



DIALOGUE – Bridges between Research and Practice in ULLL

Group 1: Access and Progression

Partner: NUI Maynooth, Ireland



NUI MAYNOOTH
Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

CASE STUDY 1: Stretching the Academy? Widening Participation and Outreach Campuses: An Irish Case Study

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Reflective Summary

In an Irish context ULL is primarily understood as the desire to move towards 1) greater systemic integration and institutional flexibility and 2) to address inequality. Research suggests that both of these things have occurred but that systemic inequality still exists. This case study looks at the establishment of an outreach Life Long Learning Campus at Kilkenny by the Department of Adult and Community Education at NUI Maynooth. It offers an example of an initiative which has had many positive ULL outcomes through innovation. By studying the genesis of Kilkenny campus it becomes clear that from a 'grassroots level' however the general policy objectives outlined above have played less of a role than might be imagined.

Even more pointedly these case studies illustrate how the links between research and practice can be fluid and nuanced and how initiatives are often more sensitive to local needs, power structures and rely more on innovation within established fields of practice than policy directives. When thinking about improving the links between research and practice these influences need to be taken into account. The other striking finding from this Case Study is the dearth of research undertaken on the programme in Kilkenny despite over a decade of successful innovation. Projects such as this and the Return to Learning Programme outlined in the second Case Study highlight the gap between formal research agendas and the ongoing research carried out by the practitioners who constantly evaluate and develop such initiatives. There is an opportunity to explore the barriers that practitioners face in bringing their wealth of research to light.

Keywords: Outreach, Satellite Campus, Widening Participation, Life Long Learning, Access, Mature Students.

Abstract: The following case study describes the development of a 'satellite' campus by the Department of Adult Education in the National University of Maynooth (NUIM). This outreach campus was established in Kilkenny in the south east of Ireland in 1997. It outlines the origin, rationale and functioning of the campus and ends by considering the strengths, limitations and future prospects for NUIM Kilkenny. The study highlights the inter play between research and pragmatic concerns, and how a philosophy of adult education and pedagogy can give rise to innovative and flexible responses to the challenges and needs of a particular region.



General Background : The Place of NUIM and the Department of Adult Education within the Broader Context

Located 30 km west of Dublin NUIM is Ireland's smallest but fastest growing university. The college in Maynooth was established in 1795 by the Catholic Church and was Ireland's national seminary and later became a Pontifical University. Today NUI Maynooth is a non-denominational university of 8,800 students in total. The university offers undergraduate and postgraduate courses in the Arts, Science, Engineering, Philosophy and Celtic Studies. The university has three faculties – Arts, Celtic Studies & Philosophy; Social Sciences and Science & Engineering, which offer programmes from undergraduate to doctorate levels in a range of disciplines including the traditional humanities, music, education, media studies, psychology, basic sciences, social sciences, computer and electronic engineering.

A large proportion of the student body (over 4,000) are full-time undergraduate BA students enrolled in the faculty of Arts, Celtic Studies and Philosophy most of whom are taking a general Arts degree which usually entails work in three different disciplines and is typically completed in three years. The science and technology primary degree courses are completed over a four-year cycle. Of the 1,800 postgraduate students at the University in 2010 – just under a third were undertaking PhD research, usually over three years, and the other two thirds were registered for Masters or Diploma qualifications which take one to two years to complete. The university offers a wide range of diploma courses, which are vocationally orientated with a particular high numbers opting for postgraduate diploma courses in education as a secondary teaching qualification. There are approximately 800 staff working in the university.

Both access, especially for mature students, and flexible provision are now a fundamental part of NUIM planning and strategy. For over a decade NUIM has attracted greater numbers of mature students than any other university. Research examining the experience of mature students in different HE institutions in Ireland (Fleming & Finnegan, 2011; Fleming, Loxley, Kenny & Finnegan, 2010) has shown that NUIM enjoys an enviable reputation amongst mature students across the tertiary sector. In NUIM mature students have cited the visibility of other mature students within the student body, a pro-access ethos across the university and the small scale of institution as the most important factors in making them feel at ease. In 2008/09 fifteen per cent of new entrants were mature students and they made up 14 per cent of the total full-time student body. Students with disabilities accounted for 5 per cent of undergraduate students in NUIM and young students from designated socio-economically disadvantaged schools made up 4 per cent of the total and it has been estimated that working class students accounts for over a fifth of the student body. LLL is part of the university's Strategic Plan 2006-2011 and has embraced LLL offering continuous professional development, entry-level and pre-university courses in their discipline and is a leader in Irish HE in off-campus provision in part-time courses for returning learners, in-service professional development and other part-time provision.



