Celebrating success

21 YEARS OF DCU ACCESS SERVICE

www.dcu.ie
THE ACCESS SERVICE AT DCU EXISTS TO EMPOWER AND SUPPORT STUDENTS FROM SOCIO-ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED Backgrounds TO REALISE THEIR FULL POTENTIAL.
Contents

Welcome from the President 4
More from our Graduates 5
Our Mission 6
Background 7
DCU Strategic Plan (2012-2015) 8
From a local initiative to a national programme 10
Success in figures: research on the Access Service 11
Conclusion 14
Who’s who in the Access Service 15

Some of our graduates...
Hear what our graduates have to say as they share their experiences, memories and achievements with us.

Karen McGowan
General Nursing
Year of graduation: 2008
Currently a full-time nurse while undertaking a Masters in Emergency Nursing at the RCSI

I always wanted to be a nurse and university was the way to my ideal job. Coming from an island off Donegal and going from knowing everyone to barely knowing anyone was a massive change, but my Access family made it much easier. The toughest days were the build up to exams, but I studied in groups, so we supported each other. My memorable days were probably in the library trying to get the thesis done. Graduation day was very special. I was proud of my achievement and it would not have happened without the support of the Access Service.
This year is a very important year in DCU’s history as we mark the 21st anniversary of Access at DCU. In September 1990, through the work of the pioneering BITE Initiative, six students from Ballymun entered DCU on Access Scholarships for the very first time. Since then, we have been honoured to have had 1,468 students pass through the doors of Access at DCU and a further 6,000 students per annum take part in our Access DCU Schools Programme.

We have many reasons for celebration on this very special occasion. Not only is DCU home to the largest Access Programme in Ireland, but over the past 21 years, Access students have been hugely successful.

Over the years, Access students have consistently demonstrated an exceptionally high level of ability. Access students who enter DCU consistently outperform their peers in terms of academic achievement. A recent study shows that over the last ten years, 90% of Access graduates have achieved either a first or second class honours degree, compared with 80% of graduates from the general undergraduate population.

Not surprisingly, DCU’s retention rates for Access students are exceptionally high! Since 1990, 93% of Access students who entered DCU have completed their third-level education. This year we are pleased to have our highest first-year Access intake ever, with over 170 new entrants registering on a wide variety of Honours Degrees at DCU. We look forward to this number rising even higher in the years ahead.

What makes DCU Access so special is not simply the impressive academic performance of Access students, but their willingness to participate in extra-curricular activities, their outstanding involvement as volunteers both in DCU and among the wider DCU community, and their ability to act as ambassadors for DCU and for the Access Service.

But what is behind the success of one of the most unique features of this university? Well, Access is undoubtedly a credit to the many staff – past and present – across all sectors of DCU who have helped to build DCU Access from a fledgling Programme to a National Initiative. We must also acknowledge the work of the many principals, teachers and guidance counsellors in our locality who work tirelessly in supporting a range of educational interventions for their students. We must also acknowledge the staff involved in a host of voluntary and community organisations across the wider community who strive for equality of educational provision. We are immensely grateful to the many funders who continue to provide much needed financial support for our outreach programmes and for student bursaries. Last, and by no means least, we salute the 1,468 students and graduates who have passed through our doors.

We are so privileged that you chose DCU for your third-level journey – and we hope that you will continue in your roles as ambassadors for one of the most successful educational outreach programmes in Ireland!

Professor Brian MacCraith, President
More from our Graduates

**Leylah Mohammed**  
Programme of Study: International Relations  
Year of Graduation: 2011  
Currently interning with Atlantic Philanthropies  
I wanted to go to university to have a better chance at employment and to gain knowledge and understanding of different issues. Because I had been to DCU for Access Week, the first day I felt I had been there all along. When I was struggling with some modules and finances, I spoke to the Access Office and they were very understanding. I could not have gone through college without their help. Thank you DCU Access.

**Karen O’Callaghan**  
Applied languages  
Year of graduation: 2001  
Currently a secondary school teacher  
I was interested in going to university because I loved languages. My first official day of college wasn’t too daunting because I had completed an orientation with the Access Service. Some of my most memorable times were the chats in the canteen and studying in the library. There were tough times too. I remember one particular module that I just couldn’t get a handle on, but I kept plodding away and reminded myself that there’s more to life than one module. I took my dad and granny to my graduation. It was the first graduation they’d been to; they were so proud.

