



NUI MAYNOOTH

Óliscoll na hÉireann Mhí Nuad

Quality Review of the Access Office

8 – 10 February 2011

Peer Review Report

Peer Review Group:

External Reviewer:

**Professor Liz Thomas, Director,
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Internal Reviewers:

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NUI Maynooth – Quality review of the Access Office, February 2011

Summary

Overall we found the Access Office to be delivering relevant and effective student-centred services to an appropriate range of target groups. In addition it is making a valuable contribution to national policy and leadership in the field of access and student success. The Office has a strong and effective team and is comparatively well resourced. There is a case for more research and evaluation to improve and disseminate the work of the Access Office internally and internationally. Future priorities should relate to mainstreaming access and success across the institution, to involve a wider staff base and to benefit more students. This is likely to include reviewing institutional organisation, procedures and practices; assessing the value and practicality of extending Access Office interventions to the wider student population; and greater collaboration with and embedding of the Access Office in the institution as a whole.

1. Strengths

The reviewers were impressed by the work of the Access Office, and identified a number of specific strengths:

- i. Student-centred provision
- ii. High student satisfaction
- iii. Strong and effective team
- iv. National leadership

1.1 Student-centred provision

Discussions with students and staff demonstrated that the work of the Access Office is highly student-centred – and clearly meeting their needs (see below). The staff have an excellent understanding of the students they are working with and the Office has developed experience and knowledge about these issues which is recognised nationally, and are able to proactively identify appropriate and effective interventions for their students. Furthermore, the team is highly committed to meeting the needs of these students and is flexibly managed allowing them to respond quickly and helpfully to students' requests for further support. The combination of well-informed, committed and accommodating staff who are managed flexibly enables the Office to proactively and reactively deliver a highly student-centred and dynamic service. This is evidenced by the range of services which are available to the student groups who are engaged by the Access Office pre-entry and who use the Access Office post-entry. Compared to other Access Offices in Ireland, and internationally, this is an extensive and high quality range of services.

1.2 High student satisfaction

Groups representing mature students, students with a disability, those from disadvantaged backgrounds or who entered the university via the NUI Cert route were invited to discuss their experience of the supports provided by the Access Office. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The practice of establishing early or pre-entry contact with these groups supports confident transition. Users of the service feel well informed about the range of supports available and how and where to access them and they are comfortable about approaching the Access Office for help. There was praise for the quality of the provision available at the Office itself and for their signposting of support provision elsewhere in the university. The students we spoke to felt that their academic, financial and pastoral support needs were well catered for. Several, across all the groups, believed that this support had been crucial to their retention progress and achievement. The Access Office also serves a social function that is recognised and valued by student groups who can feel marginalised in large institutions. The central location on the NUIM campus, the pre-established relationships with staff and the use of student tutors contribute to student satisfaction by fostering effective integration within the university and the student body as a whole.

1.3 Strong and effective team

The Access Office has a core team of staff who are knowledgeable, experienced and dedicated. They work well with each other, and exercise a high level of autonomy in their work in schools, the community and within the University. During our visit all staff displayed considerable depth of understanding about their own areas of work. By international standards we felt that the Office is well-resourced.

1.4 National leadership

The work of the NUIM Access Office is well known and respected nationally. The Director is acknowledged as a progressive influence on widening access. Her activities have contributed substantially to the high profile enjoyed by the Access Office externally and are in large part responsible for its reputation. In the context of the Irish Universities Association, the initiatives at Maynooth are regarded as innovative and examples of best practice. According to representatives of the Higher Education Authority and the Department of Education and Skills the Director took a lead role in influencing policy that resulted in the development of HEAR and DARE.

2. The case for more research and evaluation

While students and other partners spoke highly of the work of the Access Office, and this provided anecdotal evidence of effectiveness there is scope for more research and evaluation.

2.1 Current monitoring and evaluation

We identified the following monitoring and evaluation currently being undertaken:

- i. **Routine monitoring.** Routine data about numbers of students participating in activities and using services, bursaries allocated, etc, is collected by Access Office staff, primarily for accountability purposes, especially to funders.
- ii. **Formative evaluation.** Formative data about specific interventions is regularly collected at the end of visits, projects etc. This is immediate and generally quite simplistic (did you like, did you enjoy etc). The main purpose is to improve the quality of similar interventions in the future, it does not challenge the underlying principles or format of the interventions and it does not examine medium or longer term impact.
- iii. **Tracking of students.** Tracking of students is occasionally undertaken for specific projects, e.g. NUIM Cert. This work is undertaken manually by Access Office or project staff; it is time consuming and limited in scope.

