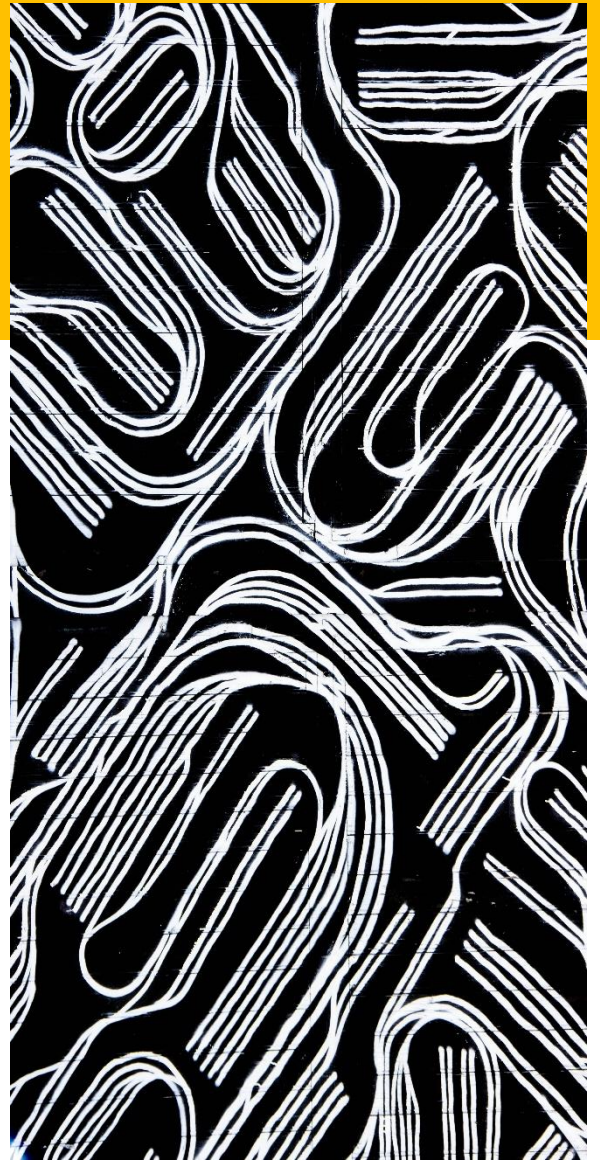# Enabling Diverse Student Voice in the University

A Case Study of the Access UCC Ambassador Programme

Authors: Caitríona Ní Laoire, James Bilson, Olive Byrne, Claire Dorrity, Claire Edwards, Caitríona Honohan, Piaras Mac Éinrí and Stephen O'Brien

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

iss21
Institute for Social Science in the 21st Century

Access UCC

Acknowledgements

Diverse Student Voice Project team

Dr. Caitríona Ní Laoire, School of Applied Social Studies

James Bilson, Access UCC

Olive Byrne, Access UCC

Dr. Claire Dorrity, School of Applied Social Studies

Dr. Claire Edwards, School of Applied Social Studies

Caitríona Honohan, Diverse Student Voice Project Research Support Officer, ISS21

Dr. Piaras Mac Éinrí, Department of Geography

Dr. Stephen O'Brien, School of Education

This report can be cited as: Ní Laoire, C., Bilson, J., Byrne, O., Dorrity, C., Edwards, C., Honohan, C., MacÉinrí, P. and O'Brien, S. (2025) *Enabling Diverse Student Voice in the University: A Case Study of the Access UCC Ambassador Programme*. Cork: UCC Access & ISS21, UCC.

Enabling Diverse Student Voice in the University
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Developing structures that enable student voice to play a meaningful part in shaping university learning environments is a key concern for contemporary higher education. A key challenge is how to ensure that student *diversity* is recognised within participatory decision-making structures in universities – that is, how to enable diverse student voices to be an active part of positive culture change in higher education environments.

The Diverse Student Voice (DSV) research project explores this question by documenting and exploring one example of a participatory decision-making structure in a university in Ireland – the Access UCC Ambassador Programme (the AAP) - a multi-level forum for diverse student voices to be heard at the centre of decision-making in Access UCC.

The research finds that a cornerstone of the impact of the AAP is its role in providing a valuable platform for revealing the complex and often hidden issues affecting students from diverse backgrounds, which are often not visible or audible in university structures. The nature of the AAP model enables students from diverse backgrounds to voice these complex and intersecting issues and makes them visible.

It is indeed possible to develop meaningful participatory mechanisms in HE, but it is slow, careful work, which requires time and commitment to build relationships – between students, between staff, and between staff and students. This presents challenges to contemporary higher education where managerialist logics of performance and efficiency dominate. However, HE institutions that are serious about enabling diverse student voice need to address these challenges. The AAP model provides some useful lessons for embarking on this journey, such as the following.

Efforts to ensure student engagement in university structures should consider that:

- ❖ Student voice is not student voice if it is not diverse.

- ❖ Safe spaces are needed for meaningful student participation

- ❖ Meaningful student voice requires relationships of community and solidarity to be built through on-going processes of engagement, not once-off encounters, with diverse groups of students

- ❖ Student representation and advocacy is important and valuable work being done by students for the university

- ❖ Embedding principles of inclusion and diversity in all student engagement activities is a first step in enabling diverse student voice

- ❖ Enabling different concerns and issues to emerge in spaces of student participation can contribute to transformative change.

Contents

1. Context

1.1 Introduction

Developing structures that enable student voice to play a meaningful part in shaping university learning environments is a key concern for contemporary higher education. The Irish government's *National Access Plan (2022-2028)* for higher education sets out as one of its goals (Objective 1.4) 'to incorporate the voice of priority group students in decision-making on access, participation and student success policies, programmes and initiatives' (Government of Ireland, 2022, p.58). In line with this, Goal 2.4 of *Securing Our Future: UCC Strategic Plan 2023-2028* is to 'support student success, health and wellbeing, informed by the student voice' (UCC, 2023, p.12). This is connected to the democratic necessity to develop deeper and more inclusive levels of participatory decision-making in the wider public sphere. However, research on participatory decision-making shows that there are varying degrees of 'participation' that citizens (such as students/learners) experience – ranging from being 'manipulated' to being 'in control' in terms of the ways in which their own knowledge, values and attitudes are affirmed, developed and fulfilled (Arnstein 1969). The degree to which 'participation' is meaningful relates to the type of approach taken to 'capturing and enabling' learner voice.

Attracting and retaining a diverse community of students is also core to the missions of both the Higher Education Authority (Government of Ireland, 2022) and UCC (UCC, 2023), and essential if universities are to reflect the 'superdiverse' nature of the societies in which they are located. This presents challenges to universities if they are to address significant diversification variables that affect where, how, and under what circumstances people from diverse backgrounds experience the education system. One of these challenges is the question of how to ensure this diversity is recognised within participatory decision-making structures in universities – that is, how to enable diverse student voices to be an active part of positive culture change in higher education environments.

1.2 Situating the *Diverse Student Voice* project

This report explores some of these dilemmas and challenges for higher education by **documenting and exploring one example of a participatory decision-making structure in a university in Ireland**. Developed by Access UCC, UCC's support service tasked with widening participation and supporting 'non-traditional' learners in the university, the Access UCC Ambassador Programme (AAP) was established in 2022 as a mechanism to further develop and amplify student voice amongst diverse groups of learners in the higher education space. Recognising that the AAP could offer a valuable case study from which lessons could be learned about how to enable diverse student voice in a meaningful way, it became clear to Access UCC staff that it was essential to document this unique initiative as it was unfolding. As a result, the *Diverse Student Voice* research project was conceived as a collaboration between Access UCC and researchers in UCC's interdisciplinary social sciences research institute, ISS21.

The key aim of the *Diverse Student Voice* project, described in more detail in Section 3, was to **document and critically analyse the process of the AAP as a way of enabling diverse student voice in university structures**. This was undertaken both with a view to learning about how the AAP – and

indeed other participatory spaces within the contemporary university – might be sustained and enhanced, but also critically reflecting on what it means to talk about 'diverse student voice' and 'student representation' within spaces of higher education. Developing an action research approach, the project involved multiple research methods, including observations of AAP meetings, interviews with staff, and focus groups and reflective diaries with students.

Through these combined methods, the *Diverse Student Voice* project provides **a rich and multi-layered evidence base** to support the development of meaningful mechanisms for enabling diverse student voices to be heard in university structures.

