10th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'24)
Universitat Politècnica de València, València, 2024
DOI: https://doi.org/10.4995/HEAd24.2024.17324

Deaf Signing Students in Higher Education: the benefits of a congregated programme for deaf students in teacher education

Elizabeth S. Mathews, Ann Marie Farrell, Lorraine Ní Ghairbhith
Institute of Education, Dublin City University, Ireland.

How to cite: Mathews, E. S.; Farrell, A. M.; Ní Ghairbhith, L. 2024. Deaf Signing Students in Higher Education: the benefits of a congregated programme for deaf students in teacher education. In: 10th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'24). Valencia, 18-21 June 2024. https://doi.org/10.4995/HEAd24.2024.17324

Abstract

Deaf students have typically had lower rates of access to, and progression through higher education. In Ireland, deaf people have traditionally been excluded from initial teacher eduation for primary teaching. In Dublin City University in 2019, a pilot initiative commenced to provide a dedicated entry pathway for deaf students to initial teacher education for primary teaching. Owing to the very unique nature of this pathway, a comprehensive evaluation of this four year pilot initiative was carried out at the request of the Department of Education. This paper will report preliminary findings from that mixed-methods evalution. In particular, the findings reported below focus on the benefits found for the creation of a congregated pathway for deaf students (rather than allowing individual students into a variety of different universities) and the subsequent potential for building capacity at the university and in the community for the improved integration of deaf students.

Keywords: *deaf; higher education; interpreters; access; teacher education*

1. Introduction

Deaf students have typically experienced lower progression rates to higher education, and once there, poorer retention within their programmes (Garberoglio et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2011). The reasons for this are complex and multifaceted but likely to include poorer overall academic attainment for these students (Marschark et al., 2015), structural barriers in accessing higher education (Mathews, 2020), and soft barriers such as low expectations of parents (Michael, Cinamon & Most, 2015), teachers (Johnson et al., 2022) or themselves (Johnson, et al., 2022; Weisel & Cinamon, 2005). In Ireland, where this research is based, deaf students have been showing improved access to higher education over the last number of decades (Higher Education Authority, 2015), though they have been identified as more likely to withdraw from their programme of study compared with other students with disabilities (Treanor et al, 2013).

However, their participation in particular programmes of study has been consistently poor. One such programme is initial teacher education for primary teaching where there was a specific structural barrier inhibiting deaf people entering the programme.

This barrier was the requirement for a high level of the Irish language in the summative examinations in secondary school, examinations which are used as a means of gaining entry to university. This has been dealt with in detail elsewhere (Mathews, 2020). Briefly, Irish is a required subject for entry to initial teacher education for primary teaching in the Republic of Ireland. However, deaf students have typically been exempt from its study in school. Indeed, it is not delivered as a subject in schools for deaf children. Nonetheless, it had been required of deaf candidates applying for initial teacher education for primary teaching. Aside from the obvious issues of equity, this had a considerable negative impact on the deaf education system given the absence of deaf teachers in the sector and the subsequent lack of cultural (Johnstone & Corse, 2010) and linguistic (Hall, 2017) role models for young deaf children.

Following a consultation process in 2011, the major stakeholders in education in Ireland (such as the Teaching Council, the Department of Education, the Colleges of Eduation, and others) acknowledged that this was an anomaly that needed to be addressed and encouraged the development of a pilot initiative to bring a cohort of deaf signing students through initial teacher education for primary teaching (Mathews, 2020). The pilot was developed in Dublin City University, creating an entry pathway to initial teacher eduation for deaf sign language users. This represented the first ever cohort of deaf signing students to study on campus, and thus presented a unique opportunity to capture the experiences of students, academics and interpreting staff in a teacher education programme. The entry pathway itself is a unique contribution within the Irish higher education landscape in that it brought a congregated cohort of students with a shared characteristic (deaf sign language users) through a single entry pathway. Typically, initiatives providing for improved access allow students to make their way into individual programmes of study. This pathway took a different approach, believing the congregation of deaf students together might bring particular benefits.

