Promoting a Culture of Equality:

Diversity Training at Maynooth University Library

Helen Fallon, Laura Connaughton and Edel Cosgrave

Abstract

This article explores the delivery, in 2020, of a one-day diversity and intercultural training programme for all library staff at Maynooth University (MU). The aim of the programme was to give library staff the opportunity to think about and talk about the impact of a more diverse student and staff population and to explore how the Library can help create a rich intercultural environment.

Keywords: *Diversity and Intercultural training, university library staff, Ireland*

Introduction

Participation in Irish Higher Education is changing. The number of international students coming to Ireland increased by 45% between 2013 and 2017, with the number of residence permits issued increasing from 9, 3000 to 13,500 over the period. These students were primarily from the United States, China, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and Canada (Groarke, 2019). There has been a concerted effort to attract international students to Ireland, due in part to the substantial fees paid by these students.

In addition to international students, many people have moved to Ireland to work, and/or to seek asylum. As well as an increase in migrant-students, there is also greater diversity in terms of Irish ethnicity which has contributed to a growing number of Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority (BAME) students in Irish Higher Education. Figures from 2017/2018 indicate that while 85.8% of students identified as Irish, the remaining 14.2% identified as other ethnicities as illustrated in the chart below.

Ethnic Group of Respondents, 2017/2018

	Universities	Institutes of Technology	All Institutions
Irish	85.8%	83.2%	84.9%
Irish Traveller	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%
Any Other White Background	6.9%	8.7%	7.5%
African	1.7%	3.1%	2.2%
Any Other Black Background	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%
Chinese	1.3%	0.5%	1.0%
Any Other Asian Background	2.2%	2.3%	2.2%
Other	1.7%	1.9%	1.8%

Higher Education Authority (2018), p. 24

There are 12,900 students from 95 countries attending Maynooth University (MU). International enrolments increased from 540 (5.6% of total enrolments) in 2010/11 to 1,100 (9.1% of total enrolments) in 2016/2017. 28% of fulltime undergraduate students are mature students, have a disability, or are from a socio-economic disadvantaged background. (MU Strategic Plan 2018-2022).

There are 55 library staff. 48 (87%) are of Irish ethnicity. The remaining 7 (13%) are of U.K, U.S, Dutch and Nepalese ethnicity.

In this more diverse environment, cultural competency for library staff is vital. Cultural competency is defined as "a developmental process that evolves over an extended period and refers to an ability to understand the needs of diverse populations and to interact effectively with people from different cultures." (Mestre 2010)

The *Diversity Standards: Cultural Competency for Academic Libraries* produced by the US Association of College and Research Libraries Racial and Ethnic Diversity Committee (ACRL, 2012) identify key areas for the development of cultural competency. This includes self-awareness, cross-cultural knowledge, development of services, library collections and organisational and workforce diversity. The Committee recommended integrating cultural competency and diversity training into the LIS curriculum. Without cultural competency training in libraries the following problems have been evidenced: inadequate service to diverse populations; lack of cultural and language awareness and sensitivity; inability to understand how culture affects library use; and lack of respect for different perspectives. (Mestre, 2010, p, 480).

The IFLA/UNESCO Multicultural Library Manifesto advises an integrated approach to service, rather than "separate" or "additional" services for any group. They recommend the Library Strategic plan should state the objectives, priorities and services related to cultural diversity, and that services should be developed in consultation with relevant user groups (IFLA/UNESCO, 2018). The manifesto highlights the need for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in diversity for library staff and state that the staff should reflect the community the Library serves, in terms of diversity.

The UK Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals has produced an Equalities and Diversity Action Plan (CILIP, 2017). The plan identifies actions in five key areas including CILIP as an organisation, diversity and CILIP membership, diversity and the library profession, celebrating diversity and diverse and inclusive library and information services.

Equality is enshrined in Irish legislation. *The Equal Status Act 2000*[1] prohibits discrimination under nine grounds including race. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019* notes subgroups that require particular support, including ethnic minorities. The plan recognises the need "to ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population" (HEA, 2015, p. 6).