2.2 Potential value of further research and evaluation

We have identified the following purposes and benefits of undertaking further research and evaluation:

- i. **Impact assessment to inform decision-making.** Assessment of impact of interventions would inform decision-making of the Access Office and the institution as a whole. This is especially important during a period of reduced funding for higher education to inform investment decisions. This would require evidence of effectiveness, impact and value for money.
- ii. **Research and evaluation to engage colleagues.** High quality research and evaluation will be an important tool to facilitate in-reach within the institution to engage colleagues in contributing to and embedding aspects of the work of the Access Office into mainstream work of the institution. This will need to include scholarly research, comparative evaluation of impact and cost-benefit analysis. Analysis of Access Office and institutional data will be important to combat 'widening access myths' and to prove the value of specific interventions
- iii. **Dissemination of excellent practice to international colleagues to enhance the institutional reputation.** This would require robust data demonstrating effectiveness of interventions. We envisage this could be through academic journal papers, practitioner articles and conference publications. This would enhance the reputation of the Access Office and the University of Ireland Maynooth.

2.3 Barriers to further research and evaluation

We identified the following obstacles that inhibit the Access Office in conducting further research and evaluation:

- i. **Access to institutional data.** It appears that extracting relevant data from the institutional MIS system is problematic. Targeted students are not always identifiable and data query reports cannot be run off easily.
- ii. **Staff time and expertise.** Staff prioritise the delivery of services for students, and this is where their expertise lies. Staff do however have an interest in undertaking academic research and applied evaluation, but in general they do not have high levels of expertise.

2.4 Recommendations regarding research and evaluation

In light of the purposes and benefits of more research and evaluation, and the barriers identified, we propose the following recommendations with regards to research and evaluation:

- i. **Access to institutional data.** Work across the University to review how institutional data can be more readily used by the Access Office, or how appropriate management information can be made available to Access Office staff.
- ii. **Access Office staff capacity.** Staff within the Access Office expressed interest in undertaking further research and evaluation, and ways of developing their capacity and expertise in this area should be developed. This could include working in partnership with academics and/or undertaking research or evaluation training.
- iii. **Strategic links with academic departments in cognate areas.** The Access Office provides a rich source of data, research participants and research topics/projects in the fields of education, community development, social policy, sociology, psychology, pedagogy, student experience, widening access, student retention and success, adult education, etc. Both academic staff and students could be encouraged to work collaboratively with Access Office staff and projects, and Access Office staff may wish to develop their capacity and expertise in relation to applied or academic research.

3. Mainstreaming access and student success

The Access Office has been highly successful in increasing the number of non-traditional school leavers,, students with a disability and mature students studying at the University, and the post-entry support provided through the Access Office is of great benefit to eligible students. Our discussions with institutional staff demonstrated however that increasing numbers of students from 'diverse' backgrounds puts pressure on other parts of the institution. In addition, there are students who do not benefit from the post-entry support provided by the Access Office - either because they are unaware of it, or they choose not to use it or they are ineligible (e.g. because they did not apply through HEAR, or they have not registered their disability) but who would benefit from its services.

Mainstreaming refers to the process of integrating access and targeted support into all 'activities' (taken in the broadest sense) of the institution, and thus everyone, rather than a particular group, has responsibility for widening access and ensuring all students are successful. An inclusive approach promotes the use of mainstream practices and approaches that meet the needs of all students, as opposed to relying on the use of additional practices for particular student groups, such as those from access or equality groups.

We are therefore proposing that the institution should build on the excellent practice of the Access Office to begin a process of 'mainstreaming access and student success'.

3.1 Rationale for mainstreaming

Mainstreaming access and student success would have the following benefits for NUIM:

- i. **Extend knowledge and expertise across the institution.** The Access Office possesses vast expertise and knowledge about widening access and supporting and enabling students to be successful. Mainstreaming would extend this expertise across the institution to benefit both staff and students.
- ii. **Promote student equity.** Mainstreaming would help to ensure that all students are able to benefit from the academic development and pastoral support available. Financial support in particular would need to be rationed, but it would avoid students from poor families who have access through the CAO rather than HEAR being denied support.
- iii. **Overturing deficit views of students from diverse backgrounds.** A mainstream approach would challenge notions that 'Access Office' students need remedial support to succeed, but rather provide learning, teaching and academic development to support all students to fulfil their potential and maximise their success.
- iv. **Improving institutional rates of student retention and success.** Mainstreaming would make a significant contribution to improving the retention and success of all NUIM students, not just those who are eligible for support from the Access Office. HE institutions in many other countries are constantly under external pressure to improve their rates of retention and success, and we believe that Irish institutions are likely to experience an increase in this trend, especially in the current economic climate.
- v. **Create capacity amongst Access Office staff to undertake innovative pilot projects and contribute to strategic roll-out across the institution.** If the University made a commitment to mainstreaming access and success this would require significant input from Access Office staff to roll-out best practice across the institution and integrate it into academic departments and services across the institution. Thus, staff would need to reduce or relinquish day-to-day

