

# 15 Creating Inclusive Communities

## Preparing the University for a Cohort of Deaf-Sign Language Users in Initial Teacher Education

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### 15.1 Introduction and Literature Review

Deaf people have particularly low participation rates in higher education (HE) in Ireland. Despite improvements in the last two decades where the number of Deaf students in HE more than doubled between 2003 and 2013, continued difficulties with their participation means they remain a specific target group in the National Access Plan for 2015–2019 (Higher Education Authority [HEA] 2015). Furthermore, while international research indicates that enrolment in HE may have improved in recent decades for Deaf students, completion rates are markedly poor, in particular for those enrolled in 4-year degree programmes (Newman et al. 2011).

Both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ barriers prevent entry to HE and create difficulties for course completion. Hard barriers are conceptualised here as specific policies and practices that directly block entry to higher education (e.g., a requirement for a subject that is not available to some students, requirements for a fitness to practice declaration or medical examinations that prohibits entry for students with disabilities). Soft barriers are those issues that, while not directly blocking applications to HE, can make entry and progression difficult (e.g., failure to accommodate needs, lack of support structures and an inhospitable campus climate). While there are ‘soft’ barriers deterring Deaf students from participation in HE (discussed later), there have been specific ‘hard’ barriers to particular programmes. For example, prior to 2019 in the Republic of Ireland, Deaf people were largely and inadvertently excluded from the primary teaching profession owing to the requirement for a high level of competency in the Irish language (Teaching Council 2017), coupled with the widespread exemption of Deaf students from learning Irish while in school. Indeed, Irish is not taught at all in Schools for the Deaf. The same barrier does not exist at post-primary level, where the number of Deaf teachers has grown in the last two decades (Danielsson and Leeson 2017). To address this, Dublin City University (DCU) is currently providing a pathway (on a pilot basis for one cohort of four students) into the Bachelor of Education (BEd) primary initial teacher education (ITE) programme for Deaf students who use Irish Sign Language. Students on the pathway are not required to have Irish (Gaeilge), but must have competency in Irish Sign Language to a similar level (B1 on the

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Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [CEFR]) (Leeson et al. 2016). As a result, the hard barrier preventing entry to ITE has, for now, been removed. However, soft barriers are likely to remain and must be addressed to allow for successful inclusion of Deaf students on campus.

While there were specific barriers for Deaf students entering primary ITE, research indicates that access and progression through HE more generally is problematic for this cohort (Garberoglio et al. 2019) and that challenges in both academic and social domains once inside the university are evident (Hyde et al. 2009; Powell et al. 2014). In Ireland, students who are Deaf are more likely to withdraw from HE compared with students with other disabilities (Treanor et al. 2013). This could partly be caused by poorer academic readiness on the part of the student (Newman and McNamara 2016). However, Cawthon et al. (2014) highlight that institutional readiness is also critical, and they caution that initiatives focusing on improving post-secondary education participation tend to focus on the competencies of the individual, yet neglect the barriers that may exist within institutions themselves.

The most obvious feature of institutional readiness is the provision of reasonable accommodations so that students can access their education (Cawthon et al. 2014). In Ireland, the provision of such accommodations is a legal entitlement under the Equal Status Act (Government of Ireland 2000). However, it is not simply a matter of provision of accommodation, the overall campus climate can have an important bearing on whether students feel welcome or not. Indeed, provision of access and adequate student supports for students with disabilities does not necessarily translate to a positive campus climate (Wilson et al. 2000). Cress explains: “[n]ot to be confused with campus culture, campus climate is the metaphorical temperature gauge by which we measure a welcoming and receptive, versus a cool and alienating learning environment” (2008, p. 96). Campus climate is defined as the “attitudes, behaviours, and standards/practices that concern the access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential” (Rankin and Reason 2008, p. 264). Positive campus climates can contribute to a student’s sense of belonging and satisfaction (Fleming et al. 2017). Conversely, higher dropout rates are evident among students experiencing inhospitable campus climates (Cress 2008). For Deaf students, these inhospitable campus climates can be caused by audist microgressions (Stapleton and Croom 2017) and their pervasive impact on Deaf students’ campus experiences. Audism refers to the belief in the superiority of being (or behaving like you are) hearing (Humphries 1977). Using Sue’s (2010) concept of microaggressions, Stapleton and Croom (2017) examine the racism and audism experienced by Black Deaf students in HE and note that such negative encounters are endemic.