The Department of Adult and Community Education at the National University of Ireland is the only academic adult education department in the Republic of Ireland and has for over 30 years been offering courses and programmes in access, undergraduate to postgraduate education including PhD and EdD in adult education.

The department has led the field on widening participation by providing appropriate courses both on and off-campus for non-traditional learners and adult education practitioners. It has well developed connections with community and Further Education institutions across Ireland. Promoting social inclusion is central to the ethos of the department. Key to the work of the Department is the belief that

- Policies and practices of adult education must be contextualised within frameworks that acknowledge the social and cultural forces that exclude specific sectors of the population from access to education and from contributing to the knowledge creation process. This Department operates within the formal education system, which is a powerful player in determining access to and participation in higher education. Consequently the Department has an obligation to address systemic and procedural obstacles that inhibit access to education and develop alternative progression routes.
- Equality in terms of access to educational opportunities is an important first step in the process of widening participation. A second and equally important step is creating a learning environment where ‘non-traditional students’ can participate in their own right and not as exceptional individualised cases.
- Practices of pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, administration and quality assurance are interdependent and are all equally important in widening and supporting participation.

The Continuing Education unit within the Department of Adult & Community Education carries much of the responsibility for LLL including the university unit within the Department of Adult & Community Education graduate programmes. In excess of 1 500 register annually for these courses (for a brief review of the NUIM and the Dept of ACE work on LL please see EUA Sirius report)¹

Background and Rationale for Establishing the Kilkenny Campus

It was largely this commitment to widening participation and adult education approaches to education that led to the establishment of Kilkenny campus . A number of degree, diploma and certificate courses are offered there, some are offered in collaboration with other departments of the university while others are delivered in partnership with

¹ See http://adulteducation.nuim.ie/documents/EUA_SIRUSfinal_EngaginginLifelongLearning.pdf



other third-level institutions in the region. All courses are designed to offer maximum flexibility.

Planning for the Outreach Campus in Kilkenny began in 1996 during the European Year of Lifelong Learning. This year also coincided with Ireland's presidency of the European Union and was marked by the adoption by the European Commission of the significant 'Strategy for Life Long Learning' document prepared by the Irish Presidency². However, the policy context is only one part of the story. The example of an outreach campus in the North of Ireland run by Queen's University, Belfast, the strategic concerns of an expanding and diversifying university, the specific agenda of the department, individual initiative and a coalition of institutional interests were the key factors in the establishment of the new campus.

It offers some insight into the practicalities of ULL to note that Kilkenny was not the first choice for the campus. In the mid nineties a well-known figure in NUIM and Irish education Tom Collins began identifying possible sites for an outreach campus. Both NUI Maynooth and the Department of ACE were particularly concerned to widen participation and to build upon their reputation as an institution that was open for 'non-traditional' students. A satellite campus would also provide an opportunity to develop new forms of modular accreditation and to try out new ways of teaching and learning using new technologies.

The first possible location discussed was in a working class suburb of West Dublin with a rapidly expanding population, high rates of social and educational exclusion and, at the time, no third level provision.

The project was eventually 'diverted' to Kilkenny. The key difference with the west Dublin site was that there was a range of institutional actors that already had the resources, influence and space at their disposal who were interested in facilitating the project in Kilkenny. This included the Catholic Church, local business interests and the county council. Besides which there had been a long running campaign in the city for the establishment of a third level college. Space had become available in St. Kieran's College in Kilkenny. The college is a well-known secondary school in Kilkenny with august buildings and substantial grounds close to the centre of the town, which had also been a seminary. Once the seminary closed large parts of the building was empty and in need of new tenants and a new purpose.