Diversity and inclusion has been a cornerstone of Irish libraries and there is a small body of literature written in the Irish context. Parkinson (2011) explores concepts such as assimilation, multiculturalism and integration in the context of the role of Irish public libraries. Mannion and Thornley (2011) carried out an investigation of the challenges Chinese students in Irish third level libraries experience. Their recommendations include the need to acknowledge the cultural traits of Chinese students and all international students, and how these affect the use of the Library. They also recommend that library staff receive training on best practice in providing services to international students. O'Connor and Kerrigan (2013) and Stokes and Molloy (2019) provide useful insights into library staff exchanges/visits to Chinese libraries.

Background/Context

Goal 5 of the Maynooth University Strategic Plan 2018-2022[2] has the following objective:

To create an environment that promotes equality, diversity, inclusion and inter-culturalism (MU Strategic Plan 2018 - 2022, p. 45)

The Library Strategic Plan 2020-2023 (currently at draft stage) has Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Inter-culturalism as one of its six strategic areas.

The training programme described in this article, is part of a process of

1   Government of Ireland, Equal Status Act 2000 http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2000/act/8/enacted/en/html (accessed 9 March 2020)
2   Maynooth University Strategic Plan 2018-2022 https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/Maynooth_University_Strategic_Plan_2018-22_0.pdf (accessed 9 March 2020)

increasing awareness and skills and encouraging an ongoing dialogue on inclusion. Other elements of training in this area were a number of one-hour sessions in what is known as our "Library Outside In" series. This included:

- a briefing from the MU Access Office, on a range of initiatives to bring more students into the University via a variety of targeted access programmes with schools in disadvantaged areas, prisons, traveller groups and other underrepresented groups in our society

- a briefing by the Equality Officer on the Athena Swan Programme which aims to bring more women into senior positions in higher education

- a briefing by the new MU Vice-President on her role within the University.

Most frontline staff undertook autism awareness training in 2019, and the Library piloted an online disability training course for the University in 2013 (Mellon, Cullen & Fallon, 2013).

The Programme

The one-day programme was delivered in two cohorts with approximately 25 staff attending on each day. The programme was designed by the Department of Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University, in consultation with the Library. It grew out of an Erasmus funded project *Integrating Diversity in Higher Education* http://he4u2.eucen.eu/. Via this project, the Department of Adult and Community Education partnered with universities in Germany, Portugal, Greece, Finland, Austria and Belgium. Research was carried out in each university to establish the experiences and insights of mostly migrant, but also ethnic minority, students. One of the outputs of the project was the development of a generic CPD programme, which can be adapted for different contexts. Another output was the development of guidelines outlined in *Creating Intercultural Learning Environments: Guidelines for Staff within Higher Education Institutions* (HE4u2, 2017).

The guidelines and programme have been endorsed by the MU Faculty of Social Sciences Teaching and Learning sub-committee. The programme was piloted in 2019, with a mixed staff group that included two library staff and feedback was positive.

Pre-Workshop

Before the workshop participants received the following information, via e-mail, on the course.

As a group, participants will have an opportunity to:

- Explore their own cultural and ethnic identity.
- Consider the implications of working in intercultural settings.
- Learn about theories of interculturalism.
- Understand the origins and impacts of racism.
- Reflect on their own way values, beliefs and theories of intercultural work and of diversity.
- Consider ways in which they might create conditions for supporting and celebrating diversity

The workshops will be highly participative and experiential. Handouts and resource materials for developing ideas that might inform people's practice will be provided.

The Workshop

The workshop ran from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. with one hour for lunch. There were three facilitators. One is a full-time lecturer in the Department of Adult and Community Education in MU. Two are part-time lecturers in Adult and Community Education and are of Nigerian ethnicity.

Morning Session

The first exercise involved staff introducing themselves and saying something about their name. Group work followed with lively discussion and flip chart presentations. Topics discussed included: cross-cultural conversations, definitions of culture (surface versus deep culture), the concept of white privilege, the difference between race and ethnicity, the language of diversity, how to have conversations around race and ethnic diversity without feeling awkward and how to deal with difficult intercultural encounters in situations where there may be a danger of being perceived as being racist. The issue of how to encourage more diversity among library staff without using quotas was also discussed. Questions which arose in the discussions across the two days included: What are the unconscious biases BAME people experience in Ireland today? How are they manifested? Is asking someone to slow down or repeat what they have said potentially offensive if they are from a different culture? How do you ask someone about their background without being interrogative or making assumptions? How does the Library address the challenge of getting participants to integrate and mix more during information literacy session?

