

How to Achieve Inclusive Assessment in Student Support Services – A Case Study

Kinsale Campus – Cork College of FET

Introduction

Quite often, when people look at inclusive assessment practices, they internalize it to their own department and/or classroom. However, student support services within an educational setting can often be overlooked as an integral resource for supporting inclusive assessment. Like most colleges, whether they be further or higher education, at Kinsale Campus, Cork College of FET, our students are a melting pot of different learning needs and preferences. With nearly two hundred students speaking over thirty-six different languages on campus, with an age range from late teens to sixties, the demands on a student support service can be highly pressurized with huge expectations.

Therefore, the challenges to providing inclusive assessment can be complex and varied, especially when you are supporting adult, lifelong learners. Dealing with different cultures, ethnic backgrounds, social issues, disabilities, and courses varying from Horticulture to Art, we need to be able to think creatively when it comes to inclusive assessment.

Building Capacity for Inclusive Assessment

Teaching can be isolated and complex, with no space made available to percolate ideas. The development of communities of practices (COPs) within teaching provides shared spaces for staff to discuss problems, challenges and develop shared responses. COPs acknowledges the preexisting expertise, but also helps current staff to gain new skills. They also help to increase the overall connectivity of the team. This allows space for self-reflection, creating a safe environment for constructive feedback. At Kinsale Campus, there is a UDL community of practice, with biannual workshops showcasing staffs UDL 'plus one' ideas.

Universal Design for Learning is embedded into the culture and ethos of Kinsale Campus. It was one of the first FET colleges in Ireland to participate in the pilot Active Inclusion Network. It won the inaugural John Kelly UDL Award from AHEAD in 2019. To date, over ninety percent of the staff have completed the UDL digital badge with AHEAD. Therefore, it was an organic next step, to look at how we could 'UDL' our Student Support Services to ensure the academic support offered for students was as inclusive as possible.

UDL & Student Support Services

One of the first steps was to build the capacity of our student support staff. Our Personal Assistants are an integral part of student support, they were some of the first PAs in Ireland to complete CPD in UDL. This has made a significant difference in how they 'scaffold' and support students with their learning, while still enabling students to be independent learners and thinkers. At Kinsale Campus, we have supported students to lead projects like landscape design, building projects, entrepreneurial opportunities, and social media ambassadors; integrating these with learning outcomes and assessments. Using key skills and experience from lifelong learners has given more ownership of the campus to the students, increasing their sense of belonging and connection to the campus, even long after they are gone.

The student support team leads up on implementing most inclusive assessment practices across campus. This team consists of the campus director, assistant principal, guidance counselor and several members of teaching staff qualified in nursing, social care and healthcare. This team offers basic student support in a universal approach, and then offers more tailored solutions to help promote academic wellbeing.

Weekly multidisciplinary team meetings, where campus management, PAs, guidance counsellors and the disability coordinator meet to discuss and share ideas regarding inclusive assessment practices, has not only supported students, but also the teaching staff in embedding inclusion into assessments.

Students are continuously asked for formal & informal feedback on how the assessment process can be improved. The student-centered approach of UDL gives students more autonomy over how assessments are both delivered and submitted. It recognizes and values students' prior life experience as integral to informing their learning process. It also recognizes that not one size fits all. This has challenged teachers to become more ambitious and more innovative to meet the diverse needs of students. However, it can also bring resistance from some teaching staff who view inclusive assessment as time consuming and cumbersome. They may tend to over rely on traditional assessment methods, such as written exercises, viewing these as a quicker and 'safer' option, especially when it comes to the quality assurance process.

Overcoming Quality Assurance Challenges with Inclusive Assessment

There is no doubt that one of the main stumbling blocks for providing multiple means of inclusive assessment is the perception amongst teaching staff/management that it will not meet quality assurance standards. At Kinsale Campus, we have overcome these barriers by ensuring that our inclusive assessment process is evidence based, transparent and signposted clearly. We have even applied a UDL approach to the External Authentication process! Our use of signposting for learner assessment evidence has been flagged by external authenticators as robust, simple and easy to follow. Communication is key to this process, with the QA coordinator meeting with EAs on arrival, and explaining our UDL approach, always available to answer questions throughout the process. A signposting folder in digital format is included in the learner evidence portfolio. Support for teaching staff to embed this into their practice is provided throughout the academic year. Throughout the last number of years, assessors have provided signposting in innovative ways, either as mind maps, poster format, &/or written guidelines. This has been commended by EAs in their reports for making authentication as seamless as possible, allowing them more time to reflect on the use of UDL and inclusive assessment practices throughout the campus.

Conclusion

One of the great values that FET possesses is the absence of league tables, and performance-based outcomes of the students. FETs focus is on building not just capacity within teachers but also students, looking at the journey rather than the result. FET is based on developing skill sets for the workplace, which is dependent on industry demands. It is preparing students for progression and transition to higher education. Therefore, it must be fluid and adapt to the ever-changing needs when it comes to inclusive assessment. Teachers in FET must be empowered to make consistent changes to their practice and delivery of programs, to better serve the needs of their students and the wider stakeholders.

To be effective, we must not only embed inclusion into policy and procedures but infuse it into the very fabric of everyday college life. One of the main challenges we face in the FET sector is the little time we have with students, to gain their trust, and how to make the greatest impact. Most of our students are only with us for a few months and then progress either to higher education &/or employment. To support students, any initiatives around inclusive assessment we develop must be flexible, reactionary, and targeted to get the greatest outcome possible. Inclusive assessment should be student centered, to enhance participation and motivation of the learners. The assessment process should aid learners, not inhibit them by becoming another distraction or an unnecessary pressure to conform or behave in a certain way. However, the diversity within FET makes for a unique environment and opportunities to lead out and rethink inclusive assessment.