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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

# Co-learning in University College Cork

## Including students with intellectual disabilities in learning and assessment

UCC Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh University College Cork, Ireland

HEA An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas The Higher Education Authority

id+futures

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# Fieldwork and Data Collection

Edith Busteed and Eva McMullan

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# Table of Contents


id+ futures Project Vision ..... 1

1.0 Introduction ..... 1

1.1 Context: programmes for students with intellectual disability in UCC ..... 1

1.2 The Certificate in Social Citizenship (CSC) and Co-Learning ..... 3

1.2.1 CSC and Co-Learning: id+ Project (2021 – 2024) ..... 3

1.2.2 CSC and Co-Learning: id+ Futures Project (2024 – 2026) ..... 4

1.3 The Certificate in Disability Inclusive Practice (CDIP) ..... 6

2.0 id+ futures and Co-Learning in UCC: The Conceptual Framework ..... 7

2.1 Shaping and driving the id+ futures Project: The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ..... 7

2.2 Meaningful Inclusive Education ..... 8

2.3 Core Values System, Positionality, Reflexivity ..... 9

2.4 Building and Maintaining an Inclusive Culture in UCC ..... 9

2.5 Roles and Responsibilities ..... 10

3.0 How co-learning has evolved in UCC ..... 12

3.1 CSC students and meaningful inclusion in co-learning modules ..... 13

3.2 Co-learning and students: making informed choices ..... 14

4.0 Research: Experiences of Co-Learning ..... 15

4.1 Study Design and Participants ..... 15

4.2 Findings Snapshots ..... 15

4.2.2 Effects of creating conditions for inclusive learning settings ..... 15

4.2.3 Multiple and Mutual Benefits ..... 18

4.3.4 Skills Development ..... 20

4.3.5 Challenges ..... 21

4.3.6 Summary ..... 24

5.0 Conclusion: Next Steps ..... 24

5.1 Summary ..... 25

References ..... 27

# List of Figures

Figure 1: id+ Project (2021 - 2024) Workstreams ..... 2
Figure 2: CSC Modules id+ Project (2021 - 2024) ..... 3
Figure 3: SS1021 Co-Learning Study Areas ..... 4
Figure 4: CSC Modules id+ futures Project (2024 - 2026) ..... 5
Figure 5: Redesigned structure of co-learning offerings at UCC 2024/25 & 2025/26 ..... 6
Figure 6: CDIP Modules ..... 7
Figure 7: id+ Project Staffing Structure ..... 12
Figure 8: id+ Futures Project Staffing Structure ..... 12
Figure 9: Research Participants & Methods ..... 15

# id+ futures Project Vision

Our vision is that people with intellectual disabilities, if they wish, can exercise their right to access and participate in education in UCC and indeed all tertiary education as equal students.

## 1.0 Introduction

This report provides a summary account of co-learning in University College Cork (UCC), Ireland. Co-learning is an innovative collaborative learning model developed at UCC to meaningfully include students with intellectual disabilities in undergraduate and postgraduate modules providing opportunities for diverse cohorts of students to collaboratively learn alongside and with each other. Inclusion begins with providing access as a starting point, recognising that people with intellectual disabilities have been excluded from higher education (HE) settings. Access, however, is only the first step; as we explore in this report, meaningful inclusion requires changes in structures, systems and culture that align with the 'paradigm shift' of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Students with intellectual disabilities, without whom the id+ futures project would not exist, are and remain the central stakeholders and are recognised as autonomous, diverse individuals bringing their lived experience to UCC. They are recognised as learners, and as creators of and contributors to knowledge in settings where there is engagement between diverse groups of students. Our strategy, therefore, embraces deliberative inclusion and the holistic experience of being a student in learning, social and civic spaces in UCC. Going to university is about learning but is also about expanding social horizons, it is an opportunity to meet new people and friends and hang out in social spaces and become involved in Clubs and Societies (Burke et al, 2023). With that in mind, the id+ futures Project plays a critical role in strengthening the capacity of the university environment to ensure students with intellectual disabilities have an equitable student experience. This requires continuous development of reflection on and reflexive thinking about the processes, structures and mechanisms being put in place.

This report focuses on co-learning, a critical and core component of the id+ futures Project. To begin, a background to the emergence of co-learning in UCC is presented, providing the philosophical, legal and policy rationale for co-learning. Thereafter, the focus shifts to detailing how the infrastructure for co-learning was established and continues to evolve to ensure sustainability and growth. It details the research methodology for gathering data from all involved in co-learning and their experiences before highlighting emerging themes. The report concludes with recommendations for policy and practice.