**Stephen Burke**  
Genetics and Cell Biology  
Year of graduation: 2008  
Currently a Consultant with Morgan McKinley, recruiting scientific staff for the pharmaceutical and medical device industries  
I was interested in science from a young age and wanted to go to university to further my knowledge. My most memorable days were on the Access Programme, living on campus before college opened. This involved sporting and social activities, and a classroom aspect to polish up academic areas where we felt we might have a weakness. The toughest days were in second year when the step up from school to college really became apparent, and the course became very challenging. I was lucky to have a strong support network in terms of classmates, friends and the Access Service.

**Paul Bridgeman**  
Multimedia  
Year of graduation: 2006  
Currently a Director of a digital marketing agency in New Zealand  
The first day at DCU, meeting new people in an unknown environment, was both daunting and exciting. Final year project submission was definitely one of the toughest times – the stress, the long nights and the culmination of the previous three years’ work. Hand-in day, however, is probably the greatest day you will ever experience. I did the Access Summer School Programme three times, as an engineering student, as a Multimedia student and as a programme co-ordinator. My graduation was fantastic; standing with my parents as a graduate was very special, especially as none of my siblings chose to go to university.

**Darren Woods**  
Manufacturing Engineering with Business Studies  
Year of graduation: 2006  
Currently a Senior Manufacturing Engineer, Bose, Co. Monaghan  
From an early age I wanted to go to university as I felt this would allow me to create better opportunities. I came from a small school in Monaghan, so it was a massive change, but I joined the GAA club and the soccer club, and met a lot of friends there. Graduation day was a mix of emotions. On one hand it was amazing to have my degree and on the other I was leaving all the lads I had so many experiences with. The engineering course was extremely hard but we supported each other.

**Ameera Ahmed**  
Electronic Engineering  
Year of graduation: 2009  
Currently a PhD research student at the School of Engineering & Computing, DCU  
I wanted to go to university to advance my knowledge and gain skills for the profession I wanted to practise. I was terrified on my first day, but we were guided by student helpers and I had made friends by the end of orientation week. First year was most memorable because I was able to experience a lot of different activities. Final year deadlines were among the toughest days. However, I worked hard and tried to maximise relaxation time by doing things I enjoyed the most. There was a great feeling of accomplishment and joy on graduation day, particularly to see my proud parents.
Our Mission

The Access Service at DCU exists to empower and support students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds to realise their full potential.

Overall aim
We achieve this by working in accordance with national policy and in partnership with the wider DCU community, educational institutions, Government agencies, and community and voluntary organisations.

Target groups
Students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Students from ethnic minorities including separated children and students from the Traveller community.

Five core objectives
■ Ensure that the Access agenda remains central to all stages of University planning and development.
■ Maximise the use of University-wide resources to further enhance service provision to current and prospective students from non-traditional groups.
■ Build on the current capacity of the Access Service to support continued growth in student intake and enhance retention levels.
■ Enhance communication and collaboration in DCU between the Access Service, DCU staff and the wider community.
■ Contribute to and learn from new knowledge and best practice in the area of access and equality.
Background

**National context**
The National Access Plan 2008-2013 has recommended that all socio-economic groups should have entry rates of at least 54% by 2020, with non-standard entry routes accounting for 30% of all entrants to higher education institutions (HEIs) by 2013. To this end, DCU provides a host of pre-entry initiatives to North Dublin schools linked to DCU through the Access Programme, aimed at increasing participation in third level from all under-represented groups. In addition, the Service will continue to provide support to schools nationally through the outreach activities of DCU’s Schools Liaison Team. With the new Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) available to students nationwide through the CAO, an increase in applications and registrations to the DCU Access Programme is expected. The DCU Access Service currently has an Access cohort that represents 7% of its total undergraduate population. It is proposed to increase the current intake by a further 40% by 2014.

Since its inception in 1990, the DCU Access Service has maintained a high progression rate for all students. In 2010, the Access Service completed significant research, examining retention and progression rates of students over the past 20 years. From 1990 to 2010, the drop-out rate for Access students in DCU has been, on average, 7%. An important part of our endeavours over the next three years is to focus on increasing overall progression, with a specific focus being placed on student progression from first to second year.

**Background to the Service**
The DCU Access Service was established in 1990 with one full-time member of staff. Six Access students registered on undergraduate programmes during its first year. Since then, the Service has grown from strength to strength with six full-time members of staff and over 500 Access students currently undertaking degrees at DCU. Over the past 21 years, 1,468 students have registered with the Service. All students have entered degree programmes in DCU at Level 8 on the National Qualifications Framework. Today, students from 34 countries have entered DCU through the Access Service, clearly demonstrating the ability of the Service to cope with Ireland’s ever-changing cultural demographics.
Principle 1: Engagement
The principle of engagement is the cornerstone of the DCU Access Service Strategic Plan. It provides a foundation for the successful delivery of Access initiatives at DCU and is a crucial element in all of our activities. Research, evaluation, extensive networking and effective communication underpin all levels of engagement between Access DCU and its many stakeholders. Some of the new initiatives which fall under the umbrella of Engagement include a new Communications Strategy for the Access Service, an extension of existing research projects both at pre- and post-entry level, a new Alumni Relations Strategy and a comprehensive volunteer programme.

