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A whole institution approach to student success
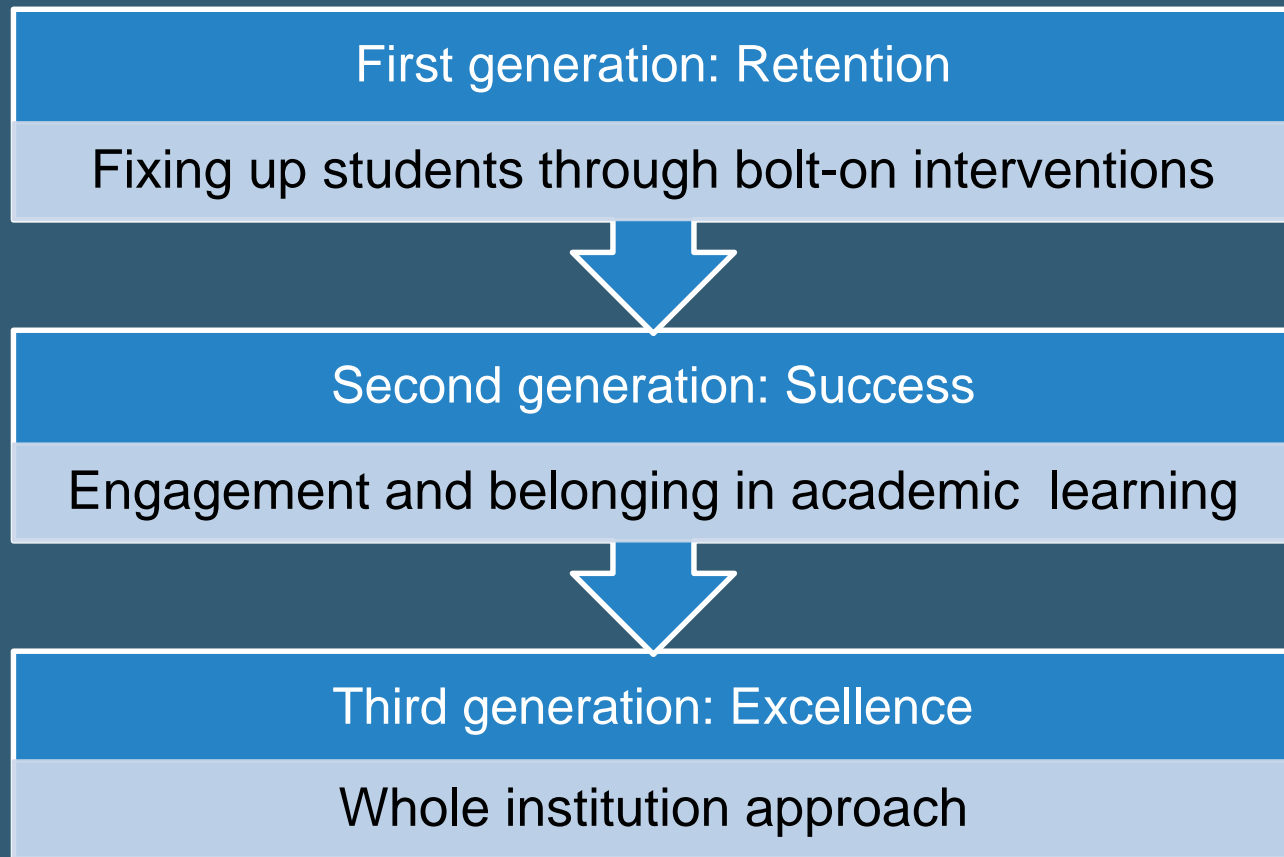**Student Affairs Ireland, Univeristy of Cork, 11th June 2019**

@ProfLizThomas

Overview of the presentation

o Context: English research study and drivers for understanding a whole institution approach.

o Findings about a whole institution approach.

o Exploring a whole institution approach to student success from the perspective of Student Affairs professionals.

o Implementing a whole institution approach, and thinking about developments.

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Context

- Study in England to understand a 'whole institution approach' (WIA) to widening participation (WP).
- In summary , WIA is defined as: *"An approach to widening participation and fair access that is **embedded at all levels of an institution, not limited to a particular unit or department, engaging across all areas of its institutions' work and inclusive of senior management.**"*
- Institutions are supposed to demonstrate a WIA approach as part of Access Agreements (now Access and Participation Plans) and it is recommended in policy and research documents, e.g. the Social Mobility Action Group report *Working in Partnership: enabling social mobility in higher education.*
- Little to make this idea explicit, and know whether institutions were doing this.