Research among Deaf students indicates that their social interactions with hearing peers can also contribute to what can be characterised as a chilly campus climate. In New Zealand, for example, Deaf students showed that they were dissatisfied with the number of friends they had in class and with the effort made by hearing students to communicate with them. Subsequently, most of the 64 students sampled “displayed an air of resigned acceptance about their loneliness” (Powell et al. 2014, p. 134). Loneliness also featured in data collected from students

in the United States of America (USA) (Parasnis et al. 2005). Students may also struggle in their interactions with staff. In particular, those who perceive staff to lack Deaf-awareness may avoid seeking necessary supports from them (Powell et al. 2014). For example, academic staff may presume that provision of accommodations automatically levels the playing field for Deaf and hearing students, failing to acknowledge or validate the complex barriers Deaf students may face to academic success (Foster et al. 1999). Furthermore, they may neglect to make any adaptations to their teaching style to accommodate Deaf students and presume the responsibility of successful inclusion to rest with the individual student and/or the support staff (Foster et al. 1999). Stapleton and Croom refer to this as ‘trivialisation’, when provision of accommodations is followed by “an insensitive, rude, belittling, or demeaning action” (2017, p. 24).

Owing to the need for institutional readiness for a cohort of Deaf students, preparation of DCU is a central component in the delivery of the BEd ISL Pathway. Starting in 2015, a suite of Deaf Awareness activities was held on campus in anticipation of the arrival of students. The overall aim of these activities was to create a warm campus climate for Deaf students, where not only would appropriate accommodations be provided, but also students would feel they fully belonged to the campus ‘family’. When the pathway received final approval from the Department of Education (DE), funding was obtained from the HEA PATH1<sup>1</sup> initiative to formalise these Deaf Awareness initiatives. Commencing in Spring of 2019 (before the intake of students the following September), Irish Sign Language (ISL) classes and Deaf Awareness Training were made available to staff and students across DCU. The latter was a one-off session provided to staff, while the ISL courses were delivered in 4-week blocks and open to staff (academic, administrative and service) and students. These activities were nearly always delivered by Deaf professionals. One of the performance targets for the initiative is that 150 students and 25 staff self-rate their ISL skills at level A1<sup>2</sup> on the CEFRL, and 75 students level and 10 staff self-rate at level A2.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, we present the results of an evaluation into the motivation of staff and students to attend Deaf Awareness activities, and into the effectiveness of these activities. The concept of campus climate is used to interrogate the findings.

## 15.2 Methodology

The Deaf Awareness activities described are part of the larger overall PATH1 initiative of providing access to ITE (primary) for Deaf students. The project is subject to a large mixed-methods evaluation comprising participant groups of hearing and Deaf students and academic and administrative staff. Data collection is ongoing and will continue through the duration of the degree programme.

The data presented in this chapter were collected through an online anonymous survey designed specifically to evaluate the Deaf Awareness activities (hereafter, referred to as activities) in this project. All students and staff who took part in the activities on campus were invited to complete the survey. From Spring 2019 until the closure of the university campus in March 2020 due to the COVID-19

pandemic, 346 people had signed up for Irish Sign Language classes on campus, 234 students and 112 staff. Approximately 50 more staff also attended Deaf Awareness Training. All 396 were invited to complete the survey. A total of 156 participants completed the survey (a response rate of 39 percent). The vast majority (91 percent) of these were responding to the Irish Sign Language courses while the remaining (9 percent) participants were evaluating the Deaf Awareness training. Fifty percent of the participants were staff, and 50 percent were students. Of the students, most were undergraduate (43 percent vs. 7 percent postgraduate), and administrative staff narrowly outnumbered academic staff (27 percent and 23 percent, respectively). Sixty-four percent reported having not met a Deaf person before undertaking the activity.

The survey sought to establish participants' motivation for taking part in the activities and their perceptions of their effectiveness both in terms of overall satisfaction with the quality of the activity and of preparing staff and students for working alongside Deaf students. Brief demographic information on whether participants were undergraduate or postgraduate students, or academic or administrative staff, was collected. Participants were then asked if they knew a Deaf person before taking part in the activity. Participants were asked to rate their level of ISL competency on the CEFRL (Leeson et al. 2016). Next followed a range of rating scales and open-ended questions relating to participant satisfaction with the activity and their evaluation of the activity overall. Closed questions asked how likely they were to recommend the activity to a friend or colleague (10-point numeric scale), how they would rate it (5-point scale), if they felt the course was well-organised (5-point Likert scale), whether they found the trainers approachable (5-point Likert scale), satisfaction with the length of the activity (5-point scale) and whether they believed that the activity had left them better equipped to work with Deaf people or not. Open-ended questions explored likes and dislikes about the activity, whether the activity had changed their thoughts or behaviours in any way (and how), reasons for signing up for the activity and any other information they wished to provide. The quantitative data were analysed using simple descriptive statistics while qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) through NVIVO to find recurring themes. The data reported here were collected up to summer of 2020, roughly halfway through the funding period.

