
First Day Contact Initiative at Maynooth University

Overview

The First Day Contact (FDC) initiative was developed by the Access Office in Maynooth University in collaboration with the University's Student Union (MSU) as a possible means of alleviating social difficulties around attending Clubs and Societies for students. The Maynooth University Access Programme (MAP) encourages under-represented groups to enter third level and provides these groups with support through their time at Maynooth. It was envisioned that the FDC could become a role within clubs and societies. The FDC person would have a welcoming role, greeting and integrating newcomers into the club/society, especially those who are registered with MAP. This article will discuss the rationale behind the initiative and the steps involved in developing and running it. To conclude it will evaluate a pilot that was run in Semester 2 of the 2018/19 academic year and discuss the future of this initiative.

Introduction

Background to the Maynooth Access Programme (MAP)

Since 1998, the Maynooth University Access Programme (MAP) have formed the central part of the University's plan to encourage young adults, mature learners, people with disabilities, Travellers and refugees and others from under-represented socio-economic groups to go to university. The mission of MAP is to work in partnership across the University and education sector and with students, teachers, families, communities and businesses to widen access and participation at third-level for students who have not traditionally progressed. MAP offers a range of outreach, transition and post-entry programmes for people with the enthusiasm, motivation and ability to progress to and through the university and beyond.

In the 2018/19 academic year, over 900 students registered with a Disability, accounting for about 8.4% of the general student population. Disability is broadly defined and includes those with a mental health condition, Specific Learning Difficulty (SLD) e.g. Dyslexia, Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD), Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) among many others (see Figure 1 for a breakdown of the different categories of disabilities registered with the MAP office). The National Learning Network (NLN), and the Maynooth Access Office have been working in collaboration since 2012 to provide the Student Central programme for students who are registered with a disability and require additional academic and/or wellness support. Two Assistant Psychologists (APs) are employed by NLN to support these students. Due to the diverse demographic of students who are linked with MAP, these cohorts may require additional supports to ease the transition into third level education. The FDC initiative was designed as a means of creating a more inclusive university environment for all students, which would inherently benefit students registered with MAP also.

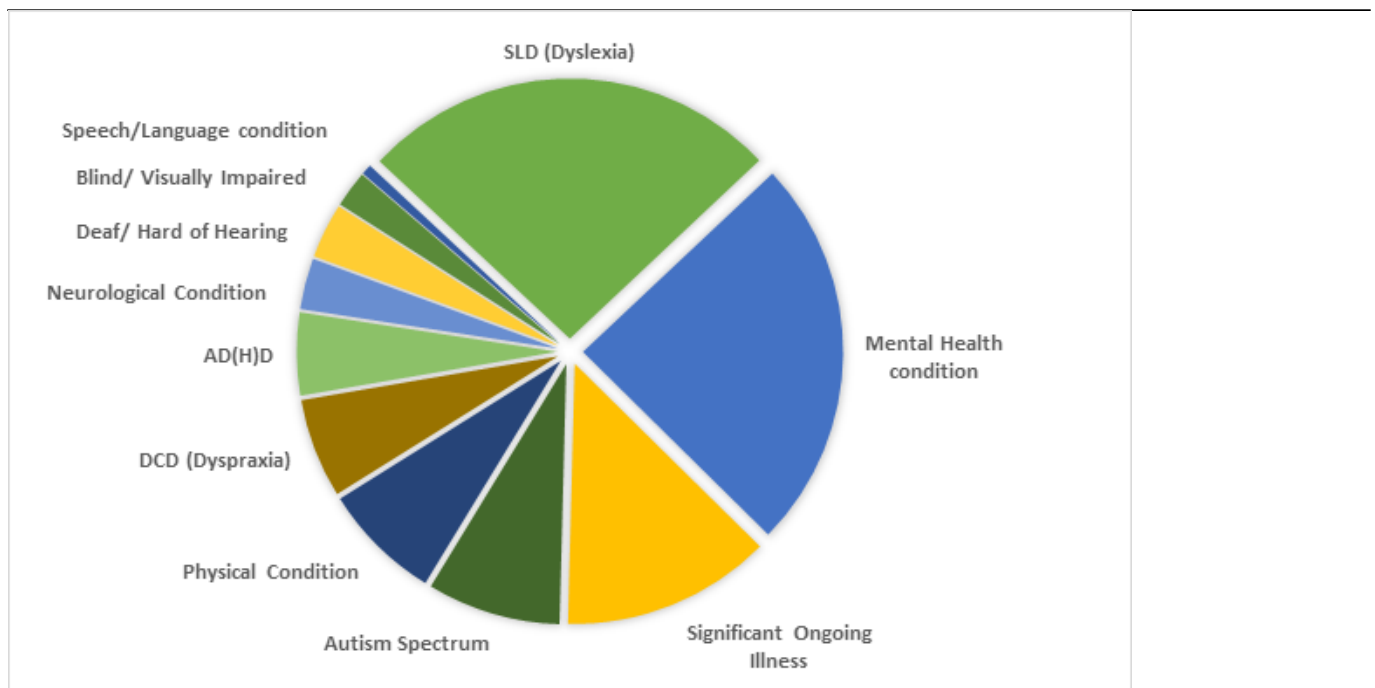


Figure 1. Demographics of students registered [with](#) the Disability Office, Maynooth University

Rationale

The FDC initiative was initially proposed by MAP as a possible means of alleviating social difficulties around attending clubs and societies for students registered with the office. This was as a result of interactions with students using Student Central, who reported difficulty integrating socially into the University. Initially, it was envisioned that students attending Student Central, especially those presenting with Autism or anxiety would benefit from the FDC initiative. It soon became apparent, however, that the overall student population would benefit from this initiative, thus creating a more inclusive environment.