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Evolution of understanding about retention and success

First generation: Retention

Fixing up students through bolt-on interventions

Second generation: Success

Engagement and belonging in academic learning

Third generation: Excellence

Whole institution approach

Study success outcomes

Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE 2013) identified four outcomes of HE:

○ Achieving a degree (retention and completion).

○ Achieving a good degree (attainment).

○ Achieving a degree and continuing to employment/further study (employability).

○ Achieving a degree and continuing to graduate employment or study (graduate progression).

Understanding a whole institution approach research study

1. What is involved in a 'whole institution' approach to WP?

2. How can a whole institution approach be implemented and managed?

3. What strategies and tools can be used to evaluate a whole institution approach to WP?

Research design

- Literature review, including looking at gender mainstreaming in development.

- Five diverse institutional case studies, based on 3 hour participatory workshop, using Appreciative Inquiry approach.

  - Aston University, Kingston University London, Solihull College University Centre, University of Sheffield and University of Worcester.

- Participatory workshop.

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Core – and essential - features of a whole institution approach

1. A whole lifecycle approach to WP is adopted: access to HE; experience in HE; and progression beyond UG programme.

2. Departments, services and units from across the institution are involved in widening participation (i.e. not just 'professional WP' staff): academics, student affairs, planners, IT, library, administrative staff etc.

3. There is a clear and explicit institutional commitment to widening participation, defining target groups and expected outcomes as appropriate.

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Additional characteristics – to go beyond the 'minimum'

1. Working with a wider range of WP target groups.
2. Expanding the student lifecycle incorporating admissions, marketing, attainment, access to postgraduate study.
3. Embedding WP into all roles and considerations across the institution.
4. Involving students, alumni and the students' union in WP.
5. Ensuring data, evidence and research inform all aspects of the institution's work.
6. Allocating WP resources across the institution.
7. An integrated rather than fragmented approach based on sharing, collaboration and co-ordination.

What does it involve? Inclusive approach

An inclusive approach:

... necessitates a shift away from supporting specific student groups through a discrete set of policies or time-bound interventions, towards equity considerations being embedded within all functions of the institution and treated as an ongoing process of quality enhancement. Making a shift of such magnitude requires cultural and systemic change at both the policy and practice levels. (May and Bridger, 2010, p.6)

What does it involve? Alignment

Alignment

… involves matching resources, policies, and practices with the institution's educational purposes and student characteristics through forging educational partnerships within and among traditional organisational boundaries, especially faculty, academic affairs, and student affairs units. (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2010, cited in Felten et al 2016, p92)

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From champions, to silos of excellence, to a whole institution

Vertical alignment: the student lifecycle represents vertical alignment

| Progression |
| Student success |
| Access |

| Academic experience | Personal and social well-being | Professional development | Financial support |

Horizontal alignment: Students' daily lived experience

The university as a complex or a complicated system

- Systems approach considers how the constituent parts of an organisation (or system) work together to inform the process of change.
- **Complex system**: multiple groupings contribute to retention and success in variable ways. Passionate staff take ownership of the issues and work collaboratively with other like-minded colleagues and students; it is 'bottom-up'.
- But a complex system can result in fragmentation and incoherency, risking duplication and gaps in provision, and even 'competition' between comparable interventions, resulting in staff frustration and student confusion - and an inconsistent student experience and outcomes.
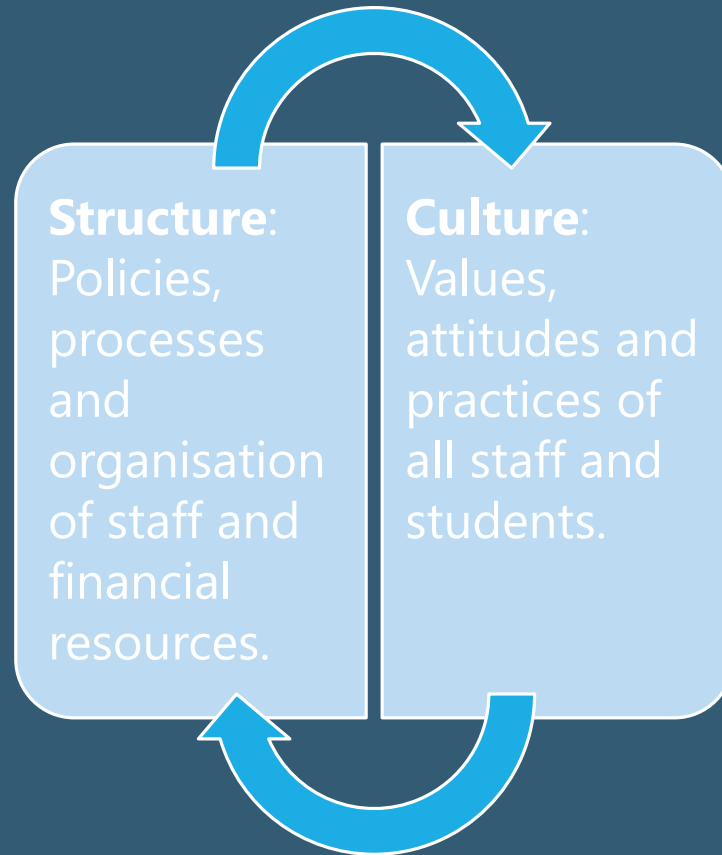
The university as a complex or a complicated system