1.3 About the Access UCC Ambassador Programme (AAP)

In 2022, Access Officers in UCC initiated the Access UCC Ambassador Programme (AAP). It was intended that this initiative would amplify student voice, provide a direct 'feedback loop' from students with regards to their respective learning and 'service' experiences and, ultimately, enable Access services 'to be more adaptive and flexible to students' needs and wants and give staff the opportunity to provide targeted support and guidance (Access UCC Support Team, 2022, p. 1). And so, the two-fold purpose of the AAP was established:

1. To allow Access students to have the opportunity to shape policy and decisions within Access services.

2. To provide a forum for initiatives to be broadcast to Access students and for feedback to be generated for staff. (ibid., p. 2).

The chief remit of the Access UCC Support Team is to provide academic, financial, and social supports to students identified as under-represented in the National Access Plan as they transition to university life. To foster greater inclusion, UCC has developed four alternative access pathways specifically designed to increase participation from under-represented groups. These pathways are complemented by comprehensive support services tailored to meet the unique needs of key groups, including school-leavers from lower socio-economic backgrounds, students with disabilities, mature students, and those transferring from Further Education.

Operationally, the AAP initiative is designed to function at two (inter-connected) levels. The *first level* consists of **four 'service specific' groups** comprising 4-8 *student representatives* (Student Ambassadors) from each of the above student support categories: DS (Disability Support); MS (Mature Students); PLUS (HEAR Scheme students); QQI/FET (students coming to university through level 6 or 7 courses). The task allocated to each of these four groups is to identify the key issues and concerns for their group, in relation to Access UCC services and supports, which can be fed back to Access staff. The positions are widely advertised and Student Ambassadors (SAs) are selected by Access UCC staff based on applications outlining their motivation to advocate on behalf of their peers. In total, 34 Student Ambassadors were appointed for the 2023-24 academic year. Training is provided to Ambassadors over the course of one day. A two-hour payment for attending each meeting is offered throughout the year in respect of valuing students' time commitment and recognising that, in many cases, Access students experience acute financial challenges. Each of the four groups is expected to self-arrange meeting times and convene at least twice each Semester, that is, at least four times in the academic year.

The **second level** of the AAG initiative – which is at a more *global* advisory level – comprises two representatives from each of the four 'service' categories, along with the Head of Access, and at least one member of the Access UCC Support Team who acts as Facilitator. Meetings at this global service advisory level take place once at the end of each Semester of the academic year, that is, twice in total. At these meetings, SAs share their group's issues and Access UCC staff respond to them. The issues and outcomes arising from these two meetings, in particular, are continually communicated at various Access Programme Manager Meetings (which are likewise organised across the four 'service' categories), as well as to the wider Access Support Team who work across these groupings. In this way, a continuous 'feedback loop' is designed to:

1. Assist in evaluating the accessibility of the university's facilities, programmes and services.

2. Make recommendations for needed improvements in Access services.

3. Provide guidance in developing access policy and a plan for action.

4. Serve as an access resource and review mechanism, which may include consultation on new programmes, policies and services.

5. Assist in educating staff, senior management and students concerning disability services and other wider access issues, which may include awareness seminars and participating on conference panels and workshops (Access UCC Support Team, 2022, p. 3).

In relation to the student 'ambassadors', it is hoped that this model will promote new skills (such as leadership, communication, creativity, project management and advocacy), validate student ideas and authentic experiences and, most importantly, position their 'voice' at the centre of the decision-making process within the Access Office. In relation to the staff, it is hoped that this model will enable them to engage more with 'live' student concerns, explore targeted items for further review and, most importantly, assign tasks within their own services and provide concrete communication to students on actions taken with and for them (ibid., p. 4).

The AAP was set up to provide a multi-level forum for diverse student voices to be heard at the centre of decision-making in Access UCC. It is a unique initiative in a number of ways, particularly its use of small constituent groups, its focus on the development of a continuous and ongoing feedback pathway, its recognition of student involvement as valuable work for the university, and its valuing of the voices of students, particularly those oft marginalised within the learner population. It therefore provides a valuable opportunity to examine how diverse student voices can be enabled and heard within university structures.

1.4 Structure of this report

The report is structured around five remaining sections. Section 2 provides a brief literature review as a way of situating the AAP and *Diverse Student Voice* project in conceptual debates about learner voice, student participation and representation. Section 3 outlines in more detail the aims and objectives of the *Diverse Student Voice* project and its methodological approach. In Section 4, we draw on our case study analysis to illuminate some of the vital ways in which the AAP acts as a model for facilitating and enabling student voice. Section 5 focuses on some of the emergent challenges, tensions and dilemmas that can be involved in building meaningful student engagement. Finally,

Section 6 concludes by asking what the contemporary university can learn from the AAP about how to better facilitate meaningful spaces for the participation of diverse student voices within our higher education communities.

2. Understanding Diverse Student Voice: Conceptual Starting Points

2.1 Introduction

This section introduces some key concepts and issues drawn from a review of literature, which serve as analytical tools on the *Diverse Student Voice* project. It explores critical understandings of 'learner voice' and the challenge of representation, before moving on to illuminate some of the barriers to participation and need for institutional engagement with diverse groups within the higher education space. Dilemmas about how student voice is currently understood, and the slippage, but also distinction, between terms such as 'student representation', 'student partnership' and 'student engagement' are also discussed.

2.2 Critically exploring the concept of 'learner voice'

'Learner voice' is a concept that is closely influenced by the democratic necessity to develop deeper and more inclusive levels of participatory decision-making in social organisations and the wider public sphere. Sherry Arnstein's (1969) early work on 'a ladder of citizen participation' highlights, for example, the varying degrees of 'participation' that citizens (for example, students) experience. Central to the typology (see Arnstein, 1969) is the importance of active listening and acting, and not just hearing without action. As Arnstein (1969, p. 217) writes:

> Rungs 3 and 4 progress to levels of 'tokenism' that allow the *have nots* to hear and to have a voice: (3) Informing and (4) Consultation. When they are proffered by powerholders as the total extent of participation, citizens may indeed hear and be heard. But under these conditions they lack the power to ensure that their views will be heeded by the powerful. When participation is restricted to these levels, there is no follow-through, no 'muscle', hence no assurance of changing the status quo.

There are many reasons why 'learner voice' must be taken seriously. It is the democratic right of each person to express themselves freely and be listened to; it is also in the best interest of educational providers to 'start where the learner is at' and act 'responsively' in accordance with diverse learner cohorts' strengths, needs and abilities; and, finally, it is ultimately in the best interest of the university system to 'better itself' – specifically, to widen its access, promote new scholarship on pedagogical inclusion, and advance its broader social and civic purpose. Research indicates that when learners are actively involved in speaking to, and leading, their own learning, there are educational and social dividends for learners, educators, policymakers and the wider community. 'Actively listening to', 'problem posing with' and 'acting alongside' learners are, in themselves, educational, well-being and wider social 'moments' that can often lead to positive cultural change.

The degree to which this change is authentic, however, is premised on how sound - philosophically, theoretically and methodologically - one's approach is to 'capturing and enabling' learner voice. It is

also premised on a clear critique of the ever-creeping mercantile and managerialist culture that 'captures' learner/student voice in particular ways for particular purposes. Finally, it is premised on critiquing the concept of 'learner/student voice' itself. What is clear from the literature (Fielding, 2004a, 2004b; Lundy, 2007; Seale, 2010; Fleming, 2015; Cook-Sather, 2020) is that 'learner voice' is complex, conflicted, even uncertain. There is the significant challenge of 'representation', for example, such as whose voice gets heard amongst the 'Others', or whose voice gets heard more. To embrace such critique, we argue in this report, is to act more responsively alongside learners, particularly those on the margins.

Many authors have noted this complex, conflicted, uncertain quality of the concept of learner voice. McLeod (2011, pp. 180–181) captures this well:

> Voice is a resonant yet slippery term, sometimes used metaphorically, sometimes literally, sometimes with benign connotations, at other times with subtle regulatory and oppressive ones. Voice is not simply speech; it can mean identity or agency, or even power, and perhaps capacity or aspiration; it can be the site of authentic reflection and insight or a radical source for counter narratives. Voice can be a code word for representing difference, or connote a democratic politics of participation and inclusion, or be the expression of an essentialized group identity.

Lundy's (2007, p. 933) concept of voice centres on a rights-based approach – 'a new way of conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)' – which aims to focus decision makers' attention to four elements of provision:

- Space: Children [and, we suggest, learners] must be given the opportunity to express a view.
- Voice: They must be facilitated to express their views.
- Audience: The view must be listened to.
- Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.