It was expected that a supportive role within clubs/societies could lead to more engagement from students registered with MAP. It is evident from the literature that students with disabilities are at risk of dropping out of university (O’Keeffe, 2013). Students with disabilities often face barriers when coming to university, can be less prepared, feel less integrated and are more at risk of poor academic performance than their non-disabled counterparts (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). O’Keeffe (2013) argues that dropping out of university is largely because students with disabilities do not feel they fit in. In particular, students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can face additional challenges including self-advocacy, organisation and forging and maintaining social relationships which can impact their experience of university (Elias and White, 2018).

DaDeppo (2009) shows that social integration into university is a strong predictor of student intent to persist with university. Research suggests that the use of peer mentors has proven successful for students with ASD transitioning to third level by providing guidance and support, signposting university facilities, providing advocacy and arranging regular meetings to review progress (Mowat, Cooper & Gilson, 2011). The FDC initiative was formulated using the principles of both peer mentoring and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in order to support students from Access routes to build social networks and empower them to successfully transition into and progress through University.

While the FDC initiative was initially designed as means of creating a more inclusive university environment for all students registered with the MAP, it quickly became evident that all students who attend clubs/societies could benefit from this initiative. All students can face many challenges when coming into university. Often, the transition from secondary school to university is a challenge in itself. Settling in, making new friends and living away from home can all contribute to difficulties in adjusting to university life. Many students who attend Maynooth University commute to and from college every day and this could also have adverse effects on students making social connections. Mature students comprise of 5.7% of the student population attending Maynooth. These students may have competing demands such as childcare/work which can also hinder having the time and ability to make emotional ties in university (Reaf, 2002). Studies have found that students who attend clubs/societies and make social alliances in university are more likely to complete their studies and have a positive experience of university life. (Ashbaugh, Koegel & Koegel, 2017). For this reason, it was decided that the FDC role could become a mainstream initiative.

The initiative would involve training FDC persons in each club and society to act as a welcoming person for students who may be nervous or shy about attending a club or society and meeting new people. It would use student's own interests to increase their social engagement and help to build social networks with peers (Ashbaugh, Koegel & Koegel, 2017). The University already facilitates many clubs and societies, catering for a diverse range of interests. While students may find it difficult to interact with clubs and societies, a peer who is trained as an FDC person in each society may facilitate these students in engaging. The FDC person would also receive disability awareness training resulting in the FDC having a better understanding of the types of challenges that students with disabilities may encounter.

2018/19 FDC Initiative Pilot

The two Assistant Psychologists within MAP progressed the FDC initiative with guidance from their supervisor (NLN Senior Educational Psychologist) and a Disability Advisor in MAP and they worked collaboratively with the Clubs and Societies Officer.

A meeting was arranged with the officers of Maynooth Student Union (MSU) to introduce them to the initiative and gauge their interest in terms of implementing the initiative with the clubs and societies at the University. The FDC initiative was very well received by the members of the MSU and the 2018/19 academic year was earmarked for a pilot run of the initiative. The pilot was run at the beginning of Semester Two in February 2019. It was decided that a formal role outline should be developed to provide clarity to the clubs and societies on what the role entailed. The outline defined the First Day Contact as a connection point for MU students who are anxious about joining clubs and societies and the social challenges that this entails. The First Day Contact acts as a facilitator to integrate the student into the group, and signpost them to other services as appropriate. The goal was that the initiative would contribute to a more inclusive clubs and societies experience for all students.

The Clubs and Societies officer advertised the role at the MSU AGM, and a total of 16 different clubs and societies volunteered to participate in the FDC pilot initiative for Semester Two. This was progressed collaboratively between the two APs from MAP and the Clubs and Societies Officer. Some examples of the clubs and societies that participated included; Hockey Club, Philosophy Society, Aquatics Club, Access Society, Mental Health Society, and the Karate Club. A training session was designed by the AP's for the FDC participants, with input from the Clubs and Societies Officer, the NLN Educational Psychologist, and the Disability Advisor. This training session was

delivered by the AP's in February 2019. The training included an outline of the role of the FDC, the students who were likely to benefit from the initiative, the boundaries of the role, and the appropriate services that the FDC could signpost students to if necessary. For example, if the FDC person felt that a student was in distress, they could refer them to the counselling service if necessary. It was important to highlight the significance of the boundaries of the role, to ensure the students acting as FDC's were aware of the extent of their responsibilities. For example, the training addressed that the FDC would be a connection point for new students attending the club or society. This meant that the FDC did not have to feel responsible for that person on an ongoing basis. They were also informed that it was not a counselling role and to ensure they would refer any concerns to other support services in the University if they needed to. Role play scenarios were conducted, and FDC's were provided with the opportunity to raise any questions they had in relation to the role at the end of the session. The FDC's who participated in the training then put themselves forward at the Semester Two Fairs Day in February 2019 and remained active in the role for the remainder of Semester Two. Students were asked to complete a short feedback questionnaire at the end of the training session and were asked to provide their contact information if they were willing to take part in a subsequent feedback session to discuss their experience of the FDC role.