Principle 2: Enterprise
The outcomes of the DCU Access Service (high graduate employment, high retention rates and academic performance) can themselves be considered enterprising in that they provide value for money and prove that investment in Access is worthwhile and cost-effective. One of the Access Service’s guiding principles is to maximise its use of available resources at a low cost. Engaging with the corporate sector has provided the Service with the means to reach an ever-expanding prospective student population. This support from the enterprise sector has been particularly crucial at a time when the numbers of students experiencing socio-economic disadvantage is at an all-time high while public funding for Access is being reduced. Other examples of DCU Access enterprise strategies include involving undergraduate Access students in social innovation and enterprising activities as part of the Uaneen Module and as part of the Enterprise Awards on campus. There is also a proposal to provide an Enterprise Award for Access Students in link schools, as well as our continued collaboration with NIFFTE, Junior Achievement and Young Social Innovators (YSI).
Principle 3: Translation
A fundamental objective of the DCU Access Service is to provide up-to-date, accurate and user-friendly information on Access-related matters to key audiences. In particular, the DCU Access Service is responsible for providing information on admission, supports and service provision to non-traditional students in our community. In doing so, the Access Service seeks to ensure equality of outcome for students from non-traditional student groups, which translates into societal benefit for all.

In addition, the DCU Access Service aims to encourage Access students/alumni to play a significant role in the commercialisation of DCU through engagement in campus companies and by participating in research initiatives on campus.

We will continue to collaborate with the National Centres based on the DCU campus to ensure that resources are maximised, further develop volunteering opportunities for Access students in collaboration with the DCU Educational Trust and the Board of Trustees, and continue to collaborate with the corporate sector to deliver innovative programmes to non-traditional student groups.

Principle 4: Transformation
One of the primary aims of the Access Service is to help transform the lives of students experiencing socio-economic disadvantage by ensuring that equal opportunities exist to enter and succeed in higher education. In addition, the Access Service seeks to broaden students’ horizons and help current and prospective students to reach their true potential – academically, socially and professionally – through positive engagement in educational activities.

We aim to ensure that DCU is open and accessible to the local community, to provide students with a positive educational experience at pre- and post-entry level and to highlight the positive profile of Access students to DCU staff and the wider student body. The Access Service encourages Access students to become role models and ambassadors for the Access Programme at DCU and for the wider equity agenda. One of our key goals is to help create a 21st century graduate by encouraging current Access students to acquire key graduate attributes, as defined by DCU’s ‘Generation 21’.

The DCU Access Service Team

The Access Service works in partnership with the Student Recruitment Office (SRO), forming one Department under the Head of Service, who reports directly to the University Secretary.

In total, there are six full-time members of staff in the Access Service, three of which are shared posts with the Student Recruitment Office. These are as follows:

- **Access and Student Recruitment**
  - Ita Tobin – Head of Service
  - Orla Conlan – Access Officer/Mature Student Officer
  - Caroline Bove – Department Secretary

- **Access Service**
  - Cathy McLoughlin – Post-Entry Project Officer
  - Colette Keogh – Post-Entry Project Officer
  - Susan Hawkins – Pre-Entry Project Officer

**Organisational Chart:**

- **Head of service**
  - **Access Officer**
    - **Student Recruitment Officer**
    - **Student Recruitment Officer**
    - **Student Recruitment Officer**
  - **Project Officer**
  - **Project Officer**
  - **Project Officer**
  - **Secretary/Administrator**
Introduction
From its inception as a university, DCU has had as part of its ethos the goal of making a third-level education possible for all. In 1989, the governing body of DCU decided to put in place an initiative to address the low numbers entering third-level from the local Ballymun area, which traditionally has a high level of social deprivation, and little or no progression to higher education. In collaboration with a number of interested groups in Ballymun, DCU established an initiative called BITE (Ballymun Initiative for Third Level Education) in 1990. BITE focused on preparing students for third level, helping them with their subject choice in third year, and providing financial scholarships and other supports. Following the success of this pilot, the Access programme at DCU was established and work began with 16 other schools in North Dublin. A full-time Access Officer was appointed at DCU in 1996, and the North Dublin Access Programme (NDA) was launched to target a wider audience in the north city.