### 1.1 Context: programmes for students with intellectual disability in UCC

The first provision of programmes for students with intellectual disabilities in UCC began in 2009. This moved to a second phase in 2020 with the introduction of the id+ Project and a third phase commenced with the id+ futures Project in 2024.

### *Phase 1: Certificate in Contemporary Living (CCL) 2009-2020*

The CCL, which ran from 2009-2020, provided cohort-based learning for students with intellectual disabilities and was a segregated learning model with some opportunities for social inclusion. Funding for the CCL was precarious, and the programme ended with COVID in 2020. The CCL developed as momentum around the CRPD grew and became increasingly guided by its framework and commentary on Article 24, published in 2016. The CCL was profiled in an Impact Case Study submitted by UCC to the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in 2021 resulting in funding of €1million, under the HEA Performance Fund.

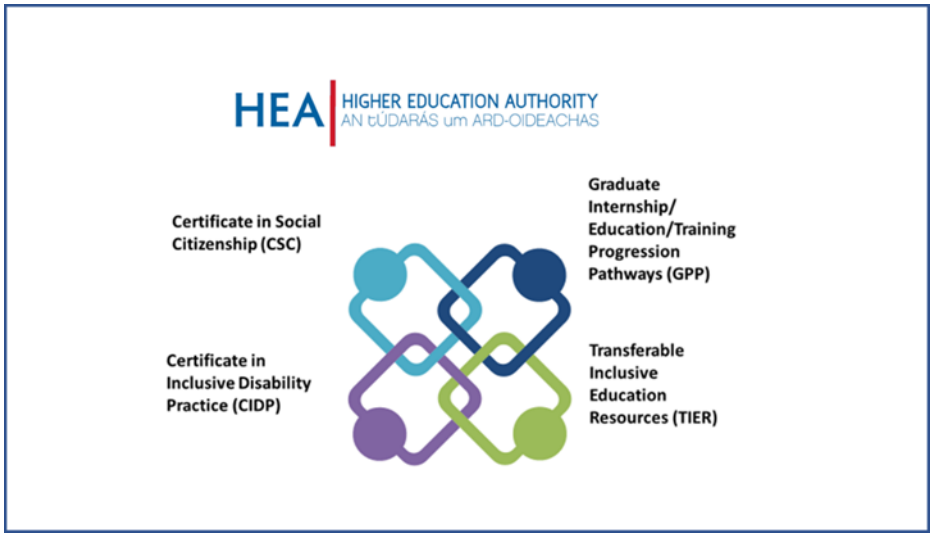
### *Phase 2: the id+ Project 2021 – 2023*

The HEA Impact Case Study funding facilitated the id+ Project, a new 3-year programme developing rights-based, inclusive education programmes with 4 workstreams and underpinned the development of meaningful inclusive education for students with intellectual disabilities (see Figure 1). Two new one-year programmes were developed:

- the Certificate in Social Citizenship (CSC) and
- the Certificate in Disability Inclusive Practice (CDIP).

A key feature of both these programmes was co-learning. This marked a definitive turn in providing segregated programmes for students with intellectual disabilities towards hybrid provision including cohort-based modules and choices of co-learning modules in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes from across the university. In addition, both programmes include a three-month paid work placement. The CSC and CDIP programmes are mapped onto the National Framework of Qualifications, at levels 5 and 6, respectively. Graduates receive a National University of Ireland Special Purpose Award.

*Figure 1 id+ Project (2021 - 2024) Workstreams*



*Phase 3: the id+ Futures Project 2024 - 2026*

In 2024, additional funding from the HEA under PATH 4: Phase 2, facilitated a new iteration of the id+ Project: the id+ futures Project. This enabled advancement of the co-learning model and its supporting structures that are explicitly underpinned by rights-based values and philosophy in accordance with the CRPD. In this iteration, the CDIP programme remained the same; however, the CSC became a two-year programme offering co-learning modules choices in both years.