2.3 Whose voices count in Higher Education? The challenge of student 'representation'

The challenge of *representation* must be considered when conceiving of and designing student voice initiatives in Higher Education. McStravock (2022), for example, highlights the challenges Students Union officers face when attempting to represent the views of diverse learners. Indeed, enabling diverse, intersectional, voices via wider student voice initiatives remains a key *social justice* concern (Zepke, 2015). This is because diverse voices interconnect with 'socio-economic status, gender, sexuality, disability, or ethnicity' in ways that reveal 'the complexity of experiencing social inequalities in everyday student life' (Resch, 2023, p. 1). McLeod (2011) notes the importance of not silencing differences between voices (even *within* particular groups), while Carey (2013, p. 1300) stresses considering 'the voice of those who have a more hesitant or subversive relationship with the system'.

Despite acknowledging the importance of others' lifelong experiences, research indicates that including diverse student voice in university decision-making is not prevalent (Bjorneras *et al.*, 2022; Resch, 2023). While care needs to be taken not to exclusively align voice with 'marginalized learners' – for fear of further stigmatization (McLeod, 2011) – a greater 'representation' of 'Other voices' is needed to encourage more meaningful student participation in university life (Bjorneras *et al.*, 2022). Significant barriers to student participation persist, particularly in relation to marginalized learners,

however. To illustrate, students for whom English is not their first language can experience barriers in understanding its everyday usage in the university, as well as its attachment to formal institutional practices (Mayaba, Ralarala and Angu, 2018). The ways in which inclusive language is employed, for example in relation to disability (Lister at al., 2019), may also present depictive and practical challenges for students. Many studies note the economic, social and cultural barriers that working-class students experience in university in comparison to their middle-class peers (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010; Finnegan and Merrill, 2017). Scanlon *et al.* (2020, pp. 761–762) too highlight ethnicity challenges, such as the case of a Traveller student in their study 'who recalled feeling completely isolated and intimidated by her new surroundings' and whose 'family objected to her going to university on the grounds that she was likely to face discrimination (both at university and in middle-class workplaces), and lose her Traveller identity'. Field *et al.* (2010) note how 'non-traditional' students, including mature students, can experience the role of student as temporary, provisional and even sometimes marginal to their other established identities. And in Rath's (2022) study of the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education in Ireland, the following barriers are identified:

> Students pointed to a range of academic and structural challenges that acted as a barrier to engaging socially through their academic work. Barriers included being prevented from recording lectures, fears of disability disclosure to academic staff, failure to provide lecture slides in advance, lack of awareness and use of universal design techniques among lecturers and tutors, and a failure to receive timely academic and social supports. These were compounded by physical infrastructural difficulties including difficulties getting to class due to timetabling, being unable to find accessible seating among classmates, overcrowded corridors, and broken elevators (Rath, 2022, p. 5).

Thus, significant barriers to participation – and we can include real financial and time barriers (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Crozier *et al.*, 2008; McCoy and Byrne, 2011; Government of Ireland, 2022) – inhibit students' (particularly diverse students') access to information about, and meaningful representation in, decision-making structures in the university (Planas *et al.*, 2013).

2.4 Towards re-imagining, re-structuring and re-enacting student voice in the university

'Student voice' is frequently associated with 'student representation', 'student partnership' and 'student engagement' – indeed, these terms are often used interchangeably. To illustrate, Matthews and Dollinger (2023, p. 556) discuss the common-sense usage of both 'student representation' and 'student partnership'. 'Representing' is evoked when students, in their official capacity as learners, 'speak on behalf of other students or one student speaks for many students', whereas 'partnering' is espoused 'to signal that students can collaborate or work together with teachers and staff to achieve the mutually beneficial goal of bettering teaching and learning' (ibid.). While both terms are not mutually exclusive, 'student representation' is generally used in relation to governance matters (e.g., Lizzio and Wilson, 2009) and 'student partnership' is utilised in relation to attempts to improve teaching and learning (e.g. Cook-Sather, 2020). 'Student engagement' too is frequently used in university policy and practice, sometimes with explicit reference to 'student voice', and sometimes not (Hassan *et al.*, 2022). We may add to this the ever-frequent, even generalist, use of the term 'student experience' in university contexts.

Whilst sometimes confusing, there are no doubt good reasons to connect such terms and, at the same time, distinguish them. For example, in relation to the terms 'student representation' and 'student partnership':

> First, the potential for student partners to speak for and as themselves, to have their unique voices recognised in conversation about teaching and learning, is diminished when they are perceived and received by university staff as representing (or speaking for) other students [and] Second, the importance of student representatives being elected by students, as opposed to being selected by staff, is diminished when student partnership is seen as being superior or interchangeable with systems of elected student representation (Matthews and Dollinger, 2023, p. 566).

In this report, we are particularly concerned with how best to 'represent' student voice in governance terms (a *re-imagining and re-structuring* of 'voice'). We are also concerned with innovative ways of enabling or 'partnering' with students to act upon their views, concerns, experiences (a *re-enacting* of voice). In relation to the former, for example, traditional structures of student representation include Student Councils, Students Unions, Class Representatives and Student Ambassadors. This report hopes to speak to the possibility of renewed ways of thinking about and structuring 'student representation' in university governance. In relation to 'student participation', this report hopes to speak to the possibility of new ways of acting upon student voice that may emerge through such innovative governance models.

The possibility for re-imagining, re-structuring and re-enacting student voice in the university can, however, be curtailed by long-established (and oft rigid) systems that define student representation and participation in narrow ways. To illustrate, 'student voice' can be reduced to (quantitative) feedback surveys (for example: The UK National Student Survey; the Irish Survey of Student Engagement). Student representatives too can become 'agents of, and for, quality assurance' (Matthews and Dollinger, 2023, p. 560). And 'capturing' voice in consumerist – 'service-user' – ways can simply embed a mercantile logic into the burgeoning advance of the 'university business' model (Canning, 2017). Indeed, as Cook-Sather (2020) notes, this conception of student voice is often framed *as* student feedback. Thus, in these neoliberal times, care must be taken to actively listen to students' personal stories and experiences (Fleming, Finnegan and Loxley, 2017) and to recognise that the collective power of students can be 'weakened' - reduced to 'class enrolment numbers and student evaluations of teaching surveys' (Cornelius-Bell and Bell, 2020, p. 24).

While we cannot be naïve as to the limitations of new 'student voice' possibilities, there are nevertheless positive developments in HE policy and practice to note. Ireland's current *National Access Plan - A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028*, for example, includes *Goal 1: Inclusivity*, and *Objective 1.4*:

> To incorporate the voice of priority group students in decision-making on access, participation and student success policies, programmes and initiatives (Government of Ireland, 2022, p. 58).

This plan also sets out reporting mechanisms for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) on the above. In the last decade, too, there has been a growing recognition of the need to innovate for more meaningful student involvement and participation in decision-making in Higher Education (for example, HEA, 2016). Ireland's National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP), for example, was

established in 2016 through partnership between the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI). The current *NStEP Strategy 2022-25* outlines their key objective:

> The work of NStEP not only seeks to embed student voice across all levels of the sector, but actively creates initiatives that supports a vision of a learning community where students are partners in the decision-making process (National Student Engagement Programme, 2022, p. 2).

Here, 'student voice' is intrinsically linked to 'student engagement' and, ultimately, 'student partnership':

> Student voice is the act of students sharing their individual and collective lived experiences, expressed through views and perspectives, demonstrated by formal and informal conversation, debate, feedback, and ultimately, active listening and being heard.

> Student engagement is a process by which students and staff seek to work together to shape decision-making in higher education, building individual and collective capacity and knowledge to navigate institutional structures and cultures.

> Student partnership is the practice that both drives forward and emerges from meaningful student engagement, which recognises the need to re-balance power dynamics in higher education and seeks to enable a culture of change through collaboration, reciprocity and shared responsibility between staff and students.' (National Student Engagement Programme, 2022, p. 10).

The work of AONTAS (Ireland's National Adult Learning Organisation) too is worthy of mention. Its longitudinal (annually administered) 'National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum' project brings together adult learners from across the country to share their learning experiences with policy-makers and practitioners (see Dowdall, Sheerin and O'Reilly, 2019; AONTAS, 2024).