The NDA Programme permitted entry to the university on fewer points than was required through the CAO system, as well as offering students a range of financial, social and academic supports post entry. In early 2000, in collaboration with other higher education institutions (HEIs) the Access scheme began to go nationwide. The scheme then went through a number of incarnations before emerging as the current scheme, the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR), which is operated through the Central Applications Office (CAO). The scheme is now a national initiative, with all applications processed through the CAO. DCU upholds a commitment to social inclusion as one of its core values and today the focus on Access remains at the forefront of the DCU Strategic Plan 2010-2012, Making a Difference. The following research provides a brief overview of the outcomes and successes of the Access programme at DCU over 21 years using comparative figures from the undergraduate population. To view the full report, please visit www.dcu.ie/access.

From a local initiative to a national programme
A research project on 21 years of the Access Service at DCU.

Declan Daly
Chemical and Pharmaceutical Science
Year of graduation: 2010
Currently a postgraduate researcher in the School of Chemical Sciences at DCU
From an early age I realised that the more educated you are, the greater number of job opportunities are available. I was excited attending my first lecture, as it was definitely very different to secondary school. I met my new classmates, some of whom are still close friends now. The most memorable days were the social events such as the Fresher, Halloween and summer balls. Exam time is a pretty stressful time of the year, but I was always organised and studied well throughout the year. Graduation day was a proud day for me and my family; the hard work finally paid off.

Leah Yeung
Journalism and Multimedia
Years of graduation: 2008 and 2010
Currently working freelance in television production and journalism
University has become a rite of passage and I really wanted to have that experience. The first official day at DCU was amazing, because the Access Summer School helped banish any first day jitters. Over the years I joined many societies. I loved the variety of opportunities to volunteer, being able to give back to such a supportive service. Now that I’m in the ‘real’ world, some of the things I miss most are having all my friends in the same place. I missed my undergraduate graduation but when I graduated from my MSc, I was overwhelmed by the memories of both degrees.

Gillian Duffy
Business Studies
Year of graduation: 2003
Now a published novelist
I was good at business studies at school so I thought it would be a good idea to study it at university. My first day was nerve-wracking but the staff of the Access Service eased my anxieties. It was exciting too. I struggled with French during second year and there were days when I really doubted my ability. Step by step, I identified the academic areas I needed to work on, and ensured that my weaker subjects got the attention they deserved. Graduation day was really exciting; my parents and family were really proud that I’d achieved an honours degree.

David Kinsella
Mechatronic Engineering
Year of graduation: 2011
Hopes to begin a postgraduate programme in November 2011
I always wanted to be an architect or engineer. I completed a week’s orientation with the Access Service, so all my nerves were gone and I knew what to expect, even though nobody from my school was in my course. I joined as many societies as I could but eventually concentrated on one – DCU Men’s Soccer. My toughest days were the final weeks coming up to the end of term. I dealt with it by knocking down, getting assignments handed in on time and concentrating on exams. The main thing is to relax and everything else will fall into place.
The aims of the research were to:

i. profile the employment outcomes of DCU Access graduates from 1990-2008;
ii. profile the further education experiences of DCU Access graduates from 1990-2008;
iii. investigate the reasons why students withdrew from their course; and,
iv. collate strong statistical data on the performance of Access students relative to the DCU student population in a number of areas: by qualification, faculty, withdrawal rate and reason given.

Making contact

Initial contact was made with all former Access students via a letter from the DCU Access Director, inviting them to take part in a short telephone questionnaire. Despite the large time gap from the earliest students in 1990 to those who attended in 2010, the research team made contact with a remarkable 64% of former students.

Main findings

The Access programme began with an intake of just six students in 1990, culminating in 126 students entering in 2010. Diagram 1 below tracks the student intake over a 20-year period.

Keith Grehan
Business Studies
Year of graduation: 2008
Now a Financial Reporter with CitiGroup
I was lucky that I had the opportunity to go to university. I stayed on campus with the Access Programme before the start of first year, so I knew my way around and made friends from the Programme. In second year a group of us set up the Access Society. Coming up to exams was always tough, but I had great friends from my class and we helped each other out. I had mixed emotions on graduation day. On the one hand I had accomplished something amazing by getting my degree, but on the other, I was leaving all the good times in college behind.

One of the most commonly asked questions of Access programmes is: do students who enter with reduced points perform as well as students coming through the mainstream route?

