

An inclusive learning initiative at NUI Maynooth: The search for a model of best practice for integrating students with intellectual disability

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Abstract

While students with disabilities have been accepted into universities for many years, the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities is a relatively new concept here in Ireland. This article outlines the search by NUI Maynooth, for a model on which to base an inclusive learning initiative for students with intellectual disabilities. The initiative, currently being piloted, came about as a result of collaboration between NUI Maynooth and other agencies dealing with people with intellectual disabilities.

Introduction

The concept of higher-level education for students with intellectual disabilities first came to my awareness when as a mature student I participated in the Student Programme for Undergraduate Research (SPUR Project), at NUI Maynooth in Summer 2010. Part of my brief was to conduct research into national and international models of best practice for students with intellectual disabilities in higher-level institutions, and this marked the beginning of my journey into a complex and little researched area in the field of education.

The early days of my research were marked by confusion and uncertainty as I struggled to understand the subject matter, and having completed six weeks of research, I was more confused than when I started. Following on from this I completed a minor dissertation (in part-fulfilment of the requirements of the BA Degree in Community Education) entitled 'Exploring international and national models of best practice for students with intellectual disabilities in higher level education institutions, with a view to finding a model for NUI Maynooth'.

As a novice researcher and a newcomer to the field of intellectual disability I found the complexity of the subject matter, particularly in relation to legislation

and human rights issues, overwhelming at times. My efforts to understand were further thwarted by the lack of a single working definition of intellectual disability, but I was heartened to note that experts in the field (Luckasson & Reeve, 2001; Hughson, Uditsky & Moody, 2004-2005; Grigal & Hart, 2010) all acknowledged that defining intellectual disability is a complex and challenging issue. The terms 'learning disability' and 'intellectual disability' were used interchangeably in the literature, yet appeared to have two different meanings. This was further compounded by terms such as significant disability, specific learning disability and developmental disability, which likewise meant different things depending on the nationality of the author. It also emerged that while the term 'intellectual disability' is commonly used among professionals and other service providers, "terms such as mental retardation or intellectual handicap are more familiar to many people" (Bray: 2003:1). Having struggled to find a definition that was not complicated by medical or legislative jargon, I opted for a functional, rather than a legal definition which, according to Grigal & Hart (2003:10) may be more useful in certain circumstances. In order to avoid ambiguity, and to save readers from the same confusion I experienced, the term 'intellectual disability' will be used throughout this article and will be understood to mean the following.

Students with significant learning, cognitive, and other conditions (e.g. mental retardation), whose disability impacts their ability to access course content without a strong system of educational supports and services. These are not students who would access the postsecondary education system in a typical manner; rather they require significant planning and collaboration to provide them with access. (Hart, Grigal, Sax, Martinez & Will, 2006:45:1)

The search for a model

My search for a model that would embrace the fully inclusive ideals of NUI Maynooth (NUIM Strategic Plan 2006-2011: Goal 5), which demanded a model that would embrace students with intellectual disabilities into all aspects of university life, and accept them as part of the general college population, took me on a journey that began with an extensive literature review. As mentioned earlier, the concept of higher-level education for students with intellectual disabilities is relatively new internationally, and practically cutting edge here in Ireland, and this was reflected in the literature. Most of the literature related to studies conducted in the United States and Canada, and involved a small cohort of researchers and expert practitioners. The literature relating to the Irish context was understandably sparse, as there was only one full-time initiative in operation at the time.

Models of inclusive education

A number of models of inclusive education emerged from the literature, but the three models as identified by Hart, Grigal, Sax, Martinez & Will (2006), outlined below, are the most widely used internationally.

1. Substantially Separate Model
2. Mixed Program/Mixed Hybrid Model
3. Inclusive Individual Support Model

The substantially separate model

- Programmes are often staffed by special education teachers and are generally housed separately within the college.
- Students only take part in classes with other students with disabilities and “typically don’t enjoy on-going sustained interaction with the general student body” (Hart, McCarthy, Pasternack, Zimbrich & Parker, 2004).

Bearing in mind the inclusion mandates of current legislation, and also the ethos of full inclusion of NUI Maynooth, a programme based on this model was deemed inappropriate and therefore was not given further consideration.

Mixed program/mixed hybrid model

- Programmes normally have a separate programme base on campus.
- While students with intellectual disabilities may take part in regular college courses with the general student body, they mainly follow a separate curriculum with other intellectually disabled students.
- Students may participate in social activities with their non-intellectually disabled peers.
- “The main focus of this model is on “functional life skills and employment objectives” (Grigal & Hart, 2010).

The Mixed Programme/Mixed Hybrid Model is undeniably inclusive, in so far as it offers places to students with intellectual disabilities, and allows access to a limited number of regular college courses. However, because the intellectually disabled students mainly follow a separate curriculum with other intellectually

disabled students, and the fact that there is a separate base on campus for ‘programme’ participants effectively isolates these students from the general college population. This calls to question whether the Mixed Hybrid Model truly aspires to be inclusive or is simply paying lip service to legislative requirements and pressure from national and international disability bodies.

Inclusive individual support model

- Students with intellectual disabilities are invited to participate in courses for audit or credit in regular college courses, certificate programmes, and or degree programmes along with the general student population.
- The intellectually disabled students “are not part of a specially designed programme for students with disabilities, but individuals who avail themselves of existing supports available through the college...and other relevant support agencies” (Weir, 2004:67). There is no program base on campus.
- Services are driven by the student’s vision and career goals, and students receive individualised support throughout the course of their studies.
- No limitations are imposed on the student by a ‘programme’ and students therefore have access to a whole range of college courses and social activities, in keeping with the fully inclusive ideals of the model.