The hopeful message from all this progressive work is this: *'Student Voice' is now a central concern for educational policy and practice*. The question remains, however: *How best can 'student voice' be enabled and put to work?*

3. The *Diverse Student Voice* Project: Research Aims and Methods

3.1 Introduction

The stated imperative to ensure student voice is heard in higher education places a responsibility on the contemporary university to ensure that this happens in a way that is true to the principles underpinning the agendas of student voice, engagement and participation. However, one of the greatest challenges to student voice is that of ensuring the voices of all HE students, from all social and educational backgrounds, are heard, listened to and given a say. The aim of the *Diverse Student Voice Project* was to document and develop a rich case study of the AAP as a mechanism and form of practice that foregrounds the voices of students from diverse constituencies and backgrounds.

3.2 Research objectives and questions

The *Diverse Student Voice* project had a number of objectives. In particular, it sought:

- To document the AAP as a case study initiative focused on enabling diverse student voices to be heard within university structures

- To delineate the uniqueness of UCC's AAP project

- To critically analyse the AAP project with a view to enhancing it

- To provide a critical lens on the concepts of 'student voice' and 'student representation' as they are understood in university structures

- To contribute to wider knowledge on how to find meaningful mechanisms for enabling diverse student voices to be heard in university structures

- To prompt new directions in university policy and practice that positively impact on student access, accessibility and outcomes

The research sought to address the following research questions, which provided a guiding framework for data collection and analysis.

- What does meaningful student/learner voice look like? Does this differ from how it is often conceived in higher education?

- How do students and staff understand the concept of learner/student 'voice'?

- Which students' voice/s get heard, or get heard *more*, in practices of representation, such as in the Access UCC Ambassador Programme?

- How are the diverse interests of participants recognised and articulated in the Ambassador UCC Ambassador Programme?

- What changes need to happen institutionally in relation to student/learner voice?

- How can spaces be created in university structures for meaningful mechanisms for enabling diverse student voices to be heard?

- How can new, impactful directions in access policy and practice be conceived of and enacted in university settings?

3.3 Methodology

3.3.1 Action research approach

The research project took an action research approach and was conducted over one academic year. Action research is valuable in contexts where members of a given group, community or organization 'wish to study their own action in order to change or improve the working of some aspects of the system and study the process in order to learn from it' (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001, xii). It usually involves 'firstly the improvement of a <u>practice</u> of some kind; secondly, the improvement of the <u>understanding</u> of a practice by its practitioners; and thirdly the improvement of the <u>situation</u> in which the practice takes place' (Carr and Kemmins, 1986, cited in Robson, 1993: 439).

The action research approach involved a collaborative learning process between researchers and staff involved in running the AAP, which took place over the course of one academic year (2023-24). The researchers observed the AAP journey as it unfolded throughout the course of the year, gathering data on the process, the practices and the experiences of those involved. At various points during the year, researchers and staff engaged in dialogue about the observations and emerging findings, which in turn informed both the ongoing research and the ongoing development of the AAP initiative.

3.3.2 Data collection and analysis

The data collection involved a number of different methods. These included:

(i)   Observations at AAP meetings: Members of the research team attended regular meetings of the four service-specific Ambassador groups and the global advisory group, in an observer capacity, and conducted unstructured observations following a shared observation schedule. In total, approximately 20 hours of meetings were observed during the 2023-24 academic year.

(ii)   Two focus groups were conducted with SAs, while a small number of SAs completed reflective diaries outlining their reflections on their experiences of being an Ambassador.

(iii) Interviews were conducted with a small number of staff members from Access UCC.

(iv)   A review of literature, policy and practice on student/learner voice in higher education was also conducted.

Thematic analysis of observation notes, focus group transcripts, interview transcripts and reflective diaries generated a number of key themes, which are discussed in Sections 4, 5 and 6.

3.3.3. Ethics

The approval of UCC's Social Research Ethics Committee was secured prior to commencement of data-gathering. The project's ethical protocol included the following key commitments. Informed written consent was secured from all SAs prior to commencing the observations. In addition, observations did not involve audio- or video-recordings, and verbatim quotes from participants were not recorded. Additional informed consent was sought and secured from those SAs who volunteered (in response to invitations to all SAs) to take part in focus groups and reflective diaries, and from staff participating in interviews. The identities of all participants are hidden to protect their privacy.

4. The Access UCC Ambassador Programme as a Model for Enabling Diverse Student Voice in University Structures

4.1 Introduction

In this section, we draw on our research to reveal the value of the AAP initiative as an important and unique mechanism for enabling diverse student voices to be heard in university structures, most specifically in relation to the services provided by Access UCC. Its unique value relates to the way in which it creates spaces for the voices of those often most marginalised to be articulated and heard, and to bring their perspectives and lived experiences to decision-making tables. In this sense, the AAP can be seen as a model for student engagement in university structures more broadly. Here, we document some of the key ways in which AAP acts as an enabler for diverse student voice.

4.2. AAP: Revealing complex and hidden issues affecting diverse groups of students

A cornerstone of the impact of the AAP is its role in **providing a valuable platform for revealing the complex and often hidden issues affecting students from diverse backgrounds, which are often not visible or audible in university structures**. This includes the following important issues that were raised in discussions among SAs in the course of one year through the AAP:

4.2.1. Teaching and learning issues

Teaching and learning-related issues were discussed frequently by SAs, with a strong sense of disappointment and frustration being expressed in relation to students' unmet expectations regarding accessibility of course material, technology, consistency and communication. One common theme was a very strong desire among all student groups for all lectures to be recorded, while there was specific frustration with the current two-step system for students with disabilities to request lecture recordings. More generally, SAs referred to problems with inconsistency across courses in terms of how information is communicated with students and how basic skills are taught. It is likely that these kinds of issues particularly affect students who come from 'non-traditional' backgrounds or who have disabilities.

4.2.2. Need for more supports

Given that SAs were asked to focus on how the services of Access UCC might be improved to be more responsive to student needs, it is unsurprising that many of the issues raised in the small groups related to this question. Suggestions were made regarding how information provision to Access students could be better and more accessible. Other discussions revolved around the need for student supports to be more easily accessed and tailored to student needs, and some suggested that having an Access 'representative' in each School/Department was needed. There was a general feeling that Access UCC is under-resourced.

4.2.3. Wider issues affecting capacity to pursue third level education

Student Ambassadors frequently discussed wider societal issues affecting the capacity of students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds to pursue third-level education. As such, they demonstrated a strong awareness of these issues and a keen interest in issues beyond the immediacy of delivery of programmes and services for those already in higher education. The challenges facing mature students in accessing higher education, in particular because of family commitments, was a strong theme. Financial and housing issues were a concern for all groups and were particularly noted by those students who had come to university through the Plus pathway. Issues of race came up in some meetings but were not discussed in detail. SAs discussed how housing and financial restrictions, as well as family commitments for some students, all had a knock-on effect on the opportunities students had to spend time on campus and participate fully in campus life.

4.2.4. Desire for better on-campus experience

Relatedly, SAs frequently expressed a desire for a better on-campus experience. Mature students, in particular, talked about a need for events that are more age-appropriate for them and that are timetabled at more suitable times, to enable them to better integrate into campus life. Across all groups, a strong theme was a desire for more of a sense of community and belonging - in particular, more opportunities to mix informally with other Access students and a need for 'thirdspaces' on campus. The Plus students in particular talked about the paucity of 'thirdspaces', in other words, places to simply hang out between lectures, to eat their own food and to rest. These issues point to the need for the physical and social infrastructure of the university campus to be more oriented to the needs of all students.

4.2.5. Intersectionality and inequality

While some of the above issues can affect students from any background, it is clear that students who have disabilities, or experience financial difficulties, or have caring commitments, or come from 'non-traditional' social and educational backgrounds, are likely to experience these issues in multiple, reinforcing and intersecting ways. This intersectionality of difference was expressed frequently by the SAs, many of whom stated that they felt an affiliation with more than one student grouping. It is also clear that the issues experienced by these student groups can be reinforced by the acute power differentials between them and their lecturers and other university staff, restricting possibilities of issues being aired and addressed. Furthermore, the lack of on-campus thirdspaces and inclusive social spaces, as well as issues in accessing suitable supports, further marginalise students who are already disadvantaged by the educational system. These intersecting issues tend to go below the radar in the wider university. They are not high-profile 'single' issues but complex, multiple and intersecting issues that are not easily grasped by those who do not have lived experience of them.