responsibility for delivering access and success interventions, and focus on the more strategic role working across the University. In the medium to long term this would create capacity amongst Access Office staff to develop and pilot innovations and new approaches to widening access and enabling student support.

- vi. **Provide recognition and support to other parts of the institution that are experiencing increased demand as a result of greater student diversity.** A commitment to mainstreaming access and success would signal recognition to colleagues across the institution of the increased pressure they are experiencing as a result of greater student diversity. The mainstreaming approach would need to address how the capacity and support needs of these colleagues could be met.
- vii. **Effective use of resources.** The Access Office is well-resourced and successful, but is only benefiting a limited number of students. It would be appropriate to review current resources, and explore how they might be deployed more widely across the University to facilitate the access and success of a wider number of students.

3.2 Some current examples of mainstreaming

In the course of the Quality Review we identified some positive examples of how strands of the Access Office work have already been mainstreamed.

- i. **Assistive technology.** The Access Office has an excellent knowledge of technology that can prove beneficial to students with a range of disabilities to support and facilitate their learning in HE. Rather than focus on working exclusively with students with a disability in the Access Office they have mainstreamed provision in two ways. First, they have worked with IT services and have funded the installation of the full assistive technology software on all machines across the University. Second, the Access Office provides training sessions and drop-in support to enable students to select from the range of available assistive technology and use the technology effectively.
- ii. **Maths Support Centre.** The Access Office, together with academic colleagues across the University, recognised that students were struggling with the maths component of a range of programmes. This may be related to earlier educational disadvantage, although this is not necessarily the case. The Access Office co-funded the Maths Support Centre which provides taught sessions and drop-in support for students struggling with the maths component of any course. The Access Office was able to train the tutors to provide the support, and thus share and cascade expertise about academic skills development.
- iii. **Student Plus.** Originally devised to meet the needs of students with disabilities, Student+ positively promotes the use by students of the institution's technology resources for learning support and communicating. The aim is for students to discover learning as an enjoyable and sociable experience while the underlying purpose is to

encourage independent decisions about personal learning strategies. The Access Office recognises this has relevance for every learner and following a successful pilot, the scheme was rolled out to all first year Access students.

A review of the approach taken to making these activities more widely available would be useful. An understanding of how the process has worked in these cases would assist the Access Office, together with colleagues from across the University, to develop models for mainstreaming other initiatives developed by the Access Office that have proved to be effective.

3.3 Things to consider

Making a commitment to mainstreaming is a major undertaking for the Access Office and for NUIM. There are a number of things that you may wish to consider.

- i. **Identifying priorities.** It is not appropriate to try to mainstream all the work of the Access Office at the same time. Building on the examples of work that have already been mainstreamed, it may be useful to consider what are the priority areas for mainstreaming. This may be influenced by:
 - a. Work currently undertaken by the Access Office which is particularly effective and/or likely to be of significant benefit to a wider student community.
 - b. Areas of high demand or stress in other parts of the institution which could be alleviated by mainstreaming.
 - c. Activities that can be relatively easily mainstreamed to provide some 'quick wins' and evidence of progress.

- ii. **Institutional infrastructure.** It will be necessary to review the institutional infrastructure – policies, procedures, committees and other institutional structures that facilitate student engagement and support.
 - a. It may be necessary to adapt institutional policies – such as equality and diversity, admissions, learning and teaching, human resources etc to recognise, reflect or support new arrangements. For example, HR policy may need to reflect changed staff roles for academic and service staff across the university as they take greater responsibility for student access and success.
 - b. Procedures such as course design, validation, staff performance review may need to be altered to facilitate the changes.
 - c. Committee structure and membership may need to be revised, to include colleagues from the Access Office, and to provide a cross-institutional focus for widening access and ensuring student retention and success – tasks that are currently the primary responsibility of the Access Office.

- iii. **Sharing good practice.** It will be useful to examine mechanisms and approaches for sharing good practice across the institution. This is likely to be primarily about sharing good practice from the Access

Office to other colleagues, but there should be recognition that staff in other parts of the University may also have effective practice that could be shared and mainstreamed.