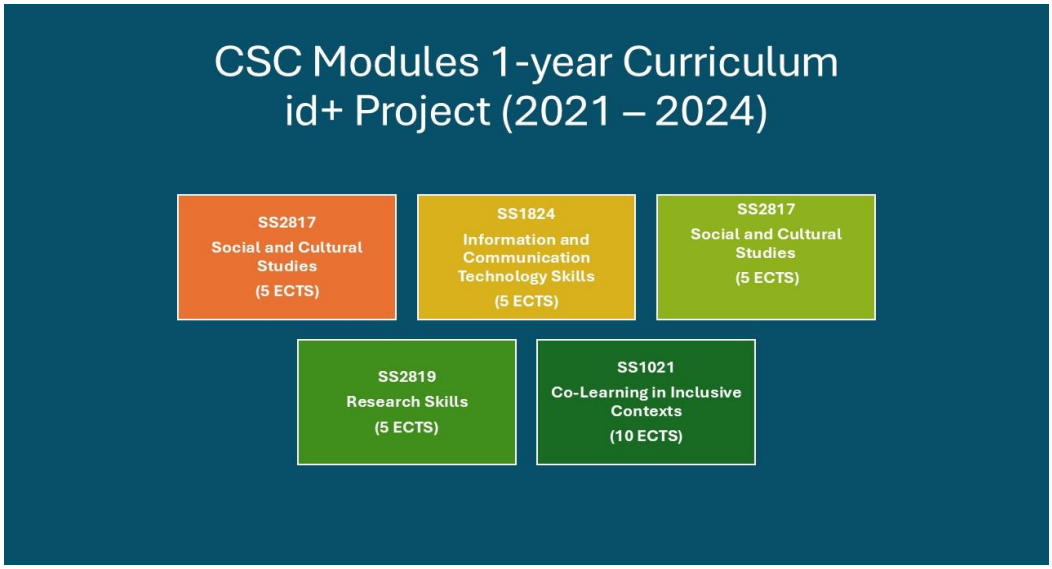
## 1.2 The Certificate in Social Citizenship (CSC) and Co-Learning

As outlined in section 1.1 above, the Certificate in Social Citizenship, a programme for new entrants to college for students with intellectual disabilities has evolved from a one-year to a two-year programme with consequent developments in co-learning opportunities. This evolution is explored next.

### 1.2.1 CSC and Co-Learning: id+ Project (2021 – 2024)

Under the id+ Project (2021 – 2024), the CSC was a one-year programme and students took 30 credits of curriculum. Fifteen credits were taken in cohort-based modules; these are modules where the students are learning together as a group. Five credits were taken through work integrated learning on the work placement. The 10-credit module, SS1021 Co-creating and Co-learning in Inclusive Contexts, housed co-learning modules where students with ID and students on bachelors and master's programmes learn together in a range of modules drawn from different disciplines and across all sectors of the university.

*Figure 2: CSC Modules id+ Project (2021 - 2024)*




SS1021 housed 18 modules under six co-learning study areas. Students were invited to decide on two study areas which offered opportunities to learn in three modules (see Figure 3) (see section 3.2 CSC Students and Making Informed Choices).

*Figure 3: SS1021 Co-Learning Study Areas*

| Study Area | School / Department | Module |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Including Children | Department of Music<br>Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy<br>School of Education | Let the Music Play<br>Play Provision for Inclusion in Early Childhood<br>Disability: Pedagogical Approaches to PE , Sport & Physical Activity. |
| 2. People & Diversity | Department of Geography<br>School of Nursing and Midwifery<br><br>Department of Food Business and Development. | Cities of Diversity<br>Valuing People with Intellectual Disability<br>Introduction to Development Studies |
| 3. Performing Arts | Department of Theatre<br>Department of Music<br>Department of Music | Performance in Culture<br>Choral Studies<br>Music Education |
| 4. Health & Wellbeing | School of Applied Psychology<br>School of Nursing and Midwifery<br><br>School of Food & Nutritional Sciences | Cognitive Enhancement<br>Interpersonal Skills for Nursing Care & Psychology for Healthcare<br>Fundamentals of Nutrition |
| 5. Sustainable Living | School of Engineering & Architecture<br>Department of Geography<br>School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Science | Introduction to Energy Engineering<br>Sustainable Cities & Communities<br>The Environment & Human Health |
| 6. The World Around Us | School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Science<br>School of Public Health<br>School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences | Introduction to Environmental Science<br><br>Perspectives on Public Health<br>Cells, Biomolecules, Genetics and Evolution |