2. Methodology

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the Bachelor of Education (Irish Sign Language pathway), a designated entry route for deaf sign language users to primary teaching which was a pilot initiative supported by the Department of Education and the Higher Education Authority from 2019 until 2024 . Also included in the evaluation was a suite of capacity building activities within the university that commenced before and ran for the duration of the pilot. These capacity building activities were designed to support the inclusion of deaf students and increase the visibility of the field of deaf education generally at a national level. They included Irish Sign language classes, deaf awareness training, deaf education seminars and a one-day symposium

on two contemporary issues in deaf education. Data was gathered through a mixed methods approach combining survey responses, interview data and field notes of the principal investigator who also lead the development of this pathway. A team of three researchers (the authors of this paper) was involved in the collection of data. Surveys combining closed and open-ended questions were administered to those who took part in the capacity building activities. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with deaf and hearing students (n=4), academic staff (n=8), and interpreters (n=6) about their experiences during the programme. In total, 156 people completed surveys and 18 people completed interviews. Since the second and third year of the programme were badly impacted by Covid-19 restrictions, data collection concentrated on the first and last years of the four year degree programme, and the year following graduation (2019/20, 2022/23 and 2023/24). Data collection is ongoing. This paper will present preliminary findings from the evaluation concentrating on a single theme: the merits of a congregated pathway for deaf students.

3. Results

One of the interesting features of this pilot initiative is that it brought a cohort of deaf signing students into a single teacher education programme at Dublin City University (rather than allowing individual deaf students into various teacher education programmes across the country). While creating a dedicated pathway was somewhat contentious in that it restricted the choice of teacher education setting available to deaf applicants in a way that hearing applicants were not restricted, it allowed for concentration of funding in a single location and this brought a number of benefits to the pathway.

First, it facilitated capacity building to take place at a relatively intensive level. Capacity building was conceptualized at two broad levels in this pilot: first, at the level of the university where we delivered Irish Sign Language (ISL) classes and deaf awareness training to staff and students to directly improve the inclusion of students on campus, and second at the level of the community where we rolled out a seminar series (4 seminars) and a one-day sympsosium to instigate a longer term improvement in the field of deaf education into which our students would graduate. This approach reflects an adaptive approach to access for underrepresented groups where "it is acknowledged that recruitment, without significant system adaptation, is inadequate" (Keane, Heinz and McDaid, 2022) A number of common features permeated capacity building activities. First, where possible, deaf people's experiences were foregrounded (e.g. we worked with deaf presenters where possible). Second, when activities were delivered in DCU, they were delivered across all three campuses of the university rather than just the campus where the deaf students were enrolled, signalling that this was a university-wide initiative. Third, we tried to reach as broad an audience as possible (e.g. we delivered our seminars and symposium online, offering English-ISL interpretetation as well as International Sign interpretation to reach audiences outside Ireland). When activities targetted staff, they

were available to *all* staff, including academic, administrative, and service staff such as security and catering, full-time and part-time. Also, when scheduling activities for staff we were cognizant of the mixed schedules university personnel might have and tried to broaden our audience ready by offering varied engagement options such as weekly courses, 1-day intensive courses, and personalized one-to-one courses for those in senior management with very limited time (e.g. the President of the University). Over the course of the pilot programme, 260 members of staff and 404 students (undergraduate and postgraduate) took part in ISL classes across Dublin City University. We had a further 419 attendees at the deaf education seminars and symposium. This part of the pilot was evaluated through anonymous surveys distributed after a capacity building event took place.

Staff and students alike were very positive about the experiences in ISL classes. Benefits highlighted by those participating included improved ISL skills (91% of partipants reporting this) and increased awareness of the Deaf community and Deaf culture (108 references across the data). Qualitative statements from the survey highlighted the benfits of running the classes on campus:

> "It has opened me up the wanting to really learn more of ISL, I really want to learn more of ISL, a language I never thought too much about if I am honest." (Staff, ISL course).
>
> "It was a sort of a "lightning bolt" moment, where I wondered, why isn't everyone learning this in school? Seems utterly ridiculous not to be - there are nothing but advantages to knowing it." (Staff, ISL course).

Deaf awareness training was mainly attended by staff, in particular those who were preparing to include deaf students in their lectures. Like the ISL classes, attendees were extremely positive about the opportunity it afforded them to learn from deaf presenters and many highlighted the practical nature of the training:

> "Practical and grounded in experience." (Academic staff, Deaf Awareness Training).