### 15.3 Findings

In this section, we present the survey findings, focusing on two main themes: motivation for participating and effectiveness of the initiatives.

#### 15.3.1 Motivation for Participating

Analysis revealed that the most common motivating factor for participating in the activity was a desire to communicate with Deaf people. Of the 70 references to facilitating communication with Deaf people, 36 referred to the Deaf students

currently enrolled on the BEd specifically. It was evident that this was important for both staff and students:

I felt working in a university that facilitates Deaf students, it's important to have some sign language should a student come into my work place.

(Staff member, ISL course)

I felt that there was a language barrier between myself and other students.

(Student, ISL course)

Others reflected that they would like to be able to communicate with Deaf people in their community or places of work:

My parents' neighbours are Deaf, and it would be nice to be able to have a better connection with them.

(Staff, ISL course)

While the use of interpreters was noted, it was important for several participants to be able to communicate *directly* (i.e., without an interpreter) with the Deaf students:

As I am a student teacher, I might have Deaf students in my class in years to come, and it would be a shame if I could not communicate with them directly without an interpreter.

(Student, ISL course)

Having an interest in ISL and Deafness was the second most motivating factor for participants.

I have always wanted to learn some ISL but never really knew how to go about it. I thought that this would be the perfect way to get an introduction into what it might be like, and it did.

(Student, ISL course)

One participant commented that the course linked to their research in the field of linguistics, while another spoke of how their son had enjoyed an ISL workshop in school. Three participants cited personal experience of hearing loss as their motivation for engagement, and three participants participated in this course as a follow-up to previous ISL courses.

### 15.3.2 Effectiveness of the Activities

At a basic level, from the participants' perspectives, the activities were effective, with 58 percent selecting the maximum "excellent" rating and a further 42 percent rating it as very good or good. There was strong agreement that the activities had been well organised (97 percent), and that the trainer/teacher was approachable

(99 percent). Using a 10-point scale to rank the likelihood they would recommend this course/event to a friend or colleague, 95 percent selected a value of 8 or higher.

The qualitative data indicated that participants were very happy with the quality of the activities and the learning environment. Participants reported that the activities were fun and that the content was easy to learn. The language taught was considered appropriate and useful, and the opportunity to learn specific vocabulary needed by participants was commended. Praise for the instructors and their methodologies, the small class-sizes and the supportive environment emerged as significant factors contributing to perceived effectiveness of the course:

The teacher was excellent and met each of us where we were. We learnt so much by being placed at our ease in a very friendly atmosphere—no fear of making mistakes.

(Staff, ISL course)

I also liked that it was in a small group, it was more one-to-one this way and I felt comfortable. I liked how we were consistently using and repeating sign language during the classes, it helped me remember.

(Student, ISL course)

Indeed, many participants expressed interest in continuing to improve their ISL skills both through formal classes as well as in informal “meet-ups” to facilitate practice (83 references):

It has opened me up the wanting to really learn more of ISL, I really want to learn more of ISL, a language I never thought too much about if I am honest.

(Staff, ISL course)

It was a sort of a ‘lightning bolt’ moment, where I wondered, why isn’t everyone learning this in school? Seems utterly ridiculous not to be—there are nothing but advantages to knowing it.

(Staff, ISL course)

While it is heartening that participants rated the activities highly, found them enjoyable and recommended them to others, it is critical that they also leave them better equipped for working with Deaf students. In terms of the CEFRL rating targets noted in Section 15.1, 61 (of the 75 set as a target) students self-rated at level A1, 10 at A2 and 3 at B1. In addition, 47 staff self-rated at level A1 and 3 at level A2. Overall, we are halfway to the student target of A1 ratings and have almost achieved twice the target for staff.

As well as this tangible improvement in ISL skills, most (91 percent) of the participants felt better equipped to work with Deaf people following the activities. Analysis of the open-ended question on changed behaviours and attitudes revealed further nuances. Given the aims of this initiative regarding improved inclusion of

the new cohort of Deaf students, it is particularly positive to note that students and staff both reported that the course gave them confidence to approach and communicate with Deaf students more:

It has really helped me understand how much people who are Deaf are used to people who are hearing and helped me feel more comfortable to approach the Deaf students in my year.

(Student, ISL course)

I want the Deaf students to know they can call to me and request the information about our Department and [that I can] help and advise Deaf students the way I help hearing students.

(Staff, ISL course)

I am talking and interacting a lot more with the Deaf pupils in my course and I am very happy about that.