Concerns were expressed about losing our own cultural identity and the view expressed that people who come from "elsewhere" should conform to our societal norms.

Afternoon

The participants had the opportunity to read and consider *Creating Intercultural Learning Environments: Guidelines for Staff within Higher Education Institutions*. This was followed by group work on how the Library can incorporate diversity into what we do. Suggestions included signage in languages beyond Irish and English, a more diverse library website and social media presence, revisiting our collection policies to ensure our books and archives reflects a variety of cultures, and aligning our outreach events with different cultural events. While we celebrate Africa Day, it was felt that this could be broadened to include Chinese New Year, Thanksgiving and other significant events from different traditions. The need to consider diversity in our teaching and training was also identified. The suggestion was made that names and examples in PowerPoint presentation should reflect our diverse users and our orientation programme for new students should be inclusive and representative of different ethnic backgrounds. Similarly artwork throughout the building should be representative of different cultures. Culturally significant collections could be highlighted and might be used to encourage more diverse audiences at library events that are open to the public. On-going staff training in cultural diversity was also identified as a need and the suggestion that the Library have a diversity committee was made by one group.

Evaluations

An evaluation form, used by the course presenters, was distributed at the close of each day. There were 44 responses in total and feedback was very positive.

Participants rated the following statements on a "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" scale.

1. Facilitators presented materials in a clear and organised manner
2. Opportunities to reflect on and discuss the material covered, if appropriate
3. The manner of teaching and facilitation
4. Your contribution to the learning of the group

This was followed by open questions:

What did you like most about this session?

Almost all respondents provided a response to this question (44 of 45). A significant number (39%) identified the opportunity for group discussions as the aspect most liked. Several found the session informative and some mentioned learning in relation to the use of language in particular. It was also felt that the relaxed and informal atmosphere provided helped to facilitate participation and open discussion.
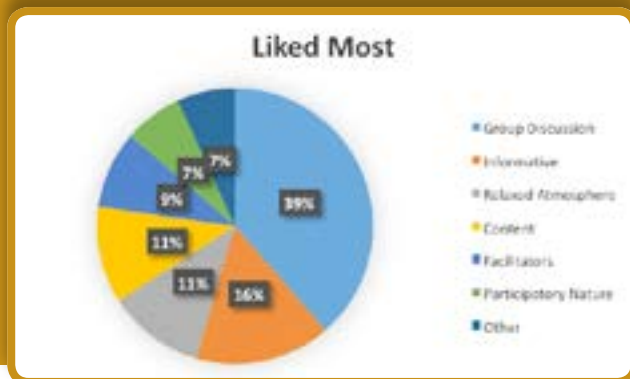

What did you like least about this session?

Some participants (11%) felt that the workshop was too long. Others felt that some topics were rushed while too much time was given to others. Some remarked (9%) that while discussion was interesting, they felt it lacked focus and direction at times.
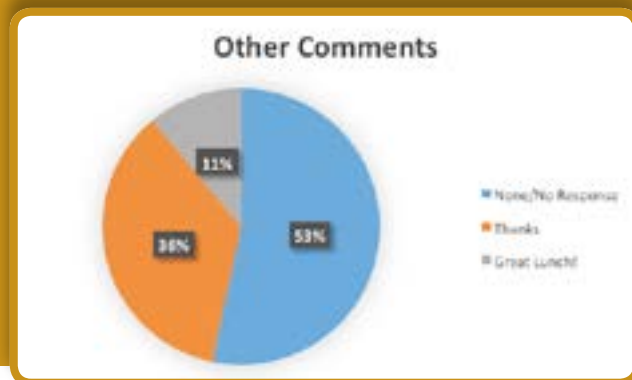
Promoting a Culture of Equality: Diversity Training at Maynooth University Library
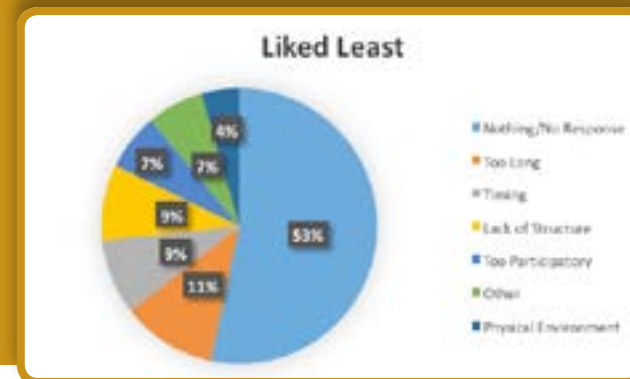
How could this workshop be improved?