The Inclusive Individual Support Model encapsulates everything that is important to NUI Maynooth in terms of diversity and inclusion, and therefore was considered the most appropriate model on which to base a programme. This model has been used with great success for a number of years in the state of Alberta, Canada, and it is hoped that NUI Maynooth can achieve the same level of success with the implementation of the Inclusive Learning Initiative currently being piloted.

The concept of inclusive education

Before considering the implications of admitting students with intellectual disabilities, to NUI Maynooth and other higher-level education institutions, it is pertinent at this point to briefly review the concept of inclusive education and the human rights issues underpinning it. It is generally accepted that the concept of inclusive education emerged at the World Conference on Special Needs Education Access and Equality, known as the Salamanca Statement 1994. A framework for action on special needs education was agreed at the conference, which stated,

Inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and to the enjoyment and exercise of human rights. Within the field of education this is reflected in the development of strategies that seek to bring about a genuine equalisation of opportunity. (Salamanca, 1994:11)

The concept was restated at the World Education Forum, Dakar 2000 (UNESCO, 2000), and The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006). State parties were called on “to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels.” (United Nations, 2006:Article 24 (1). The European Association of Service Providers for persons with disabilities (EASPD), reinforced the concept in its Manifesto on Inclusive Education (2009), stating clearly that it is the responsibility of all to ensure that every adult and child has the same right to high quality and appropriate education as everybody else (EASPD, 2009).

Beyond the concept

While the concept of inclusive education has been affirmed by all of the above, it is important not to think of it as just a concept. In order to understand its meaning in real terms, we must consider its implications for universities and other higher-level education institutions that aspire to full inclusion of disadvantaged groups. It is also important to differentiate between the ‘partial inclusion’ approach of the Substantially Separate and Mixed Hybrid Models, and the fully inclusive aspirations of the Inclusive Individual Support Model. Before exploring the implications for universities offering such an initiative, I would like to share my own misgivings, as to how students with an intellectual disability could be successfully integrated into a university environment.

Apart from the implications for faculty and also the general student population, I wondered how a student with an intellectual disability would cope with the demands of a university schedule and all it entails. Others with whom I discussed my research had similar reservations. Some questioned whether the academic standing of the university would be adversely affected by admitting intellectually disabled students, while others suggested that a university was simply not a suitable environment for a person with an intellectual disability. These were some of the issues addressed in my dissertation, and as my research progressed and I learned more about the practical application of the Inclusive Individual Support Model, my misgivings were replaced by an understanding of the difference between token inclusion and the true meaning of diversity and integration. I also came to recognise that the benefits of an initiative like

the Inclusive Learning Initiative offered by NUI Maynooth, extend beyond the intellectually disabled students to faculty, regular college students, and everybody else that becomes involved in such an initiative.

Implications of admitting students with intellectual disabilities to a higher education institution

One of the implications of an initiative such as the Inclusive Learning Initiative being piloted by NUI Maynooth is that it contradicts traditional perceptions as to who belongs in a university. By welcoming students with all levels of intellectual disability into the regular college community, outdated notions are severely challenged. For those concerned that the academic standing of the university may suffer as a result of admitting intellectually disabled students, Adams & Browne, (2006:4) point out “it is not about the dilution of academic standards but a recognition of difference, and the creation of a rigorous framework that reflects that position”. A feature of the Inclusive Individual Support Model is that students are not expected to reach degree or even certificate standard. Instead, their work is individually assessed, and accredited according to their own level of achievement. Many of the successful initiatives worldwide based on this model give priority to increasing social skills, and place little emphasis on accreditation, preferring to present students with portfolios of completed work and certificates of achievement. It should be noted however that in some instances intellectually disabled students have

It would be unwise to focus only on the positive implications for universities of offering places to students with intellectual disabilities, because as with all innovative projects, a number of challenges present themselves for faculty, administration and regular college students. A high level of support is needed in the planning stages for each individual student, which inevitably places a strain on resources. However, the small numbers catered for within the Inclusive Individual Support Model means the level of strain is manageable and existing support structures are not unduly stretched. Regular college students are called on to volunteer as mentors to their intellectually disabled peers, but inherent in this challenge lies an opportunity to grow as caring and accepting individuals. Faculty likewise, are called upon to reach out to those who learn differently than others, and to “rethink their pedagogy and remodel their delivery methods” (Smith, 2003:15). Within this challenge also, lies an opportunity for reflection and evaluation.

Conclusion

Having embarked on a journey of exploration into an unknown and under-researched area of adult education, I emerged, with a greater understanding of the intellectually disabled, and their capabilities. The readings for my literature review and the interviews I conducted throughout the course of my research introduced me to a level of compassion and acceptance that most of us can only aspire to.

The past decade has afforded us an immense opportunity here in Ireland to embrace diversity in terms of religion and ethnicity, and we pride ourselves on being an inclusive and culturally diverse nation. This is reflected in our education system, from preschool right through to higher level. However, in order to grow as a nation that truly embraces those who are different, it is imperative that we extend our understanding of diversity beyond these narrow confines. Ireland has a long history of institutionalising its' intellectually disabled citizens, and it is only in recent decades that measures have been taken to integrate intellectually disabled adults into the wider community. The onus is now on every organisation and institution to further advance these measures by providing equitable access and equal opportunities to one of the most marginalized groups in our society, those with intellectual disabilities. NUI Maynooth, by means of the Inclusive Learning Initiative, has demonstrated its' commitment to improving integration approaches, and it is hoped that this will act as a catalyst for other universities and higher-education institutions wishing to do likewise.

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