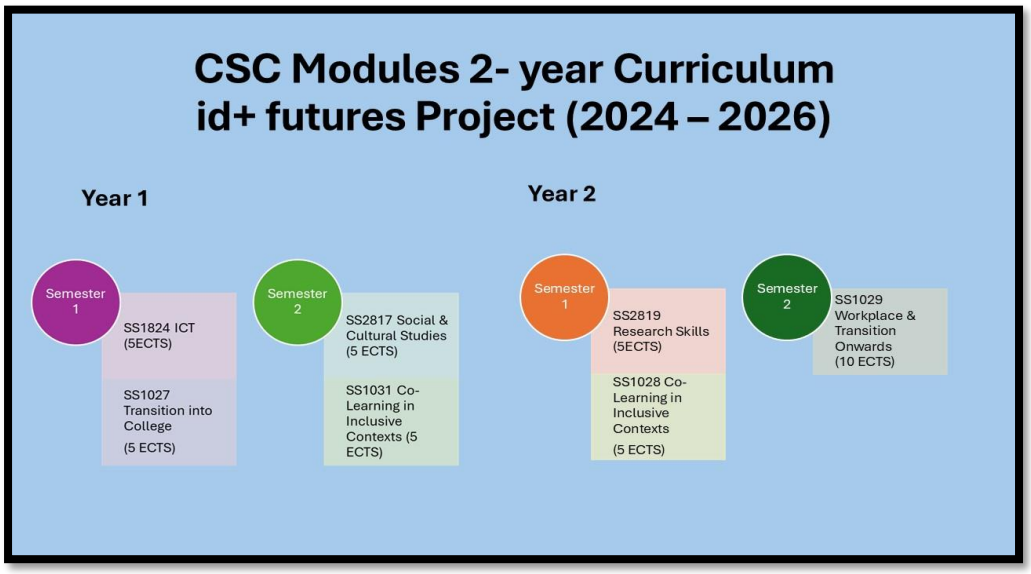
During the two years of the id+ Project, Teaching Fellows, together with the core team, explored many different options for the delivery of co-learning. In some modules, CSC students attended part of a module (e.g. 4 weeks), while in others, CSC students attend the full module (12 weeks). While this diversity was positive in many respects, it resulted in a high workload for 10 credits (ECTS) of co-learning. It also resulted in over-assessment of learning outcomes. This experience informed the re-design of co-learning under the next iteration of the CSC programme under the id+ Futures Project (2024 – 2026).

### 1.2.2 CSC and Co-Learning: id+ Futures Project (2024 – 2026)

In academic year 2024/25, the CSC became a two-year programme, and students take 40 credits of curriculum. Fifteen credits are taken in cohort-based modules, and five credits are taken in a co-learning module in both first and second years: SS1028 and SS1031. The remaining ten credits are taken in a work placement and transition onwards module; the aim is to equip students to progress into a chosen field of work or further education (see Figure 4). This module SS1029 Work Placement and Transition Onwards involves preparatory work with CSC students in semester one of second year before formal delivery of the module in semester two. The preparatory stage provides students with an opportunity for 1:1 meeting with the Workplace and Employment Coordinator to map their experiences, existing skills and interests. An individualised plan is then drawn up. This plan develops over the course of second year allowing

students to plan for their transition into work placement and post-graduation, whether into work or further education.

*Figure 4: CSC Modules id+ futures Project (2024 - 2026)*




Drawing on the experiences of co-learning in academic years 2021/22 and 2022/23, the structure of co-learning offerings was re-designed. Students take four co-learning modules: two in semester two of first year and an additional two modules in semester one of second year. To ensure equity of experience, choices are organised according to two lists:

(a) full immersion in the module

(b) inclusion in part of the module.

To ensure a more appropriate and balanced workload for co-learning, and address the concerns about over-assessment, we shifted the structure to allow choice from two groups of modules:

Group 1 (yellow) modules offered co-learning for the full semester and full inclusion in the totality of the module.

Group 2 (green) modules offered co-learning for part of the module or for a section of the module.

Each semester, CSC students select one module from Group 1 and one module from Group 2 (see Figure 5).

*Figure 5: Redesigned structure of co-learning offerings at UCC 2024/25 & 2025/26*

