The Accessibility and Inclusion (A&I) Project: Working towards an accessible and inclusive online learning experience

# **Objective of the study:**

Online, open education has transformative potential for students with diverse learning needs who would otherwise not be able, or would prefer not, to attend on-campus higher education (Lee, 2017). While open education programmes have enhanced students’ ability to access higher education institutions, various barriers in teaching and learning approaches can negatively impact the level of accessibility and inclusion (A&I) within programmes (McKeown & McKeown, 2019). Although progress has been made in recent years around A&I in higher education, it is necessary to continuously improve teaching and learning practices to ensure education is as accessible as possible (Batanero-Ochaita et al., 2021).

In order to improve student support and retention it is also necessary to gain a greater understanding of learners’ diverse needs and to gain insights into learners’ experiences in the various stages of their higher education journey. A greater insight into learner needs, especially those with specific conditions, impairments, or disorders (CIDs), allows for improvements in the level of A&I within online programmes to be made, in order to facilitate and enhance their success as online students. In response to this, the A&I Project was initiated with the aim to review and redevelop the online learning materials; organisation and structure; and provision of teaching and learning, within a fully online, undergraduate programme.

The project employed an action research methodology and was prompted by the evaluation data from current students with specific CIDs. After reflecting on this data, the researchers could identify the main areas that needed improvement, and actions on how to implement changes. Feedback was then sought from students, staff, and colleagues from the wider University on how best to improve the main areas for review. These areas related to:

* making A&I information more explicit and normalised in the programme;
* changing practices around discussion forums to make them less overwhelming for students;
* improving structure, organisation, and direction in modules;
* reviewing assessments in light of UDL principles and reasonable accommodations.

With the aid of the Quality Improvement and Development funding awarded to this project by the DCU Quality Promotion Office, data were gathered through written feedback, interviews, and focus groups with these stakeholders. An aim of the study was to include stakeholders as co-designers of online learning, where research was done with, rather than on, those in minority groups. Before any changes were fully implemented into the modules, written feedback on these changes was again sought from the stakeholder to ensure that no further learning barriers were inadvertently created while implementing the suggested changes.

The preliminary findings of the project indicated that the implementations and redevelopment of the modules as guided by the data were well received, with current evaluative data on the restructure of these elements being positive. A [report on the project](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1uUSEPMmDr8EiAATMfyAWQreY06Dvf1LrSsGIQ8Tx5cs/edit?usp=sharing) was created for the use of educators, learning designers, and programme coordinators, which focuses on these findings and recommendations on how best to improve these four areas from the data collected. The guides within the report provide information on the simple and practical changes, along with research-based examples and templates of the implementations, that have received positive feedback from the participants in the A&I project. The goal of disseminating these findings and resources is to help make a step toward a higher education structure where education is accessible to everyone, and where the diverse nature and needs of higher education students are recognised.

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