4.3 Voicing and visibilising complex and intersecting issues

The nature of the AAP model **enables students from diverse backgrounds to voice these complex and intersecting issues and makes them visible**. The initiative is greatly appreciated by both staff and students who are involved in it for its foregrounding of the voices of students who are not usually heard and whose lived experiences are not recognised.

This aspect of the AAP is evident in the considerable investment made by both staff and students in the AAP, in the context of a highly time-pressured academic environment. The researchers who observed SA meetings were particularly impressed by the serious, focused and respectful tone of all meetings, where particular efforts were made by SAs to fulfil their roles properly and to ensure that every SA had a chance to contribute. This tone was reflected at the meetings with staff, where SAs commented that throughout the whole AAP initiative, they felt listened to and respected.

> Like you can see how much like they [the staff] value kind of our opinions and kind of that they are really interested in kind of like hearing what we have to say rather than you know, doing it for the sake of doing it (Student Ambassador SA 29, Focus Group 1).

> I suppose the huge benefit is, you know, just being in a room to see these voices and hear them bouncing off one another and to see the confidence in the students grow from year to year. Particularly I have enjoyed the students who have done two years with us now to see their confidence grow (Staff member A).

The atmosphere of mutual respect and confidence to express oneself is key to the success of the AAP. Allied to this is that the SAs are well-equipped to articulate their complex issues from the position of their own lived experiences.

Based on these observations, the research has identified **five key aspects of the AAP initiative** that contribute to enabling the voicing and visibilising of important but under-recognised issues affecting students in the university.

4.3.1 The AAP creates safe spaces for articulation of diverse student voices

This is achieved through the use of small groups in which students can share experiences with others from similar backgrounds and can identify their common issues, without direct staff input. The safety of the space is reinforced by receiving the message from staff that their issues are important and will be heard.

> You know, while yes students in Access might present with more specific issues like financial issues or socio-economic issues, the way that we engage with those students – be it honest - open – it is just good practice – you treat the person with respect, honesty and openness – they are more likely then to engage with you (Staff member C).

In this way, relationships of trust and respect are built – among the students themselves, and between students and staff.

4.3.2 The AAP formally values the work of student advocacy

Through its formalised structure of multi-level groups and fixed number of meetings, the AAP is an initiative that respects the time and other commitments of students. This is reinforced through the payment of SAs, at an hourly rate, by Access UCC, for their time and contributions. This also makes it possible for students who experience financial difficulties to be involved.

4.3.3 Students are well equipped to articulate their complex issues from perspective of lived experience.

While some of the student groups involved in the AAP may be more experienced as advocates than others, a common theme across all groups is how well-equipped the SAs are to speak from their own lived experiences and to advocate for their fellow students. As one staff member states:

> In terms of the benefits and what is going well, it has been a very, very enriching experience to hear such competent student voices, to speak eloquently about the issues that they are experiencing. They are fine advocates for the student voice, they are fine advocates for Access. (Staff member A)

What was particularly notable in the observations was how strongly many SAs felt about the exclusions faced by other students and their desire to advocate for them.

> I suppose the reality for me was going back to education now and a student voice is to like show others, you know, like that it's – college is for everyone. You know, it doesn't matter what we are, who we are - that there is a place for all of us you know. […] The biggest thing for me is just giving people hope, you know, to break out. Like where I am from, third level education is not the norm, you know (SA 6, Focus Group 1).

In other words, the SAs are strongly motivated and well-positioned to speak up for others whose voices are not often heard in university structures.

4.3.4 Access UCC are committed to core principles of inclusion and diversity

The AAP was developed and implemented by Access UCC, reflecting that office's commitment to enabling and hearing the voices of diverse students in their decision-making processes. This commitment is carried through in the way in which the AAP is rolled out each year which requires considerable investment of time and resources by the office, and also requires a willingness to listen and to see how exclusion and marginalisation play out in student life. A first step in promoting inclusion is to recognise and name *exclusion*, and to be open to changing one's own practices as a result.

4.3.5 Marginalised voices are centred in the AAP

Student Ambassadors are selected for participation in the AAP on the basis of their own lived experience of educational disadvantage; in this way, marginal voices are centred in the initiative. They are further enabled through the aspects of the AAP, discussed above in (a) to (d), that support students to advocate for themselves and their fellow students.

4.4 Conclusion

The higher education sector has a stated commitment to incorporate the student voice in decision-making as well as to attract and retain a diverse community of students. To meet both commitments, it will be necessary to create structures that support and enable the articulation of diverse student voice, and as such, disrupt traditional university decision-making structures and practices. It will also be necessary to recognise – to see and to hear (in order to address) - the ways in which students who

are already disadvantaged become further marginalised in university life. The AAP initiative illustrates what is possible when there is institutional investment in meaningful processes for engagement of diverse student voices in decision-making.

5. Tensions within and Obstacles to Meaningful Student Engagement

5.1 Introduction

While the AAP demonstrates the possibilities inherent in participatory processes which seek to centre diverse student voice, such initiatives require time, investment and commitment on the part of the university as well as the students. As a result, meaningful student engagement can be difficult to achieve and there are inherent tensions in implementing models like the AAP within existing higher education structures. Contemporary university structures tend to be hierarchical and performance-focused; as a result, tensions and difficulties can emerge when seeking to incorporate meaningful structures for engagement of diverse students in decision-making. In this section, we document some of these tensions and difficulties.

5.2 Workload and time issues

Participation in the AAP initiative requires a significant workload and time commitment from the Student Ambassadors. Although it offers valuable personal development opportunities to students, it can also sometimes interfere with their studies. Related to this, the AAP would not be possible without considerable investment by Access UCC staff. In addition, it is challenging to complete the work of the AAP within the timeframe of the highly condensed and time-pressured typical academic year.

> We are meeting students at the wrong time. […] When is the right time, you know? Is the right time in September? It's not - they don't have enough experience. Is the right time in October? No because they are handing in all their assignments, and they're studying for… Is it November? No because there's Christmas exams coming on. Then they have gone home or they have gone off campus so you don't get them (Staff member B).

However, the work of engagement by its nature takes time and institutional investment if it is to be meaningful. It is difficult to resolve this issue as it reflects inherent tensions within the contemporary neoliberal higher education system – between a stated desire for inclusivity and the imperatives of a commodified education system. However, universities that are serious about student engagement and inclusivity need to prioritise this.

5.3 Achieving shared understandings of the engagement process

It is challenging to ensure that all Student Ambassadors are equally integrated into the AAP structures, as some tend to be more involved than others, for a variety of reasons including other demands on their time. Those who are less involved can be further marginalised as they miss out on key information and communication which might enable them to be more involved.

> Because people do feel left out then when they don't hear about things that are going on. They are like "am I part of the advisory group still or what is going on?" (SA 9, Focus Group 2)

Additionally, there can sometimes be ambiguity among Student Ambassadors regarding their roles, for example when people have different understandings of what is expected.

Developing ongoing and effective methods of communication with all involved, in ways that recognise diverse capacities to engage and diverse preferences for communication methods and that ensure shared understanding of roles, can help to avoid misunderstandings. However, role ambiguities can also be related to different understandings of what is meant by student voice (discussed below in 5.5).

5.4 The challenge of 'representation'

It can be challenging for students to speak for 'constituencies', as is expected in the traditional representation model. Every student's experience is unique and it can be difficult to develop mechanisms whereby 'representatives' can consult with wider constituencies. Some Student Ambassadors express concerns about their ability to adequately consult with their peers, other students from similar backgrounds whose voices are not heard.

> I think as people, as a group, we are all so different. Like I don't actually see any of them – it is mad like how we don't see anybody else. I have met people here and then I am like "I am never going to see them" – because we are all in different courses of course (SA 6, Focus Group 2).

> A challenging part of this for me is not speaking over others as I feel that I don't represent others with my opinions and it feels very wrong to do this in the Access environment (SA Y, Diary Entry).

However, the AAP initiative shows that when students from similar (though diverse) backgrounds have the space to develop shared understandings from their own lived experiences, to articulate these in a safe environment and to be listened to by decision-makers, such as in the AAP model, an alternative pathway to meaningful diverse student engagement in decision-making is possible.

Many SAs spoke about the transformative effect on them of realising that their own experiences were shared by other students from different types of backgrounds:

> SA 2: I think I thought it was more, being diverse was more – what would the word be - not 'fractured' but more separate than it actually is. Well, I found in a sense the opposite for everyone obviously does have very different lived experience but there has been such an overlap, and that was…

> SA 34: That is what I was going to say, it's the overlap.