**Diagram 2: Level of qualification obtained.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Access 2003-2010</th>
<th>Gen. UG DCU 2003-2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher 2 Div.1</td>
<td>47.0%</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher 2 Div.2</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Pass/Dis)*</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Other includes Oscail and some Level 8 postgraduate nursing courses, which are not relevant to this study.

The answer is yes. In fact, on average they outperform students who enter by traditional routes. While the general student body obtained more first-class degrees, when combined with Higher 2.1 (H2.1), then Access students are outperforming by 61.1% to 56.7%, which is significant. This also carries through into second class, grade 2 (H2.2), where Access students achieved 5.4% more than the general student body. If one takes into account that over two-thirds of Access students enter DCU on reduced points, then this is a phenomenal achievement.

**Diagram 3: Breakdown of students by faculty.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Access 1990-2009</th>
<th>DCU UG 2008/09*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities and social sciences</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computing and engineering</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and health</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Nationality**

DCU has had students from 34 nationalities enter the Access programme. To date, students from 15 nationalities have graduated, while the remainder are current students. This strongly reflects Ireland’s changing demographics.

**Employment**

An area of interest to the researchers was whether students secured employment in the area they had studied on graduation. A total of 85% of respondents stated that they were employed in an area directly related to their degree. Given the current high levels of unemployment, it was interesting to see that the unemployment rate was extremely low at 4%.
Diagram 4: Areas of employment.

Diagram 5: Further study.

Completion of studies

Given that a significant percentage of Access students enter on reduced points, it is important to monitor the attrition rate. As can be seen from Diagram 6, just 7% of students failed to complete their third-level studies at DCU or another higher level institution.

Diagram 6: Completion of third-level studies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current UG</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduates</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studies elsewhere</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawal</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This may be due to DCU degrees being very specific, with a strong emphasis on business, science and technology and with defined career paths.

One of the primary aims of Access is to give school-leavers who have the ability to benefit from and succeed in higher education and who come from socio-economic groups in Irish society that are under-represented in third-level education the opportunities that may otherwise be denied to them. Diagram 5 shows that over 53% of Access graduates went on to further study.
Conclusion

DCU has been running a very successful Access programme for 21 years. With 1,468 students obtaining scholarships, and almost 600 graduates, it continues to grow from strength to strength. The success of its programme can be attributed to a number of factors, including:

■ the support and commitment of staff at all levels across the University;
■ a comprehensive pre-entry programme;
■ the provision of scholarships – private funding only;
■ a tailored Orientation Programme for incoming Access students;
■ networking opportunities offered to Access students by the Educational Trust;
■ student learning agreements;
■ a designated first year Post-Entry Officer;
■ one-to-one meetings;
■ tuition workshops;
■ peer mentoring; and,
■ subsidised accommodation.

For more information on each of the above and to view the full research report, please visit the DCU Access website: www.dcu.ie/access.

Noel Carroll
Education and Training
Year of graduation: 2010
Currently a postgraduate student at NUIM in Community Education, Equality and Social Activism

My reason for going to university was to gain experience and different views of the world. I am the first member of my family to attend university and I wanted to have a career, not just a job. I missed graduation day as I was on a youth worker exchange in Zambia, which came about because I won the Access travel award with EIL. I loved DCU and had many good times there. It was financially tough and around exams it was very stressful. Access were a great help with every problem I had; I had my very own support team every step of the way.

Stephen Fuller
BSc Analytical Science
Year of graduation: 1997
Currently a Technical Officer, National Centre for Sensor Research, DCU

I was interested in science, and wanted to work in a research lab. My first day at DCU was exciting, although I was quite anxious. Myself and a girl from my Leaving Cert class started together, so we had each other for company. During the year, there were times when I’d walk out of a lecture thinking that I hadn’t a hope of getting to grips with course work, but a clear head works wonders and there’s a lot to be said for 15 minutes of fresh air. I felt a great sense of achievement when I completed my degree.
Who’s who in the Access Service

Access and Student Recruitment

Ita Tobin
Head of Service
01 700 5493
ita.tobin@dcu.ie

Orla Conlan
Access Officer
01 700 8869
orla.conlan@dcu.ie

Caroline Bowe
Department Secretary
01 700 5530
caroline.bowe@dcu.ie

Susan Hawkins
Pre-Entry
Project Officer
01 700 6040
susan.hawkins@dcu.ie

Cathy McLoughlin
Post-Entry
Project Officer
01 700 8814
cathy.mcloughlin@dcu.ie

Colette Keogh
Post-Entry
Project Officer
01 700 8868
colette.keogh@dcu.ie