- **Complicated system**: Offers greater certainty as there are fixed, albeit complicated, interactions, resulting in a consistent outcome.
- This indicates the potential value of seeking to emulate – at least to some extent – a complicated system, to seek to achieve more certainty in the processes, and the experiences and outcomes for students through a more co-ordinated approach.

- This however has to be balanced against the value of bottom up initiatives which show understanding of the localised context.

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In summary:

A whole institution approach requires alignment and consistency across the institution to create an inclusive approach which all students benefit from irrespective of where they are located within the institution, and which extends not just across their lifecycle, but throughout their daily lived experience, incorporating their academic experience, and also their personal and social well-being and their professional development.

Institutional commitment to student retention and success

Structure: Policies, processes and organisation of staff and financial resources.

Culture: Values, attitudes and practices of all staff and students.

Underpinned by data, evidence and research
Co-ordinated and consistent approach to retention and success

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SWOT analysis of WIA to Student Success

WIA to Student Success

current

STRENGTHS
- Institutional mission statement (UoS)
- Student success committee to share practice
- Student data dashboard.
- Good work + collaboration in some schools

WEAKNESSES
- meaning not explicit to all staff
- Resources held with SS dept.
- Lack of staff time for SS work unless central to role
- Student service staff no access to data dashboard
- Attendance is often limited

OPPORTUNITIES
- make greater links between services
- Strive for greater consistency.
- Use financial support to promote wider student engagement
- Increase role of SU and alumni in student success.
- KPIs for all staff

THREATS
- Lack of time + resources
- Some staff difficult to engage.
- Some students won't / don't get involved.
- Data limitations
- Other priorities.

Future

SWOT Analysis:
- Current **S**trengths and **W**eaknesses;
- Future **O**pportunities and **T**hreats

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Use these questions as prompts for discussion

- Is there an explicit institutional commitment to student success, does everyone understand what it means for students and in relation to their role?
- To what extent do policies and allocation of resources reflect this commitment and priority?
- Do all staff understand their contribution and have appropriate skills and capacity to improve student success?
- How is data and evidence used and shared to improve student success? How are staff accountable?
- How is student success co-ordinated to share practice, promote consistency and avoid gaps and overlap of provision?

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Implementation: 'Top-down, bottom-up' approach

- Intervention at both the institutional and the individual levels to engage staff and bring about change:

    ... organisational change required to bring about inclusive policy and practice fell into two broad categories: institutional-level change: targeting institutional policy, strategy, structures, systems, processes and/or environmental factors, whether centrally or within departments/faculties; individual-level change: targeting individuals' attitudes, awareness, knowledge, understanding, perceptions and assumptions, as well as practice. (May and Bridger, 2010 p36).

- Kift (2009) calls the **'top-down, bottom-up'** approach.
- It requires addressing both the structure and culture of the institution. **Culture** refers to the values, attitudes and practices of people. **Structure** refers to the institutional policies, processes and organisation of the university.

Culture of the institution

Culture refers to the values, attitudes and practices of the staff (and students). These need to be 'tightly' defined to help create compatible understanding and action. Developing a 'WP friendly' or inclusive culture can be understood to involve:

- Raising people's **awareness and understanding** of the issues;
- Developing people's skills and capacity which informs their **practice**; and
- Demonstrating the **impact** of people's practice on the experiences or outcomes of students from target groups.

