, through their own educational programmes, to act as facilitators for some modules. For example, fourth year Clinical Speech and Language students will offer the spoken communication element of the *English and Spoken communication* module and music students will lead the *Music* module as part of their sophomore research and personal, professional development. In addition, a facilitator with an intellectual disability will lead elements of the *Drama and Dance* course, demonstrating to the certificate students what may be possible for them to undertake in the future.

Expected Outcomes and Impact of the Certificate Programme

Through undertaking the *Certificate in Contemporary Living*, it is anticipated that the students will experience personal achievement, undergo personal development, obtain abilities and skills which place them in a position to follow their dreams and to take a full place in society, in whatever form that means to them as individuals. The certificate will provide students with a recognised qualification, allow them to study in a third level environment with their peers, to socially integrate with their peers and to develop the confidence that such an opportunity provides.

The certificate will open the closed door to an environment that can be available to all, in a manner that is suited to the participants' requirements. It is to be hoped that it will become a model of best practice for individuals with learning difficulties throughout Ireland and will be recognised internationally as an exemplar of what is possible. If the evidence, although anecdotal, observed from the pilot programme is extrapolated the students will be able to challenge the current expectations of what they should achieve in the transition to adulthood and to join society as core, rather than peripheral members. This will allow fulfilment of some of the dreams identified by students on the pilot programme:

- *To study at Trinity and get a job.*

- *I would love to go on telly. Study in Trinity on two-year programme and finish college. Work in a pub and go on a cruise holiday with my family.*
- *Get some poems published. Get a certificate from Trinity and travel to Trinity on my own.*
- *To get a full-time office job in a supermarket. Have an apartment with my friend.*
- *Work in a library sorting books.*

SOCIAL ASPECTS AND BENEFITS

Participation in the certificate pilot programme and forthcoming certificate involves more than attending courses or completing modules. Students benefit from the numerous social aspects of attending TCD. The fostering of opportunities to develop friendships and participate in the social activities and events at TCD is a goal of the programme. On the pilot programme the students experienced the following: sharing lunch with other TCD students; developing friendships with students in the clinical speech and language programme; and learning from peer mentors in the music department.

To ensure that the certificate programme is fully inclusive, allowing access to the social experiences at tertiary level, the peer mentoring programme will be further developed to facilitate the students' inclusion in university societies, clubs and social events. The students will be encouraged, in collaboration with their Trinity peers, to form a university society in order to enhance the social element of studying at Trinity.

AGENDA FOR SUPPORT

In order to achieve the goal of full participation in the academic and social life of TCD, the NISLD has set the following agenda:

1. Begin with one student at a time. The NISLD has the ultimate goal of providing a tertiary programme centred around the unique interests, skills, and priorities of the student him/herself. In other words, a student with a learning disability would be able to access a course at TCD and be provided with the supplemental supports and services required to be successfully included in higher education.
2. Plan for the student's schedule. NISLD will work jointly with the Disability Support Services to provide the necessary mentor or coach supports needed to ensure that the student successfully completes the TCD course.
3. Collaborate with college instructors. The NISLD has submitted proposals to the Department of Education and Sciences and the TCD internal funding scheme aimed at developing support and mentorship programmes for TCD academic staff. Experiences such as teaching with TCD staff, and opportunities to modify and adapt university courses and materials would be supported. Finally, TCD academic staff would have opportunities to build their capacity to (a) teach creatively using co-operative learning techniques; and (b) support the needs of diverse learners.
4. Plan for peer support outside of classroom. The *Certificate of Contemporary Living* seeks to provide a uniquely inclusive

experience for individuals with learning difficulties. As such, the NISLD will provide training and support for peers to provide opportunities for friendships and social networks outside of formal coursework and classes.

THOUGHTS FOR THE FUTURE

“Lifelong learning becomes a concept that should be encouraged for everyone, not just an elite few” (Doyle, 2003, p. 321). The inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities into the fabric of academic and social life at Trinity College Dublin is not just about a particular student, “nor is it about doing something nice for individuals with disabilities” (Doyle, 2003, p. 321), or providing eight modules in an off-campus building to a select group of post-secondary students with learning difficulties. Rather, it is an opportunity for persons with learning difficulties to be involved thoroughly into the academic and social activities of the College.

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