(Student, ISL course)

Beyond communicating with Deaf people, other participants (108 references in the data) reflected on their increased knowledge and understanding of Deaf culture<sup>4</sup> and history, improved awareness of issues pertaining to the Deaf community and a greater knowledge, awareness and appreciation of ISL as a language:

It makes me appreciate the challenges faced by Deaf people in mainstream contexts more.

(Staff, ISL course)

Learning ISL has made me appreciate and respect the Deaf community.

(Student, ISL course)

I did not really view ISL as a unique language before the course, I do now.

(Staff, ISL course)

Four participants also reflected on a new-found understanding of the important role of the interpreter:

I learned a lot about sign language that I wasn't previously aware of and the importance of the interpreter to Deaf students.

(Staff, Deaf Awareness Training)

Further analysis of the 11 participants who indicated that the activities did *not* change their thoughts or behaviours in any way revealed that 5 had known a Deaf person before engaging with the course, and 1 participant had mild hearing loss. One other participant had previously completed Level 1 ISL. As such, they may have come to the course with much of the knowledge that was being disseminated at this beginner level.

## 15.4 Discussion and Conclusion

Both individual (Nagle et al. 2016) and institutional (Cawthon et al. 2014) readiness are essential for Deaf students to succeed in HE. However, emphasis has typically been on the former, and academic staff sometimes assume that the provision of accommodations to Deaf students (which they see as being the responsibility of the student and support staff) levels the playing field (Foster et al. 1999). This can ignore the complex issues at play for Deaf students and results, overall, in a chilly campus climate where Deaf students are misunderstood and poorly served by staff who do not understand their experiences and peers who ignore them (Powell et al. 2014). Given that 64 percent of the sample in this research had never met a Deaf person before, it is perhaps understandable why Deaf awareness is so lacking in higher education settings. To address this, DCU is providing a multifaceted and holistic programme of capacity building to create a warm campus climate for Deaf students so that they feel they belong to the university ‘family’.

A diverse group of participants took part in Deaf Awareness activities on campus for a variety of personal and professional reasons, though the majority cited being able to communicate with Deaf people generally, and the Deaf cohort on campus specifically, as their primary reason for taking part. Overall, participants were very positive in their evaluation of the courses and noted them to be effective in improving their Deaf awareness and competencies in Irish Sign Language. As a result, through their engagement with the activities, staff and students at DCU are paving the way to create a warm campus climate for Deaf students by committing to direct communication with, and validation of, these students. Their commitment is evidenced through multiple references to continuing to take ISL classes and a call for staff and student networks to practice their skills.

Communication is at the heart of successful inclusion (Powell et al. 2014), and a warm campus climate for Deaf students is a necessity. Deaf students are vulnerable to feeling lonely and isolated in higher education settings, even when sign language interpreters are made available (Parasnis et al. 2005). Direct communication with peers and with staff (academic staff in particular) is expected to improve the sense of belonging of the Deaf cohort of students to the university ‘family’. While many hearing students stated that they had an interest in Irish Sign Language prior to starting on this programme, taking part in classes on campus gave them the confidence to approach their Deaf peers and communicate directly with them, something that has been lacking for other Deaf students in higher education (Powell et al. 2014). For staff, this was coupled with a realisation that while direct communication is valuable, the complexity of Irish Sign Language means that mediated communication via an interpreter will also be essential.

As well as fostering direct communication, the activities also led participants to validate the lived experiences of their Deaf peers and students. Acknowledging the existence of Deaf culture, the discrimination faced by Deaf people in the education system historically, the richness and value of Irish Sign Language and the everyday challenges faced by Deaf people in an otherwise ‘hearing’ world is important in contributing to a campus climate that sees and recognises Deaf students for who they are. It also reduces the potential for audist microaggressions



(Stapleton and Croom 2017) as the level of deaf awareness among the campus community is raised.

The combined effect is that Deaf students should experience a warmer campus climate where peers and staff communicate directly with them, where their culture and language are validated and where they have an improved sense of belonging with the university ‘family’. As data collection for this project continues, rich qualitative data will be collected from the Deaf student cohort and will provide further nuance to the successes and remaining challenges in the pursuit of a Deaf-friendly campus at DCU.

## Notes

- 1 Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH): Strand 1 (Equity of Access to Initial Teacher Education).
- 2 Level A1 is summarised as: “Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details, such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person communicates slowly and clearly and is prepared to help” (Leeson et al. 2016, p. 9).
- 3 Level A2 is summarised as: “Can understand sentences and frequently-used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g., basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need” (Leeson et al. 2016, p. 9).
- 4 Deaf communities have been recognised as having their own distinct culture comprising language, values, traditions, norms and identity (Padden and Humphries 1988).

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