From the perspective of the Department of Adult and Community Education the initiative offered the possibility to do something innovative in terms of widening participation in a largely old fashioned and inflexible HE sector. It has been outlined above that Irish HE has been transformed in many ways but nonetheless remains in certain respects very traditional in course design and provision. This is abundantly clear when we examine in the progression and access routes available to students. The system remains tied to educational courses designed for students who are attending a central campus on a full-time basis. Policy and funding streams also reflect this bias. In fact both the OECD (2004) and Skilbeck (2001) have noted in reviews of Irish HE that one of the key weaknesses of the system is this lack of

² See http://europa.eu/documents/comm/white_papers/pdf/com95_590_en.pdf



flexibility. Today there are less than twenty thousand part-time students enrolled in undergraduate courses and less than ten thousand postgraduate students (HEA, 2011).

Besides this there was a considerable 'educational shortfall in Kilkenny. Kilkenny is a town in the south east of Ireland of just under 25,000 people and the surrounding county has a population just over 87,500 CSO (2011). Only 25% CSO (2006) hold third level qualifications which is well below the national average of 35%. Low participation rates in second and third level education, and a high level of early school leavers, are educational issues that have been documented across the South East Region as a whole CSO, (2006). This is, at least in part, because the nearest universities are in Cork, which is 150 km from Kilkenny and in Dublin and NUIM which is 120 km away. The nearest Institute of Technology is Waterford and this is approximately 50 km away.

The Development of Kilkenny Campus

Once it was decided that the project would go ahead a Steering Committee with strong representation from educational, business and community interests in the region was appointed to further the development of the campus, plan appropriate courses in the light of local needs identify and mobilise political and financial resources which could contribute to the long term and sustainable development of the programme.

The campus has since then consolidated and developed and in 2008 St. Kieran's College undertook substantial renovations and refurbished two floors in the building for use as classrooms and office space. Shortly afterwards a formal lease was negotiated between the College and the University, replacing the loose arrangement that had pertained for the first ten years of the existence of the Campus.

The first courses offered through the Campus were the newly developed modular, part-time and inter-disciplinary degree programmes in Community Studies and in Local Studies. These have continued to be the core programmes at the Campus. Both are inter-departmental and inter-disciplinary degrees; the Local Studies programme is offered jointly by the Departments of History, Geography, Irish and Classics, while the Departments of Adult & Community Education, Sociology, Anthropology and Applied Social Studies collaborate to offer the Community Studies programme. Academic issues are dealt with by a Course Management Team, which comprises the Registrar, the Heads of the participating departments, and staff from the Department of Adult & Community Education, which co-ordinates and manages the programmes.

Other early offerings included the Diploma in Youth and Community Work, which provided professional training for practitioners in this field, and continuing professional development programmes for teachers and trainers. The Campus programme has since been augmented by a number of other Certificates and Diplomas which offer stepping stones to the degrees, and progression thereafter to postgraduate studies. However, the number of responsible departments from the main campus involved in Kilkenny has diminished.

Offered in the evenings, the modular structure of the programmes on offer facilitates participation by a wide range of adult learners. In addition, residential and non-residential course modules are offered during the summer period allowing participants to supplement the modules obtained during the winter and spring semesters. Overall, the greatest flexibility possible is afforded to participants thereby allowing them to study at their own pace and in accordance with their own subject preferences.

The use of Recognition of Accredited Prior Learning (RAPL) in the two inter-disciplinary part-time BA programmes also fosters progression to degree level for entrants who have taken introductory third level courses with other Higher Education Institutes. Developed specifically for adult learners returning to education, these degree programmes also incorporate such key Life Long Learning features as credit accumulation and transfer, flexible modular structure, student-centred learning methodologies, etc.

In their capacity to recognise accredited prior learning, their openness to credit transfer, their flexibility with regard to credit accumulation and their capacity to ‘travel to the students’, these programmes provide a mechanism whereby adult students can advance in a systematic, progressive and learner friendly way towards a primary degree.