- iv. **Collaboration and joint working.** It will be important to develop a collaborative approach to mainstreaming, based on partnerships between colleagues, departments and services, and to emphasise joint working to achieve shared objectives.
- v. **Resource issues.** The resource implications of mainstreaming for the Access Office and the whole of the institution will have to be carefully reviewed, to ensure an effective transition to a new way of working.

3.4 Potential next steps/recommendations for mainstreaming

- i. We recommend an initial review of the present institutional organisation, procedures and practices to assess the extent to which the work of the Access Office is able to influence the wider work of the university. The review could consider whether current institutional policies, procedures and practices accord with the principles and philosophy of the Access Office and could measure the extent to which the wider university already contributes to and benefits from the work of the Access Office.
- ii. The review would provide a basis for assessing the value and practicality of extending Access Office interventions to the wider student population, supported by improved data, evaluation and research. The comparative effectiveness of the interventions could be measured against the university's priorities and inform a strategy for the roll out of programmes that would contribute to retention and success for all students.
- iii. The practical process of embedding the Access Office in the university as a whole implies further collaboration. Consideration is needed of which services and departments would be required to contribute to mainstream delivery of programmes and of how responsibility for student success could be shared. Barriers to inclusive practice need to be recognised and addressed. We saw effective models of mainstreaming Access Office initiatives across the institution and examples of successful collaboration between the Access Office and other departments and services – Library, Academic Access Advisors etc. The experience of developing these models contains lessons about the practical process that will be valuable when forming a strategy for further mainstreaming.

Conclusions

There is much excellent work going on in the Access Office. The Office is well organised and managed, and staff are knowledgeable, enthusiastic and effective. The services are highly valued by students and other partners. There is however a need for greater evaluation and research to demonstrate the impact of these interventions, and to facilitate the sharing of practice

internally and internationally. There are some excellent examples of how the Access Office has led and contributed to cross-institutional initiatives to widen access and enhance student retention and success. We feel that there is scope to mainstream more of the work of the Access Office. This would be in the interest of student equity, staff workload, and institutional reputation in the area of student success.

Resources

The following resources may be useful to assist with the process of evaluating impact and mainstreaming access and success.

Berry, J. and Loke, G. (2011) *Improving the degree attainment of Black and minority ethnic students*. York: HEA

Blackey, H., et al *Evaluating the impact of learning and teaching strategies*. Cardiff: HEFCW

Griffiths, S. (2010) *Teaching for Inclusion in Higher Education: A Guide to Practice*. Queens' University

May, H. and Bridger, K. (2010) *Developing and Embedding Inclusive Policy and Practice*. York: HEA

May, H. and Felsing, A. (2010) *Strategic Approaches to Disabled Student Engagement*. London: Equality Challenge Unit/HEA

May, H. and Thomas, L. (2010) *Self-evaluation Framework: Embedding Equality and Diversity in the Curriculum*. York: HEA

Thomas, L. (2009) *Mainstreaming and Sustaining Widening Participation in Institutions*, Final Report to the Higher Education Funding Council for England, September 2009. Ormskirk: Action on Access available http://www.actiononaccess.org/index.php?p=11_2_3

Thomas, L. and Jones, R. (2007) *Embedding employability in the context of widening participation*. York: Higher Education Academy

Thomas, L. with May, H., Harrop, H., Houston, M., Knox, H., Lee, M.F., Osborne, M., Pudner, H. and Trotman, C. (2005) *From the margins to the mainstream: embedding widening participation in higher education*. London: Universities UK
http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Documents/margins_fullreport.pdf

Thomas, L. and May, H. (2010) *Inclusive learning and teaching* York: HEA.

Thomas, L. and Rawson, A. (2011 forthcoming) *Social Mobility through Higher Education: Mainstreaming Widening Participation and Equality in Institutions*. Ormskirk: Action on Access

Thomas, L., Storan, J., Wylie, V., Berzins, K., Harley, P, Linley, R. and Rawson, A. (2010) *Review of widening participation strategic assessments 2009*. Ormskirk: Action on Access, available from http://www.actiononaccess.org/index.php?p=19_4

Thomas, L and Tight, M. (eds) (2011) *Institutional transformation to engage a diverse student body*. Bingley: Emerald Books

Staff development resources: University of Wolverhampton, 30 credit multi media open access module for teaching staff in HE
<http://www.wlv.ac.uk/teachinclusively>

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