Furthermore, they saw the event as part of a necessary move to improve accessibility in higher education:

> "Personal and professional insight into an extremely important area which higher education institutes should be doing a great deal to support." (Academic Staff, Deaf Awareness Training).

Some participants also noted the limitations of this kind of training and highlighted larger, sometimes systemic issues with the roll out of new initiatives:

> "The recognition by DCU staff at higher levels of valuable time and resources required of lecturers to deliver a meaningful experience...Time should be officially built in and recognised on workload model." (Academic Staff, Deaf Awareness Training).

Some wanted further opportunity to talk about the direct implications of including deaf students in their work:

> " [There was] not enough time to talk through implications for and practicalities of our local situation" (Academic Staff, Deaf Awareness Training)

Capacity building at the community level through seminars and the symposium was met with extremely positive feedback, to an unanticipated level. Comments from participants revealed that professional development in the area of deaf education is desired, not just in Ireland, but overseas, with participants tuning in from as far away as Australia:

> "Great to get an update of language assessment within the field. I am in Australia so appreciated having the opportunity to watch the recorded seminar, 2:30 am was a bit too early for me". (Participant, Seminar 1)

Constructive criticism of the seminars and symposium tended to focus on issues relating to technology (the participant's connectivity issues or the size of the interpreters on screen), desire for content on a congruent topic (e.g. more applicable to primary or postprimary, depending on the sector of the participant), and in a few cases that the seminar did not deliver what they were hoping for. Overall, however, the feedback across the four seminars and symposiums was extremely positive:

> "As a teacher of the Deaf and ISL interpreter I am always wanting to broaden my knowledge and learn more about the Deaf community, its language and Deaf Education and this symposium and the other seminars DCU have provided are a fantastic way of doing this." (Participant, Symposium).

A second major advantage brought by a congregated cohort of students was that ISL interpreters could be contracted within the university. Ordinarily in Ireland, sign language interpretation for individual students is provided through an agency external to the university. While the agency will often try to ensure continuity of interpreters, there is no guarantee of that. Interpreters will not be employees of the university. For the Bachelor of Education ISL pathway, a team of three full time equivalent interpreters was contracted to work with the students over the course of each academic year. Care was taken to allow for timetabling of preparation hours and team meetings for the interpreters to allow them to build a strong cohesive team for supporting students. For interpreters, being contracted to work in the university was a considerable departure from the usual mechanism used to provide interpreters within higher education whereby they are paid as self-employed suppliers. Our approach brought a number of

advantages. Especially, they felt like they were a member of the staff in DCU, rather than being ancillary staff who come in, but were not members of, the university community:

> "I felt like an established member of the professional team. And so yes, there was the whole thing – a member of the DCU community." (ISL interpreter 2, focus group)

A third major advantage was that the concentration of funding allowed for the development of specific modules for the cohort of deaf students that would be relevant to their careers as teachers of deaf students. In total, 11 dedicated modules were delivered across the four years. These covered topics such as audiology, working with other professionals, sign language linguistics, assessment of deaf children, and others. This allows for graduates to apply for recognition as teachers of the deaf in jurisdictions where a minimum mandatory qualification is required (e.g. in the UK).

Finally, the congregation of students had considerable social benefits from both the perspective of staff and students alike. First, it brought increased visibility of the cohort to the lecturing staff:

> "I possibly did spend more time with them but not to the detriment of others. I was very conscious of everybody else, but I became more conscious that I needed to ensure that they [the deaf students] understood." (Academic staff, interview).

Furthermore, it created a safe deaf space for students, which ultimately aided their integration with their hearing peers. Speaking about their *past* experiences in other higher educational establishments where they had been the only deaf student in their programme, two of the students recounted:

> "I was a loner before in college, I was lonely, I used to eat by myself. My class? Forget them!" (Deaf B.Ed ISL student 3, focus group)

> "The interpreter was my best friend there you know. I talked to my interpreter more than I did to other people." (Deaf B.Ed ISL student 1, focus group)

Pointing to the benefits of the deaf peer group, the B.Ed ISL student cohort noted that their interactions with hearing peers improved after they started to socialize with them as a group, but that they would not have had the confidence to do this without the support of their deaf peers. Thus, while having a congregated group of deaf peers may be perceived as a threat to integration with hearing peers, in the case of this cohort of students, it facilitated their ultimate integration with the main hearing cohort.

