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# Building Solidarity amongst Students from Underrepresented Backgrounds in Higher Education: Observations from research undertaken at Maynooth University

## Introduction

This article will outline key observations from an undergraduate Anthropology thesis that investigated how a sense of solidarity formed among students who participated in the Maynooth University Access Programme. There are multiple approaches to how solidarity and related concepts can be theorised (Cingolani 2015; Komter 2005; Simonic 2019; Thijssen 2012; Durkheim 1984; Anderson 2006) but in this context, solidarity can be loosely defined as the mutual support and sense of shared identity found in those who recognise themselves as having shared experiences as these are the features which emerged prominently in this research. These traits were obvious among certain participants in the Maynooth University Access Programme as evidenced in a large and active student 'Access Society' and in the large and active friend groups which oriented around it. It was also interesting that solidarity was as common between students with disabilities and students coming from socio-economic disadvantage as it was within these cohorts. Therefore the idea of a shared experience went beyond the basic criteria for participation in an access programme and so the researcher was interested in what created an authentic (Sapir 1924; Saris 2013) sense of solidarity which lead students to participate enthusiastically in access interventions.

## The Access Student Community

The fact that labels such as disability were not paramount to a sense of group solidarity is interesting in terms of building access interventions that encourage wider participation in the university community. It is worth noting that there was less evidence of the same level of solidarity extending to include mature students although there were a number of mature students who participated enthusiastically in access initiatives. There may be wider structural issues that affect mature students more, and which this research does not cover, such as caring and work responsibilities. Equally, there may be cultural factors that did not emerge here. There is interesting anthropological literature on kinship and solidarity. Cumming and Schneider (1961) found that adult sibling relationships were often solidary and were important in the case of American kinship. Sibling relationships were also commonly substituted or supplemented with other collaterals or horizontal relations showing the importance of that kind of relationship for fostering solidarity. In the case of the research reported here sibling solidarity is not examined but participants could be seen as belonging to the same peer group and so exploring the occurrence of solidarity in this instance is similarly interesting and can be theorised similarly by examining what features of relationships, such as shared experiences and mutual support, can build solidarity. This research showed that differences between individuals could be overcome by shared experiences built through participation in the Access Programme. Consideration will be given to how these observations might apply to enhancing the participation and experience of students in university life. This article will highlight a selection of observations that are of most interest based on points highlighted by higher education professionals who have advised the author.

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## Methodology

The primary aim of this research was to investigate Maynooth access student culture to understand how they build bonds, their experiences of college, and their feelings about participating in the Maynooth Access Programme. In order to describe culture, it is necessary to observe interactions, rituals, and contexts as well as to gather textual data from what members of a group have to say. Observations of a group can give insight into how they interact with one another and who interacts with whom and in what way. (Goffman 1983, 1955, 1971, 1986) Goffman suggested that observing how individuals present themselves in interactions with others can give insight into their identity, with the theory that perceptions and identities depend on the context of the interaction and on who is involved. In that sense, a person's identity isn't static but is constantly constructed in interactions with others. In the case of this research, observation of interactions gave insight into group dynamics and the relationships between people, such as friendliness, and some individuals taking leadership roles among others. It is also important when trying to understand the culture of a group to take an inductive, grounded approach, meaning that the researcher commences research without a set hypothesis or without any assumptions about their subject matter, and instead, begins building questions based on observations which stand out as important indicators of relations within the group. Through this inductive approach, the researcher can build an understanding of group dynamics and frame a question that focuses on a theme that emerges as being important or interesting.

With this research philosophy in mind, participant observation was the key method selected for the research, with the researcher participating in events held by the Access Society, other access related activities, and casual gatherings. This participant observation was followed up by a number of in-depth open-ended interviews to test observations by the researcher against the opinions of experienced participants. A combination of convenience and purposive sampling was used to select interviewees who were present at the field site frequently and demonstrated extensive relevant experience. One weakness of this approach is that there was a much smaller input from access students who didn't participate as much in access-oriented activities. It would have been interesting to have had more input from these students as to why they did not participate in access society events but a smaller amount of data was collected in this regard.

## Key Findings

Findings will be offered under four headings relating to different factors which contributed to building solidarity.

### Student Leadership

One thing that stood out as contributing to a strong sense of belonging and community among access students was the provision for student leadership and student led initiatives. In this case, the student Access Society played a key role. Access students had set up their own student society under the Clubs and Societies Office which enabled them to elect a committee of their peers to organise weekly social events and awareness raising campaigns such as those raising awareness around disability. This empowered students to build leaders among their peers and gave them autonomy to organise events with support or collaboration from the Access Office. The result was regular social events revolving around the 'access' label which created a positive association with the concept of 'access' and facilitated the forming of friendships and mutually supportive groups.