> SA 2: At the Access meeting there was an incredible amount of overlap -

> SA 29: Yeah there is actually. (Focus Group 1)

This discovery of shared experiences through dialogue with each other enables structural issues to emerge, be identified and named, and can potentially be a powerful basis for speaking out about those issues that affect the most marginalised in the university. This can only happen when marginal voices are foregrounded, and safe spaces are created for enabling diverse student voice. Thus, in contrast to the 'representative' model, **the building of community and solidarity are key to enabling voice.**

5.5 Different institutional meanings of diverse student voice

Some of the tensions that are inherent in initiatives like the AAP reflect differences in understanding of the meaning of (diverse) student voice and of the purpose of the initiative itself. Participants (students and staff) articulate a variety of understandings:

> I think for me it means the whole collective of different experiences and different opinions of all students from every background. So different creeds, different religions, different abilities or backgrounds are included in the student voice. Making sure that it is also encapsulated and being projected as well is also very important to me (SA 9, Focus Group 2).

> So I think the biggest thing for me is I suppose now being an Access ambassador is like I want to reach a younger generation that maybe come out of school and have to go to say training centres or whatever like that. That school isn't for everyone but that they can move on through training (SA 6, Focus Group 2).

> I suppose it is about engagement, it is about them having not just the platform to say stuff to us but also that cycle of us listening, doing something about it – but not just that now. I would say it has evolved to be us listening and involving them in what we do with it; so the sort of co… or the collaboration and the co-creation I suppose maybe of systems and processes that… that is informed by our professional practice and their user experience and lived experience (Staff member A).

While shared understandings do emerge, the AAP initiative also incorporates some tensions in terms of potentially divergent visions of what is meant by the idea of enabling diverse student voice. We highlight here two ways in which tensions surrounding the meaning and purpose of diverse student voice manifest in the AAP initiative.

5.5 1 Diverse student voices for institutional change or institutional capture? Ambassadors for whom?

The success of the AAP means that there are often demands for it to be used for purposes other than the primary one of enabling diverse student voices to be heard through the participatory structures of the AAP. The Student Ambassadors have come to be seen as a valuable resource for the university and its various offices and projects, often being invited to participate in other initiatives, or being used for once-off consultations where the 'student voice' or 'input' is required, or being seen as ambassadors for the university. These can be valuable opportunities for students' personal development as well as for ensuring students from diverse backgrounds can have real impacts on university activities.

For example, time at AAP meetings is often dedicated to other university initiatives presenting to, or consulting with, SAs. In addition, SAs receive frequent notices offering them opportunities to get involved in other activities (some paid, some as volunteers) – sometimes in assistant-like roles for other Access UCC activities, sometimes as student consultants for other institutional projects. While there is no obligation on them to take these up, it is clear that there is a core group of SAs who tend

to get more involved than others. Others express their frustrations at being unable to participate due to their other commitments:

> SA 34: It is kind of hard to find that balance. I am not saying "oh please provide less opportunities to do…". I am saying "provide more" but like maybe even during the summer – things like that – different programmes. Do you know what I mean?
> SA 2: Yeah
> SA 34: Or anything on Friday for once you know (Focus Group 1).

It could be argued that these other demands can compete with the AAP itself in terms of student time, and in addition may reproduce ambiguities/confusion in understandings of the role of Ambassador. At times, it is quite clear that the SAs are viewed as 'ambassadors for Access' – doing outreach work that is very valuable to the university.

> They are fine advocates for the student voice, they are fine advocates for Access (Staff member A).

This quote encapsulates a degree of ambiguity inherent in the idea of the ambassador – is it possible to be an ambassador for students while also being an ambassador for the institution? SAs themselves do not necessarily see these two roles as distinct. They are clearly motivated to help other students, especially those who are not connected into services they could benefit from, and to 'give back' to Access UCC.

> I think even for the people that aren't in the room today but I think every student ambassador I have ever seen that is working with Access – it is a combination of their own stories and then just the outpouring of the overflow of what Access gives to us and we obviously all want to give back. […] also because Access has given so much to us, we are now in a position to kind of give back even in this little way (SA 9, Focus Group 1).

For this SA, helping other students and helping Access UCC are interconnected goals, a view which reflects the way the AAP has been set up and has evolved.

In this context, there may be potential for confusion/complication because of mixed or blurred visions of the Ambassador role. It means that Ambassadors may find themselves holding different subject positions as Ambassadors – helping to deliver university services while also speaking for service users. There is also potential for the institutional capture of the student voice, when other initiatives, which have not necessarily committed to the principles of the AAP, use its structures to capture student voice and may use it in tokenistic ways or to support other agendas. In this scenario, the potential of student voice to bring new and transformative perspectives is modified/mitigated, and as such the real potential of the AAP model may be diluted or diverted. In other words, the AAP model, as a model for enabling diverse student voice, can come under pressure due to different understandings of what is meant by diverse student voice.

5.5.2 Voice or results? Tensions between student voice as 'political' and as feedback to improve services

Effectiveness and impact have become key imperatives in the contemporary university, by which the value of institutional activities is commonly assessed. Ideas about quality and performance that rely on clear 'results' permeate all aspects of the university, including those activities surrounding access to the university for under-represented groups. Thus, it is not surprising that the AAP is seen by some primarily as a mechanism to improve existing services.

> Really it was because of that – nobody giving us feedback. It was literally… or those students that we were trying to reach out to and they weren't coming back to us at all.' (Staff member B) (on why the AAP was established).

> … like my understanding of the ambassadors is we need to capture the students who are not communicating with us […]. We need to capture what is going on for them in the background and what we can be doing to assist them – to retain them as students. Also we would use it as a kind of a tool to recruit students as well and what do people need to see (Staff member B).

Staff member B above articulates the importance of the AAP as a means of communicating with students, to assist staff to achieve the institutional goals of improving student retention and recruitment. This kind of 'transactional' understanding is less evident among the student ambassadors, although it is present, for example in the following comment:

> I think it is perfectly reasonable to institute a policy for students who are technically paying customers to this institution to facilitate accessibility across the board and make it mandatory, do you know what I mean? (SA 34, Focus Group 1).

It could be argued that these understandings are reflective of a view of student voice as instrumental – in other words, student views are 'captured' in order to aid the institution in improving its services.

This instrumental view of student voice is also reflected in a strong desire among both staff and students for the AAP to result in concrete actions. This is understandable in the context of the time and resource pressures within which the AAP operates.

> It honestly just offers a really good way to facilitate students to air their grievances and actually be able to enact change and not just complaining to the void (SA 34, Focus Group 1).

> And hopefully from those meetings, you have an agreed set of actions that the students have zoned in on and they've polished. And they are not sort of… complaints. They are very much more solution focused ideas to avoid what they saw as problems or things that could have done better (Staff member A).

In order to ensure that it does not become a 'talking shop', the APP is quite tightly managed. SAs are encouraged to quickly narrow down their list of issues and to come to consensus around issues that are actionable. Staff facilitators play a key role in setting agendas and focusing in on selected issues for discussion, with an emphasis on identifying concrete changes that can be implemented.

There are risks with this approach, however.

First, the emphasis on common issues and consensus can mean that group-specific issues get overlooked; if diversity of student background and experience is to be taken seriously, then group-specific issues need to be acknowledged.

Second, while an efficient and focused approach to student engagement may result in concrete actions, it can also detract attention from more important (even if contentious and difficult) issues that are affecting students from diverse backgrounds. The emphasis on concrete actions and tight agendas can mean that other emergent discussions can get shut down.

For example, in one small group, the SAs raised a number of issues which they then brought to the attention of staff, via the AAP structures. However, it became clear at the next small group meeting that they felt that they had not received full responses to their issues and instead had been asked to provide more solutions, at which they expressed dissatisfaction.

It is possible also that discussions can become dominated by staff voices in their desire to 'solve' the issues being raised by students:

> But then sometimes in the meetings it [staff input] is like a lot and it is taking up space from the actual student ambassadors themselves… (SA 34, Focus Group 1).

While the desire to solve the problems that SAs are raising is understandable, it may result in an over-emphasis on issues that are 'solvable' at the expense of other more important issues. It is only through allowing people to voice and share the issues that are important to them, from the perspective of their lived experiences, that shared understandings emerge and that the most important issues can be recognised and named.