4. Conclusion

Deaf students have typically experienced poorer rates of access to and progression through higher education. One initiative designed to tackle this was the creation of a dedicated pathway

into initial teacher education for primary teaching in Dublin City University, Ireland. Creating a dedicated pathway allowed for a concentration of funding which in turn provided for a range of benefits such as improved capacity building (sign language classes, deaf awareness training, seminars and a symposium), development of novel modules for a deaf education specialism, and improved inclusion of the cohort of deaf students through increased visibility for their lecturers and the creation of a secure peer group from which they could embark on social engagements with their hearing peers. This is an example of an adaptive response to recruitment of underrepresented students into teacher education. Rather than focusing on deficits of marginalised students and creating activities to change the students themselves (as reflected in reactive or strategic responses), an adaptive response is when "[institutions] realize that participation and graduation goals cannot be attained in a system in which students are expected to do all the changing" (Richardson and Skinner *in* Keane et al., 2022, p.6). The learnings from this pilot would suggest that higher education institutes should give consideration to the development of congregated pathways for other at risk or underrepresented students and use this as an opportunity for university-wide systemic change.

References

Garberoglio, C. L., Levi Palmer, J. & Cawthon, S. (2019). *Undergraduate enrollment of deaf students in the United States*. Online report at https://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/sites/default/files/Undergraduate%20Enrollment%20%20of%20Deaf%20Students%20in%20the%20United%20States.pdf

Hall, W. C. (2017). What you don't know can hurt you: the risk of language deprivation by impairing sign language development in deaf children. *Maternal and child health journal* 21 (5): 961-965. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10995-017-2287-y.

Higher Education Authority. (2015). *National plan for equity of access to higher education 2015-2019* Online at http://www.hea.ie/sites/default/files/national_plan_for_equity_of_access_to_higher_education_2015-2019_single_page_version_0.pdf Accessed 12.3.22

Johnson, P. M., Newman, L. A., Cawthon, S. W., & Javitz, H. (2022). Parent expectations, deaf youth expectations, and transition goals as predictors of postsecondary education enrollment. *Career development and transition for exceptional individuals*, 45(3), 131-142. https://doi.org/10.1177/21651434211067425

Keane, E., Heinz, M., and McDaid, R. (2022). Diversifying the teaching profession: representation matters. In E. Keane, M. Heinz and R. McDaid (Eds.), *Diversifying the teaching profession: dimensions, dilemmas and directions for the future*. (pp. 3-21). London: Routledge.

Marschark, M., Shaver, D. M., Nagle, K. M., & Newman, L. A. (2015). Predicting the academic achievement of deaf and hard-of-hearing students from individual, household, communication, and educational factors. *Exceptional children*, *81*(3), 350–369. https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402914563700

Mathews, E.S. (2020). Signs of equity: access to teacher education for deaf students in the Republic of Ireland. *Sign language studies,* 21(1) 68-97. https://doi.org/10.1353/sls.2020.0029

Michael, R., Cinamon, R. G., & Most, T. (2015). What shapes adolescents' future perceptions? the effects of hearing loss, social affiliation, and career self-efficacy. *Journal of deaf studies and deaf education*, *20*(4), 399–407. https://doi.org/10.1093/deafed/env023

Newman, L. W., M., Knokey, A.-M., Marder, C., Nagle, K., Shaver, D., Wei, X., Cameto, R., Contreras, E., Ferguson, K., Greene, S. & Schwarting, M. (2011). *The post-high school outcomes of young adults with disabilities up to 8 years after high school. A report from the national longitudinal transition study-2 (NLTS2),* Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.

Treanor, D., Doyle, A. & Reilly, D. (2013). 'Supporting non-traditional students: The student journey, a new model of engagement. The move from a transactional service delivery model to a transformational resource', *How Equal? Access to Higher Education in Ireland. Research Papers*. Online: Higher Education Authority, 114-120. https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/How-Equal-Access-to-Higher-Education-in-Ireland-Research-Papers.pdf

Weisel, A., & Cinamon, R. G. (2005). Hearing, deaf, and hard-of-hearing Israeli adolescents' evaluations of deaf men and deaf women's occupational competence. *Journal of deaf studies and deaf education*, 10(4), 376–389. https://doi.org/10.1093/deafed/eni045