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An inclusive culture includes:

- **Leadership**: Managers at all levels understand, promote and are informed by inclusive principles to improve retention and success.

- **Values, attitudes and practices** of academic, professional and support staff reflect the institutional commitment to diversity, inclusion, retention and success.

- **Students and alumni** understand, value and contribute to the institutional commitment to diversity, inclusion, retention and success.

- **People meet together** to discuss retention and success and develop their inclusive practice.

- Staff from across the institution feel confident to **initiate and implement** retention and success interventions and inclusive practices.

- **Staff use the available data and evidence** to inform their decision-making and practices that effect retention and success.

Structure of the institution

Structure refers to the institutional policies, processes and organisation. This facilitates the institutional culture and contributes to consistency across the institution. This involves:

- Ensuring policies, processes and organisation take account of WP and diversity (structure as **espoused**);
- Considering the extent to which policies, processes and organisation are **enacted** (i.e. they are implemented and move beyond paper-based aspirations or statements); and
- Assessing the impact or **effect** of the policy/process/organisation on widening participation/diverse students.

Structure of the institution

- **Structures facilitate dissemination** – sharing information and practices and enabling people to contribute.

- **Strategic** (not just operational) **leadership for WP** provides guidance and co-ordination, rather than direct implementation.

- **WP resources are allocated across the institution**, or are available to all staff, not retained centrally.

- Institutional processes make **data and evidence** accessible so that it can be used to inform strategic and operational decision-making and practice.

- **Staff use the available data and evidence** to inform their decision-making and practices.

- Institutional **accountability** procedures, including key performance indicators, incorporate WP.

Structure of the institution

- **Staff policies and processes** - recruitment, induction, annual review, professional development and promotion reflect WP - including for senior managers.

- **Staff development and training** is provided to all staff to support WP.

- **Academic experience policies and processes** (e.g. learning, teaching and assessment, quality assurance and validation processes, annual monitoring) embrace WP.

- **Student support policies and processes** relating to academic, personal, financial and professional development meet the needs of WP groups.

- **Student recruitment and admissions policies and processes** reflect WP.

- Policies and processes to enhance **employability and access to postgraduate** study meet the needs of WP target groups.

Summary

- The interplay of culture and structure should enable people to be sufficiently well informed and have the capacity and commitment to implement inclusive practices, while the structure both facilitates and ensures this, and provides co-ordination across the institution, promoting integration and consistency of outcomes – avoiding duplication, fragmentation and gaps in provision.

The three essential elements to implement WIA

○ **People have the disposition and capacity to engage**: The values, attitudes and practices of the staff and students within the HEP promote and support WP.

○ **Institutional structures facilitate ownership and communication**: The institutional policies, processes and organisation (e.g. of financial and human resources) of the HEP and its sub-units promote, support and co-ordinate WP across the institution.

○ **Evidence informed and accountability**: Data and evidence is used to understand the issues, ensure staff accountability, monitor student participation, experience and outcomes, inform strategic and operational decision-making, and evaluate the process and impact.

Table discussions

- Select one of the opportunities you have written on your SWOT analysis.

- Discuss what it would involve and how it could be developed and implemented.

- Consider the threats you have identified and discuss how these might addressed in this context.

In summary, essential elements of WIA are:

1. Vertical alignment: Whole lifecycle approach.
2. Horizontal alignment: Staff from departments, services and units involved, not just professional WP staff.
3. Institutional commitment and leadership: Explicit commitment, target groups and expected outcomes.
4. Pragmatic top-down, bottom-up approach to change
   i. Staff disposition and capacity to engage
   ii. Institutional structures facilitate ownership and communication;
   iii. Evidence informed and accountability of staff and students.

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Conclusions

- WIA requires more than individual champions, or silos of excellence - vertical alignment (across the student lifecycle) and horizontal alignment (across students lived experience). In a complex system there is a risk of fragmentation, duplication and gaps resulting in an inconsistent student experience.
- Implementation requires a top-down, bottom-up approach, developing both an inclusive culture and a structure that reinforces and promotes this culture.
- The aim is to ensure staff and students have the disposition and capacity to engage; the institutional structures facilitate ownership and communication; and data and evidence is used to understand the issues, ensure staff accountability, monitor student experience and outcomes, inform strategic and operational decision-making, and evaluate the process and impact.

Thank you

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