Some respondents (15%) suggested that it might be useful to have representation and hear from other minority groups on campus, such as travellers, people with disabilities and Asian students. Some (11%) felt that the session could be more structured and focused.
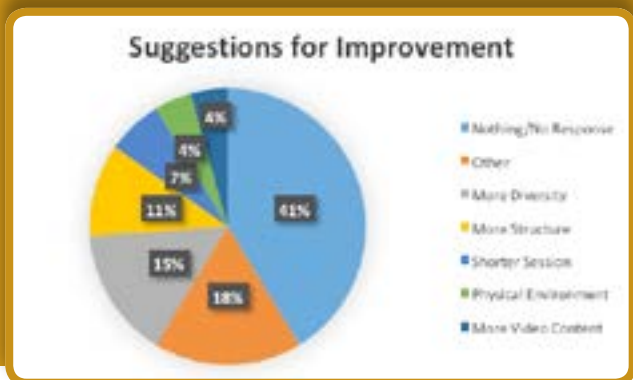
Any Other Comments?

A large number of participants took the opportunity to express their thanks for the workshop and several mentioned the lovely ethnic lunch!

Suggestions for Improvement

Other Comments

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Discussion

Running a training staff for all library staff presents challenges. An obvious challenge is the need for services to continue, which means that not all staff can in fact attend. Less obvious is the challenge of providing one training programme to quite a diverse group. Frequently, individuals or groups in the Library attend specific training which relates to their role, for example most frontline staff attended autism awareness training in 2019.

The attendees have different work and life experiences. There is a large variety of library roles represented in the group. Some participants are involved in information literacy training. These people have experience of different teaching and training methods, although few would have significant knowledge or experience of the work of Brazilian adult educator Paulo Freire. This methodology places emphasis and value on the experience, knowledge and learning needs of the group, as articulated by the individual members of the group, through discussion. The programme was built around that framework, which relies heavily on group work. Some felt stimulated and engaged by group work, while others found this challenging and possibly confusing and/or boring/repetitive.

Suggestions for further improving the programme, from the authors of this paper, include developing the information on the pre-course flier and emphasising the need to read this before the course. Between the first and second offering of the programme, the flier was recirculated. One of the facilitators briefly explained the methodology to the group on the second day, following feedback from the first day, and this worked well. We would also suggest twenty as the maximum number for the one-day programme. This was in fact the number initially suggested by the presenters.

While the afternoon discussion on diversity and the Library yielded a lot of useful information, it would have been useful to integrate the objectives relating to diversity in the Library Strategic Plan 2020-2023, more into the discussion. However, this document, while drafted, had not been ratified by University Executive at that time.

Overall feedback was very positive with comments such as:

It opened my mind

I liked the relaxed informality and honesty of discussion and presentation

Opportunity to participate and discuss topics was great/ Loved the participatory nature. I'm usually loathe to contribute but was comfortable to do so today due to the way it was run.

Learning from each other/interactivity made people engage more and develop more dialogue

Use of phrases/language very helpful/made me think about how I use language Gave us food for thought about hidden barriers

Conclusion

Creating a racially diverse, inclusive library environment represents a challenge. It involves having conversations, which can be difficult or uncomfortable, about race and culture. It also involves looking critically at our practice and policies. We need to identify what works and what needs to change and base decisions on evidence and analysis. Both robust data and student narratives have been identified as key to progress (UUK, NUS, 2019). There is no one model for success and initiatives need to be context specific and recognise nuances of different groups. Enhancing knowledge and skills of staff, alongside improving institutional processes is vital to the process.

While this case study is MU Library specific, the model could be considered by other groups including CONUL Training and Development, the LAI Continuing Professional Development (CPD) group and other library related bodies. Diversity and inclusiveness is intrinsic to the spirit of libraries. Training such as this provides an opportunity to be part of a meaningful conversation around the challenges and opportunities our changing society offers.

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