> To me it is kind of like means being kind of like taken seriously. So like you say, it used to be kind of very just top down, students not being consulted so it is kind of being brought in because we have kind of the lived experience and in particular with this group kind of like – I am with the […] section of the group – so I would have kind of lived experience (SA 29, Focus Group 1).

This student is highlighting the importance of being able to voice their own lived experience through the AAP, an aspect that is key to the uniqueness of the AAP initiative and is only possible because of the space of dialogue, sharing and trust that it has created. However, the imperative to focus only on specific action-able issues could undermine this.

For example, it was evident during some of the student group meetings that a very important, but unnamed, issue for many of the students was the need for a sense of belonging within the university. This became apparent as discussions often veered towards their desire to have a sense of community with other students from similar (non-traditional) backgrounds in the university, to know each other and to be able to socialise with each other. In addition, they expressed a desire to have access to more informal spaces on campus 'just to be', where they did not have to purchase something or do something productive. However, these issues were not seen as concrete actionable issues and, at times, discussions, about socialising for example, were shut down as students were very aware that their task was to identify concrete *actionable* issues. Recognising the need for a sense of belonging on campus can be a very powerful move, as it illuminates questions surrounding who belongs and

who does not feel they belong in our universities and opens up conversations about what an inclusive university could really look like.

In reality, of course even the concrete actionable issues raised by students are not always resolved, or resolved to the satisfaction of students - this can be disappointing and frustrating for all. However, open dialogue about issues, both small and large, can still be productive. Placing them on the agenda and being honest about the institutional issues that prevent their being resolved is in itself powerful and honours the process of student voice. As this SA expresses:

> I am very much like if you want something to change – it doesn't necessarily have to change but – you have to be a part of it. That would be really how I would be… You know you can easily sit there and go "oh I am not happy with this" and just like complaining to the wind (SA 2, Focus Group 1).

Voicing concerns by speaking from lived experience and speaking for and with others who share one's concerns can be extremely powerful. It places those issues and concerns on the table and forces those in power to hear them and acknowledge them. While immediate solutions may not be forthcoming, there is power in naming them (Ó Gráda et al 2015). Staff members involved in the AAP also express similar views:

> Students should be out protesting, they should be loud, they should be causing trouble – not "trouble" but causing awareness and noise because that is what student life should do, you know, and it is all part of it as well (Staff member C).

Thus, in initiatives like the AAP, there are tensions between the desire to enable voice and the imperative for results. These tensions reflect different understandings of diverse student voice. Is it a means of involving students in finding solutions to institutionally-defined problems? Or a way for students to voice issues that are important to them and that may not otherwise be heard in university structures? Sometimes, having the space to voice concerns may be more important than actual outcomes – and perhaps there is room for both to co-exist. Therefore, initiatives like the AAP need to acknowledge the importance of enabling voice for its own sake while ensuring that voices are listened to and taken seriously in university structures.

5.6 Conclusion: Student engagement - Imagining alternatives or more of the same?

Engaging meaningfully with diverse student voice is not easy or straightforward, therefore. There can be pressure to focus on approaches that deliver visible and immediate results or that help individual students develop their CV's, and the structures for meaningful engagement can be co-opted for other purposes. However, the real value of meaningful engagement with diverse student voice lies in its transformative potential. Transformation can be a slow process but it comes about through disruptive and creative processes such as can happen when decision-makers allow spaces to open up for marginalised voices to be heard within the structures that affect them. Such spaces need to allow students to express the concerns that are of importance to them, to share with each other, and enable blue-sky thinking about what alternatives are possible. In other words, by asking 'what would a different university look like?' (rather than, 'how can we improve this service?') it becomes possible to imagine alternatives, to re-think 'how things are done' and to begin to meaningfully address issues

of exclusion in the university. This is not easy to achieve in the contemporary university, given the pressures of time, the imperatives for visible results and the different claims on 'student voices'. But the AAP offers a valuable and tested model for beginning this journey.

6. Lessons for the Contemporary University

6.1 Introduction

The imperative to widen participation in higher education and ensure that student voices are heard is a vital democratic, public and civic responsibility of the contemporary university. Yet, as a long tradition of literature and practice shows, 'voice' – and with it, participation – can mean many different things: from the tokenism of merely providing information, or consulting, through to partnership, or ultimately what Arnstein referred to as 'citizen control' (Arnstein, 1969). Achieving meaningful participation is not an easy task, particularly in large, complex, and multi-layered institutions such as universities where managerialist logics of performance and efficiency also dominate everyday practices of 'how we do things around here'.

A key goal of the Diverse Student Voice (DSV) project was to explore how universities can develop practices and processes of meaningful participation within this complex institutional context. The case study of the AAP powerfully shows that it is indeed possible to develop meaningful participatory mechanisms, but that it is **slow, careful work, which requires time and commitment to build relationships** – between students, between staff, and between staff and students. It involves ongoing engagement to develop shared understandings of roles (in the case of AAP, what it means to be an Ambassador) and an openness to different perspectives and agendas. In practical terms, it also requires thinking in and around the parameters of university practices and the structures of the academic year, not least in terms of basic details such as timings of meetings to facilitate student schedules. To that end, we conclude the report by exploring some lessons that might be learnt from the AAP about creating meaningful practices of diverse student voice.

6.2 Placing diversity within structures of student engagement

While the DSV project sought to explore how universities can facilitate meaningful, participatory spaces which enable student voice, it was also crucially concerned with practices that facilitate the *diversity* of student voice. Students from non-traditional backgrounds tend to be those whose voices are most marginalised in university life and university structures. While student voices in general are often not heard in relation to issues that affect them, students from minority and non-traditional backgrounds are even more often excluded. Existing decision-making and engagement structures are not necessarily designed in ways that encourage or enable a diversity of student voices. For example, one SA was quite vocal about the homogeneous nature of student representation with wider student politics:

> Like I was looking at the student union catalogue of the people they are representing – rather diverse – but at the same time it is the same kind of copy and paste type of student union we have had every single year. I would say the student voice is people that are already there. They try their best to amplify everyone not just their own viewpoint – they try to amplify every voice – but I think there is somewhat of a monolith in terms of the people that are at

the forefront representing the student voice in places like the student union (SA 9, Focus Group 2).

SAs spoke about the need to extend the reach of the AAP beyond Access UCC and into other wider university structures, arguing that students like them need to have a place at the table. As Student Ambassador 9 put it:

> So diverse student voice and student voice – you can't have a student voice without it being diverse is kind of the way I would see it (SA 9, Focus Group 2).

In this sense the AAP provides a valuable model for diverse student engagement for the whole university and wider HE sector.

> Listening to student voices has previously, probably been through very select channels and never deliberately undertaken formally, and on the scale and commitment that the AAP programme is operating (SA X, Diary Entry).

Enabling diverse student voice not only is empowering for students but can contribute to transformative change towards a more inclusive university that is a place of belonging for all those who are part of it.

6.3 Lessons for the contemporary university

Based on our analysis, the AAP initiative can be seen as a model from which universities can learn valuable lessons with regard to how the incorporation of student voice can be done in a way that is inclusive of diverse student experiences and that is meaningful to all involved. We suggest that efforts to ensure student engagement in university structures should consider the following:

6.3.1 Student voice is not student voice if it is not diverse.

Structures for student engagement/participation/voice in higher education (such as student advisory groups, Students Unions, student representative structures, student-staff partnerships, etc) need to be designed so that students from diverse and non-traditional backgrounds, including those who are most affected by issues of exclusion and marginalisation, are centrally included in them.

6.3.2 Creating safe spaces for student participation

Structures for student engagement/participation should create **safe spaces** for articulation of student voices; this means the use of small student-led groups for identification of shared issues and building community and solidarity without direct input by staff, which are connected into larger structures that foreground student voice and task decision-makers to listen to students.

This discovery of shared experiences through dialogue with each other enables structural issues to emerge, be identified and named, and can potentially be a powerful basis for speaking out about those issues that most affect the most marginalised in the university. This can only happen when marginal voices are foregrounded and safe spaces are created for enabling diverse student voice.

Thus, in contrast to the 'representative' model, the building of **community and solidarity** among marginalised groups are key to enabling voice.

6.3.3 Building relationships through on-going processes of engagement
Building of **relationships** (of trust, community and solidarity) among students, and between students and university staff and decision-makers, requires ongoing processes of engagement rather than once-off encounters.

6.3.4 Valuing student representation and advocacy as important work

Student representation and advocacy needs to be **valued as important work** being done for the university and should be recognised as such through paying those who take on formal student ambassador/representative roles.