Table 1: Kilkenny Campus: Total Awards 1997 – 2011	
Total	1,143
Ph.D. (History)	3
M. Litt. (History)	3
Higher Diploma in Applications of ICT in Education	45
Post Graduate Certificates in Adult and Community Education	28
Post Graduate Certificate in Arts in Healthcare Settings	12
BA (Local / Community Studies)	87
Diploma in Arts (Local & Community Studies)	128
Diploma in Youth & Community Work	10
Diploma in Addiction Studies	10
Dioplóma sa Ghaeilge	24
NUI Certificate in Psychology	90
NUI Certificate in Counselling Skills	105
NUI Certificate in Addiction Studies	100
NUI Certificate in Adult Guidance: Theory & Practice	39
NUI Certificate in Adult and Community Education	17
NUI Certificate in Local History	45
NUI Certificate in Training & Continuing Education	184
NUI Certificate in Heritage Management	8
NUI Certificate in Training (Special Needs)	63
NUI Certificate in Equality Studies	8
NUI Certificate in Performance	12
NUI Certificate in Directing	10
NUI Certificate in Creative Writing for Publication	83
NUI Certificate in Spanish	26
NUI Certificate in Philosophy	3



Student Experience at Kilkenny

All the students are adults many of whom may not have completed second level education, are admitted to the degrees on the basis of an application form and interview. The majority have come from the immediate area but in recent years the numbers coming from the surrounding region have increased noticeably. Some students tell us stories of the significance not only of the degree qualification but of the learning involved for their opportunities in the employment market; others emphasise personal development and quality of life; above all, their stories resonate with new-found possibility:

“I have met the most interesting, generous, warm-hearted people among students, staff and lecturers. The communication/co-operation/help is great. Our campus is intimate, friendly with availability of learning aids easily accessible.”

In the early days of the Campus before the extra space became available in 2008 students experienced difficulties due to a lack of teaching space at peak times which constrained timetabling. There were also difficulties with adequate canteen facilities and access to computers, as the main student study area was located in the Library. These issues have largely been addressed with the addition of a dedicated IT room and ‘Coffee Dock’. However disabled access is extremely limited due to the age and design of the building. There is a lift but it is too small to accommodate most modern wheelchairs and structural restrictions constrain upgrading. While the Campus has served mobility-impaired students, this has required solutions to be found on a case-by-case basis. The use of technology and ICT in learning has also been more limited than initially hoped.

Since the recession the biggest challenge facing students is the financial burden of finding fees to continue their studies. The modular BA programme is highly flexible and accessible but the relatively long time it takes for a student to complete (on average five years) and the relative expense of paying on a module by module basis is having a noticeable effect on retention rates and on recruitment of new students. In the past four years there has been only two new intakes of BA students, i.e. a new group every second year, whereas up to 2008 there had been an annual intake. This also leads to questions around saturation for the programme which has been running for thirteen years in a relatively small region. The issue of progression to postgraduate programmes had been of concern to students as they had to travel to the main Maynooth Campus to continue their studies. However the success of the new postgraduate programmes over the past 18 months has fulfilled the demand in this area.

Five graduates to date have undertaken doctoral studies, three commenced their academic careers with NUI Certificates before progressing to degree and subsequently to PhD).

Successes and Strengths of Kilkenny

In a region in which there is low levels of third level participation and in which the university is seen as something removed and elitist the potential for easily accessible local ‘campuses’



is clear. Consistently 'non-traditional' learners, especially mature students, have highlighted how difficult it is to juggle their various commitments and concerns along with the demands of traditional University timetable. Students with families, work and other life commitments require more flexible University provision. Distance and travel requirement are also regularly cited as a important factor in choosing to begin a course of study for adult students.

Furthermore, as a number of scholars have pointed out most notably Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).) a crucial issue in terms of widening participation is the extent to which working class and other non-traditional students feels like a 'fish out of water 'in elite institutions. A strong sense of disjunction between one's life experience and the University space, that is a sense of both physical and cultural distance, undoubtedly impacts on access and participation. Thus locally accessible, community based small scale institutions with good student/lecturer ratios have the potential to overcome some of these barriers. Student feedback suggests that the outreach campus has been partially successful in tackling this problem.

The community of learners and scholars that has grown up around the Campus is key to its development in the future. The fact that a number of tutors from the region have graduated from the Campus and are now teaching on programmes will contribute to its development and growth into the future.

In the past year significant partnerships have been formed locally with community and development agencies to access funding for groups of unemployed students and other target groups wishing to access part time education.

The Campus has also formed strategic alliances with the Crafts Council of Ireland, a national agency which is located in the region to develop programmes and accredit existing programmes in the area of craft and design. This broad area reflects a key strategic economic development aim of the region and is a major step towards further developing programmes designed specifically to respond to local needs.