Furthermore, those students who found themselves in leadership roles reported the benefits of greater confidence and skills which they could transfer to other aspects of life and to future endeavours. This sense of leadership

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seemed to reproduce itself organically in a way that students felt was authentic, as many reported receiving support from more experienced students when they first came to college and looking up to those students only to find that they themselves were the ones to give support later. This experience was reported positively by participants. The student-lead society was also important for allowing leadership to reproduce organically because, while the Access Office appointed students to leadership roles, the society allowed students to be voted onto the committee and to emerge as a leader through their willingness to volunteer to organise events for their peers. Recognition by the Access Office and the opportunity for more formal leadership roles such as working at the pre-entry orientation was an important reward for this kind of self-directed, voluntary leadership and was also crucial for establishing the importance of leadership among students, and early on from the point of pre-entry orientation.

### Sense of active community

The overall sense was one of an active community. Research participants reported feelings of mutual support whereby they could turn to another member of the Access Society or wider access community for advice or support. This led them, on some occasions, to reach out to more formal supports from the University; on other occasions the support and empathy they received from other students was sufficient. Having received support and having access to support, students reported being more resilient to challenges which interfered with studies and extra-curricular activities. This indicated the role of students to signpost formal supports and also the role of peer support in improving the student experience. Student leadership was crucial here as key members of the society were often a positive link between the Access Office and students seeking support.

### Solidarity across the Access grouping

Another point that emerged is that solidarity extended between students with disabilities and students from socioeconomic disadvantage. Participants reported that there was empathy and mutual support between these groups of students which formed through involvement in activities with the Society and Office. Furthermore, terms like 'disadvantage' and 'disability' were far less common and rather the label 'access' had become widely adopted by students and was often endorsed with pride. Over the course of fieldwork the researcher was quick to discover if someone was an 'access student' as it was spoken of eagerly, but more often did not know if a student had a disability or came from economic disadvantage unless a more in-depth interview was conducted. In this case, the shared positive identity of 'access' made other individual differences less important and facilitated a sense of community not contingent on one set background but extended to a range of students all of whom, as one participant described, had something in their background which made them less likely to attend University and in this case, it was less important what this aspect of their background was but rather that solidarity emerged regardless.

### Role of the Pre-entry Orientation Programme

Another key factor in building what is described above is the pre-entry orientation programme called 'Launchpad' which is run before the general orientation. Here student leaders are again extremely important as the programme is mainly staffed by existing access students and this is reported later by students as having an important impact on their aspirations or what they saw themselves achieving in the future. The pre-entry orientation programme involves students staying on campus together and engaging in a busy, regimented programme of information talks and bonding activities. Students report that the intensity of the programme is draining and that it can be uncomfortable to engage in social activities with strangers but they also report that the intensity is such that their reluctance to

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engage is broken down and that they begin to bond with other students over these shared experiences. The pre-entry orientation programme could be seen theoretically through the lens of social control in that it is designed to ensure that students form bonds prior to starting lectures. For many students that is the effect they describe and they are grateful to know other access students when they first start lectures, and a number of them kept up friendships. For others, it was important to have met the more experienced students who were leaders at Launchpad as they continued to be a source of advice and support. Other students were more cynical about the orientation experience and they felt the emphasis on a sense of an 'access' community seemed contrived or spurious and they resented a pressure to engage socially. This is a risk with pre-entry orientation, but these students also reported being more aware of supports available to them and what to expect from college life having participated in the pre-entry orientation programme and they tended to remain friendly with those students who became more directly involved with 'access events' so in this sense they were part of the community but were more peripheral. Therefore, the benefits of the pre-entry orientation which emerged were greater for those who were more willing to engage but were also evident for those who were less positive about the experience. Cumming and Schneider also identify coresidential patterns as a consideration in their study of solidarity.

## Conclusion

The findings from this research showed the benefits of a sense of community and solidarity for access students and that this relied on student-lead initiatives that are also promoted and facilitated by the institution through partnership between staff and students. Within these findings, there are insights into factors that improved the student experience and which connected students with the support they needed and therefore it may be worth further exploring these factors in the context of retention, attainment, and the quality of experience reported by students. Further research is needed to explore how the same factors could apply to mature students. There is a need for greater research into how structural, as well as cultural barriers, affect different students' participation in University life, particularly mature students.

The effect of student leadership was two-fold. Firstly, students who took on leadership roles provided support and guidance to other students, while also expanding the expectations of less experienced students in terms of what they might gain from their University experience. At the same time, student leaders themselves gained invaluable experience, self-confidence, and skills. Further research might investigate if this leadership improves retention or attainment.

Similarly, the sense of an active community gave students a consistent peer network wherein they received support and empathy, which they reported as making them more resilient to challenges which affected their experience as students. This further suggests possible benefits for retention and the quality of the student experience which could be considered in the design of programmes for students.

The finding that solidarity extended between both students with disabilities and students from socioeconomic disadvantage and the crucial role the shared 'access' identity played in this is interesting in terms of overcoming stigma and improving the integration of underrepresented groups into university life. The role of labels in the context of integration in a university context therefore warrants further investigation.

Overall, these findings show that access initiatives can positively influence the student experience and further qualitative research could reveal more about how university policies and initiatives can influence students'

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experiences.

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