6.3.5 Embedding principles of inclusion and diversity in all student engagement

The core principles of **inclusion and diversity** should underpin all student engagement/participation initiatives.

6.3.6 Providing room for different concerns and issues in spaces of student participation

Within structures for student engagement/participation, there should be space both for: i. focused identification of action-able issues, <u>and</u> ii. student-led discussion which allows shared concerns to emerge organically and to be named and made visible.

6.4 Conclusion

Achieving meaningful diverse student voice, which meets all of the considerations listed here, is not easy to achieve in the contemporary university, given the pressures of time and funding, the imperatives for visible results and the different claims on 'student voices'. However, the AAP is providing agentic platforms where students are empowered to act on their own initiatives, offering a valuable and tested model for beginning this journey.

References

Access UCC Support Team (2022) *Access Ambassador Student Advisory Group*; unpublished document

AONTAS (2024) *Learners' Voices Across Ireland: National FET Learner Forum Report, 2023-2024* Available at: AONTAS_Learner_Report2024_Web_AW.pdf (Accessed 11 December, 2024).

Archer, L. and Hutchings, M. (2000) '"Bettering Yourself"? Discourses of risk, cost and benefit in ethnically diverse, young working-class non-participants' constructions of higher education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 21(4), pp. 555–574. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/713655373.

Arnstein, S.R. (1969) 'A Ladder Of Citizen Participation', *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), pp. 216–224. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225

Bjorneras, A.B. *et al.* (2022) 'Identifying Key Concepts in Ambassador Interventions for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education: A Scoping Review', *International Journal of Disability Development and Education,* 71(3), pp. 403–419. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2022.2095558.

Canning, J. (2017) 'Conceptualising student voice in UK higher education: four theoretical lenses', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 22(5), pp. 519–531. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1273207.

Carey, P. (2013) 'Student engagement in university decision-making: policies, processes and the student voice', *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(9), pp. 1290-1304. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.621022.

Cook-Sather, A. (2020) 'Respecting voices: how the co-creation of teaching and learning can support academic staff, underrepresented students, and equitable practices', *Higher Education*, 79(5), pp. 885–901. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00445-w.

Cornelius-Bell, A. and Bell, P.A. (2020) 'Partnership as Student Power: Democracy and Governance in a Neoliberal University', *Radical Teacher*, (118), pp. 21–30. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5195/rt.2020.738.

Crozier, G. *et al.* (2008) 'Different strokes for different folks: diverse students in diverse institutions – experiences of higher education', *Research Papers in Education*, 23(2), pp. 167–177. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/02671520802048703.

Dowdall, L., Sheerin, E. and O'Reilly, N. (2019) 'The National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum: The Benefits and challenges of Transforming Learner Voice into Policy Change' *Adult Learner*, 2019, pp. 148–162.

Field, J. *et al.* (2010) 'On Structure and subjectivity, reproduction and transformation: Understanding non-traditional students in higher education; a trans-European approach', *40th Annual Conference of Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA), Looking back, looking forward: Learning teaching and research in adult education past, present and future*, University of Warwick, 7 July. Available at: https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/2452/ (Accessed: 22 February 2024).

Fielding, M. (2004a) 'Transformative approaches to student voice: theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities', *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(2), pp. 295–311. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192042000195236.

Fielding, M. (2004b) ''New Wave' Student Voice and the Renewal of Civic Society', *London Review of Education*, 2(3), pp. 197-217.

Finnegan, F. and Merrill, B. (2017) ''We're as good as anybody else": a comparative study of working-class university students' experiences in England and Ireland', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38(3), pp. 307–324. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1081054.

Fleming, D. (2015) 'Student Voice: An Emerging Discourse in Irish Education Policy', *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 8(2), pp. 223–242.

Fleming, T., Finnegan, F. and Loxley, A. (2017) 'Retention in Ireland's Higher Education Institutions', in Fleming, T., Loxley, A. and Finnegan, F. (eds.) *Access and Participation in Irish Higher Education*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 261-274.

Government of Ireland (2022) *National Access Plan - A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028.* Available at: https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/233024/9771358b-667a-4172-867f-371d7e314f46.pdf#page=null (Accessed 22 February 2024).

Hassan, O. *et al.* (2022) 'Steps to Partnership: Developing, Supporting, and Embedding a New Understanding for Student Engagement in Irish Higher Education', *AISHE-J: The All Ireland Journal of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education*, 14(1), pp. 1-19.

Higher Education Authority (2016) *Enhancing student engagement in decision-making: Report of the working group on student engagement in Irish Higher Education*. Available at: https://www.iua.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/HEA-IRC-Student-Engagement-Report-Apr2016.pdf. (Accessed 4 January 2024).

Leathwood, C. and O'Connell, P. (2003) ''It's a struggle": the construction of the "new student" in higher education', *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(6), pp. 597–615. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093032000145863.

Lister, K. *et al.* (2019) 'Towards Inclusive Language: Exploring Student-Led Approaches to Talking About Disability-Related Study Needs', in L.G. Chova, A.L. Martinez, and I.C. Torres (eds). *12th Annual International Conference of Education, Research and Innovation (ICERI)*, Valencia: Int Assoc Technology Education & Development (ICERI Proceedings), pp. 1444–1453. Available at: https://oro.open.ac.uk/68408/1/Lister%20et%20al%202019%20Towards%20Inclusive%20Language.pdf (Accessed: 22 February 2024).

Lizzio, A. and Wilson, K. (2009) 'Student participation in university governance: the role conceptions and sense of efficacy of student representatives on departmental committees', *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(1), pp. 69–84. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070802602000.

Lundy, L. (2007) ''Voice" Is Not Enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), pp. 927–942.

Lynch, K. and O'Riordan, C. (1998) 'Inequality in higher education: A study of class barriers', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 19(4), pp. 445-478.

Matthews, K.E. and Dollinger, M. (2023) 'Student voice in higher education: the importance of distinguishing student representation and student partnership', *Higher Education*, 85(3), pp. 555–570. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00851-7.

Mayaba, N.N., Ralarala, M.K. and Angu, P. (2018) 'Student Voice: Perspectives on Language and Critical Pedagogy in South African Higher Education.', *Educational Research for Social Change*, 7(1), pp. 1–12. Available at: https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2018/v7i1a1.

McCoy, S. and Byrne, D. (2011) '"The sooner the better I could get out of there": barriers to higher education access in Ireland', *Irish Educational Studies*, 30(2), pp. 141–157. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2011.569135.

McLeod, J. (2011) 'Student voice and the politics of listening in higher education', *Critical Studies in Education*, 52(2), pp. 179–189. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2011.572830.

McStravock, K. (2022) 'We cannot be who we cannot see – Exploring the extent to which Students' Union officers can be truly representative of an increasingly diverse student body.', *AISHE-J: The All Ireland Journal of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education*, 14(1), pp. 1-15.

National Student Engagement Programme (2022) *NStEP Strategy 2022-2025*. Available at: https://studentengagement.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/NStEP-2022-3.pdf (Accessed 4 January 2024).

O Gráda, A., Ní Laoire, C., Linehan, C., Boylan, G., Connolly, L. (2015), "Naming the parts: a case-study of a gender equality initiative with academic women", *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 30(5): pp. 358 – 378.

Planas, A. *et al.* (2013) 'Student participation in university governance: the opinions of professors and students', *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(4), pp. 571–583. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.586996.

Rath, V. (2022) 'Social engagement: Hearing the experiences of disabled students in higher education in Ireland', *Frontiers in Education*, 7, 895392. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.895392.

Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2010) '"Fitting in" or "standing out": working-class students in UK higher education', *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(1), pp. 107–124. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920902878925.

Resch, K. (2023) 'Student voice in higher education diversity policies: A systematic review', *Frontiers in Education*, 8. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1039578.

Seale, J. (2010) 'Doing student voice work in higher education: An exploration of the value of participatory methods', *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(6), pp. 995–1015. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920903342038.

Scanlon, M. *et al.* (2020) '"My biggest fear was whether or not I would make friends": working-class students' reflections on their transition to university in Ireland', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(6), pp. 753–765. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1597030.

University College Cork (2023) *Securing Our Future: UCC Strategic Plan 2023-2028.* Available at: https://www.ucc.ie/en/president/strategy2028/

Zepke, N. (2015) 'Student engagement research: thinking beyond the mainstream', *Higher Education Research & Development*, 34(6), pp. 1311–1323. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2015.1024635.