Continuing Issues and Challenges

Despite these successes there are a number of issues that need to be highlighted in terms of how this initiative has been developed. The history of the establishment of the Campus and its location at St. Kieran's College is key to understanding both the particular challenges and triumphs of the past thirteen years. So while St. Kieran's College is well known, central, and located on attractive grounds the fact that it is strongly associated with schooling, may have inhibited some students from taking up programmes. Repeatedly research has revealed the extent to which negative experiences of schooling are a major issue for many non-traditional students (Finnegan, 2009, 2011). There is also confusion as to the identity of the campus as an adult space which may have hampered the sense that the campus was autonomous and something new.

Kilkenny campus came about through the mobilisation of a coalition of institutions. This influence is often subtle and almost unconscious, surfacing only intermittently in the interface between the Campus and its Steering Committee and in the relationship between



local stakeholders and the University, and most clearly in the relationship between the Campus as 'tenant' and St. Kieran's College as 'landlord'. However, the ongoing interest and support of the local Steering Committee over the thirteen years of the existence of the project has provided an important bridge between the Campus and its hinterland, providing a means of local ownership and access to decision makers and key influencers within the community.

In terms of the relationship of Kilkenny with the main university campus, it has enjoyed excellent support from senior management and from its 'home' Department of Adult and Community Education. It also has a successful model of partnership with the other eight Departments who are involved in the modular BA. The University itself is unsure of the direction to take on the Campus, and in practice the Campus is not integrated into the main business and strategy of the University and is seen very much as the specific business of the Department of Adult and Community Education. This has led to a difficulty in the forging of partnerships with new Departments and the development of new programmes outside the expertise of the Department of Adult and Community Education.

The Campus has also faced serious financial strains in recent years. The Campus itself is funded through a mix of a recurrent grant from the HEA and student fees. In 2006 the Campus submitted a Strategic Plan (2007 to 2011) and Report (2001 to 2006) requesting additional funding to develop and expand. Although the submission was received positively there was no increase in funding due to a lack of a policy framework for outreach initiatives and the handover of responsibility for the project from one government agency to another (from the Department of Education and Science to the HEA). The funding was cut in 2010 by 9.4%.

Another key issue for the Campus is pursuing its goal of widening participation when all the programmes it offers are self-financing and students cannot find the financial means to engage with the programmes on offer. As already noted fees and grants are not available for part-time students. This means that the most severely disadvantaged students are unlikely to enroll. The Campus has applied for targeted Government funding over the past year for part time programmes targeting unemployed people, however the criteria for such courses has been very narrowly linked to projected skills shortages and the application has so far been unsuccessful.

However, the Campus has begun to find new ways of engaging with partners in the community in order to find funding for particular groups of students who would not otherwise afford to participate. This is a key issue with regard to its remit of widening access and participation as Ireland struggles through another year of recession. Linked to this is the need to engage with other Departments and other institutions and agencies to develop new programmes. At present the University is undertaking a new strategic plan under a new President, who has made a commitment to include Kilkenny in this process as a step closer to greater integration.



Lessons from the Case Study

The development of the campus in Kilkenny has certainly provided access for mature students in the region. Nearly all of these students come from the HEA designated access groups and the organisation of the curriculum and courses reflect many of the key progressive ideas within LLP-flexibility, adult education approaches to teaching and learning, and providing supports for students coming from further education.

The link between research and theory and practice is not always straightforward, as we have seen from the Case Study, in some instances pragmatic concerns, and the serendipitous coalition of local interest groups and key educators with vision are powerful forces for action. In the case of Kilkenny Campus the coming together of these groups resulted in the setting up of the Campus rather than a national strategy or a formal piece of research to establish its location.

This can then give rise to challenges as we have seen in the case of the Campus where the institutional setting and the need to balance the coalition of interests who came together to establish the Campus in the first place; the financial and academic constraints of running a small outreach campus; and the systemic problem of the lack of funding for part time students have arguably influenced the development of the full potential of the campus.

One of the striking findings of the initial research undertaken for this project has been the dearth of research on the programme in Kilkenny despite over a decade of successful innovation. It is an important recommendation that research be carried out on an ongoing basis to gather the learning from innovative projects such as this.

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