Evaluation of the FDC Pilot Scheme

The FDC's were contacted via email to participate in a feedback session in April 2019 in order to evaluate the pilot run of the initiative and inform future progression.

The feedback session was hosted by the two Assistant Psychologists from MAP, and the Clubs and Societies Officer from the MSU. The feedback session involved a focus group of the FDC's coming together to participate in a discussion about their findings of the role, having acted as the FDC for the semester. Questions put to the group included:

- How beneficial was the training they received in preparing them for the role
- comments on their experience of the role
- engagement from the student cohort and
- suggestions to develop the role further.

The feedback from the FDC participants was very positive. They felt that the initiative was well received and that it had the potential to have a very positive impact on the student population. One person explained how they had encountered a student during the Clubs and Societies Fair's Day who was considering dropping out of college. The FDC encouraged the student to attend the club, which the student did. Here, the FDC introduced the student to other members and the student began to engage in the club regularly. Later, the student thanked him for his support and reported that she had changed her mind about dropping out as she felt she had made social connections and felt a sense of belonging to the University. The FDC's noted that the role had been effective in helping to integrate new students into clubs and societies and overall, the FDC's noted that retention of new individual's into the club/society was better when the individual had engaged with the FDC and integrated into the club/society as it was easier to make social alliances. They felt that the initiative had significant potential to be rolled out on a larger scale for the next academic year.

The FDCs reported that the training they received prior to starting the role was extremely beneficial, and they noted that it prepared them adequately for the role. In particular, FDC's reported that having a strong sense of the boundaries of the role and knowing the appropriate services to signpost students (e.g. Counselling Service, Budget

Advisory Service, Maths Support Centre) was particularly beneficial. They felt that it would be important to provide this training to all future FDC's.

One suggestion from the feedback was that it would be imperative to promote the role of FDC and advertise it so that students and members of the club/society are aware who the FDC is. Promotion could include social media, posters, t-shirts and a Facebook group could be set up for all the FDC's so they can communicate with each other. It was also suggested that the FDC's have emails set up so they are contactable should new members of clubs and societies wish to link in with them.

Finally, feedback indicated that the FDC role should become a formal role of clubs/societies. The role should be promoted to all clubs/societies at their AGM in Semester One of 2019/20, in order to implement the initiative on a wider scale within the University. The development of the FDC as a formal role will be progressed by the Clubs and Societies Officer in preparation for the AGM in Semester One of the 2019/20 academic year.

Conclusion

To conclude, the First Day Contact initiative was developed by the MAP Office in Maynooth University in collaboration with the University's Student Union as a possible means of alleviating social difficulties for students around attending Clubs and Societies. A pilot initiative was developed and run in the second semester of the 2018/19 academic year. The pilot initiative involved recruiting participants from clubs and societies to act as FDC's and provide training for them. They then attended the Fairs Day and acted as FDC's to newcomers of their clubs and societies for the remainder of the semester. The initiative was well received by the Clubs and Societies.

Feedback from the pilot initiative included a discussion of the FDC's experience of the role as well as the benefits and challenges they may have faced. This provided the MAP Office and the Maynooth Student Union with more information regarding the future direction of the initiative. The clubs and societies identified benefit from the role as it could increase their member numbers and also retain members. It benefits the student who may need some initial support integrating into the club or society, which was the primary aim.

Future Progression

It is anticipated that the FDC will become a formal role in most clubs/societies with a goal of starting this for September 2019. From evaluating the pilot run of the First Day Contact initiative, the following have been identified as key in order to successfully continue the progression of this initiative.

Key Issues for progression:

- In order to develop this role and ensure its sustainability, the role must become a mainstream role within individual clubs/societies. This will ensure that the position of the FDC is filled every year.
- Promotion of the role will be developed by the Clubs and Societies Officer over the summer months. This will involve the FDC becoming a formal role within the clubs and societies and becoming ratified within their constitution.
- Training and ongoing support will be provided to future FDC's two weeks after the role has been advertised at the clubs and societies council meeting at the beginning of the new semester.
- The FDC will be supported by the head of the club or society of which they are a member, the Student

Union's Clubs and Societies Officer, and the two Assistant Psychologist's from MAP.

- Recognition of the contribution of the FDC's will be acknowledged by certificates which will be presented to the FDCs at the end of each academic year. This is to encourage students to apply for the role and also to recognise the employability skills that the FDC's have gained from being part of this initiative.

There will be scope to conduct further research following the 2019/20 academic year to examine the implementation of the First Day Contact role on a larger scale to further refine the role and evaluate its efficacy.

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