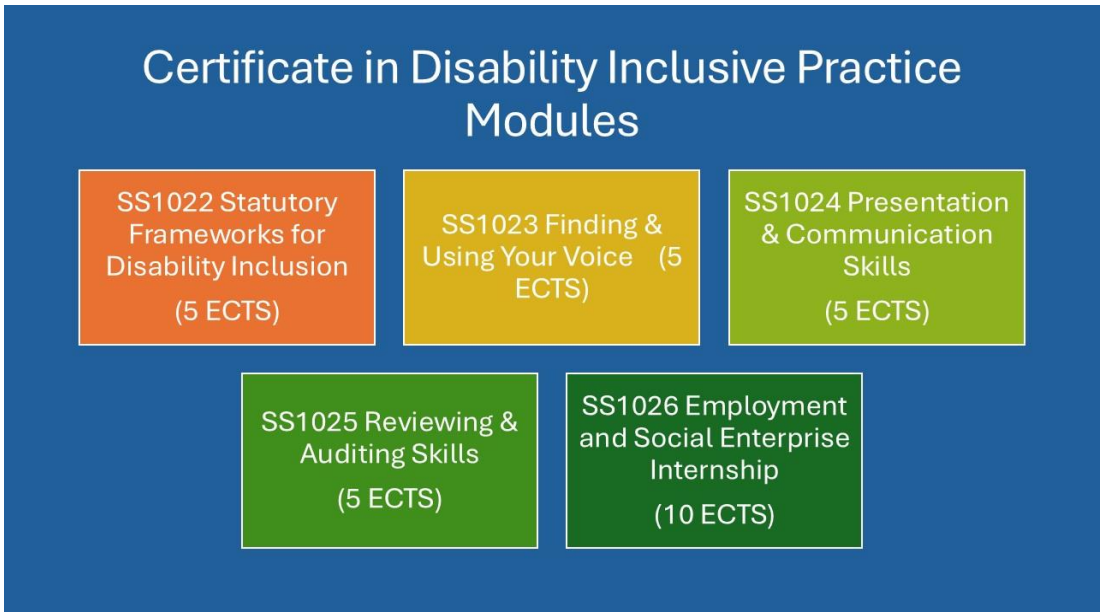
| Co-learning Module | Group 1 (Yellow modules) | Group 2 (Green modules) |
|---|---|---|
| **SS1031**<br>**Semester 2 (2024/25)** | Music<br>Environmental studies<br>Public health<br>Geography<br>Archaeology<br>Choral studies | Music and early childcare<br>Music in the community<br>Theatre<br>Psychology<br>Business and economics<br>Wind energy engineering |
| **SS1028**<br>**Semester 1 (2025/26)** | Public Health<br>Choral Studies<br>Geography<br>Business management<br>Theatre | Music education<br>Economics<br>English<br>Business Information Systems<br>Nursing<br>Biology |

Our experience of co-learning at UCC shows that co-learning can be developed within all disciplines and programmes of the institution. Co-learning is best developed within modules in ways that are appropriate to the disciplines and the subject being taught.

## 1.3 The Certificate in Disability Inclusive Practice (CDIP)

The CDIP is open to people who have completed the CSC, the CCL, or an equivalent course. The CDIP emerged from a growing realisation that the unique perspective of students with ID was contributing to addressing physical, social and cultural barriers to inclusion in UCC. Students with ID are experts by experience and some wish to become advocates for policy and systemic change and get paid, as experts do, for their experience and work. CDIP students take cohort-based modules and co-learn in degree modules that equip them with relevant legal and policy knowledge, and skills required to ensure that the voices of people with ID are heard, recognised, and acted upon in all sectors of life. Co-learning is facilitated under SS1022 Statutory frameworks for disability inclusion, with students required to attend a social policy module (SS3051), a law module (LW6592) and an education module (ED4107) to satisfy the requirement of SS1022. There are additional opportunities for CDIP students to engage with students and academics as part of SS1023, SS1024 and SS1025 given the requirements of the modules (see Figure 6).

*Figure 6: CDIP Modules*




## 2.0 id+ futures and Co-Learning in UCC: The Conceptual Framework

In this section, we explain the conceptual underpinning and values of the id+ futures Project in addition to elaborating on the positionality of the project and its commitment to reflexivity. This begins with an exploration of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) which is the principal driver that has underpinned the progression from the CCL to the id+ Project and continues to drive the development of the id+ futures Project.

### 2.1 Shaping and driving the id+ futures Project: The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The CRPD is the eighth universal convention on human rights. It was adopted by the United Nations in December 2006 and is recognised for the significant engagement and participation of people with disabilities in its negotiation and drafting processes (Series, 2019). The CRPD is often cited as a paradigm shift (Kayess and French, 2008). It challenges historical and long-held assumptions about people with disabilities, assumptions that have violated their dignity. These assumptions gave rise to policies, structures and service provision which have differentiated people with disabilities, leading to segregation and exclusion in all spheres of life. It also allowed for the institutionalisation of laws that deprive individuals of fundamental rights to make decisions and to participate in all the things that most people take for granted.

The CRPD rejects the medical model of disability that reduces individuals to impairments. It embraces the social model which recognises the barriers and structures that disable people and, it is argued, extends to a "human rights model of disability" (Degener, 2016) providing foundational values for policy. The CRPD embraces the interdependence of civil and political rights, concerned primarily with individual liberties, and socioeconomic rights that provide for rights to education,

health, social support which are critical to ensure liberties and inclusion (Series, 2019). Article 24(1) of the CRPD provides that 'States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning.' General comment 4 (2016) provides guidance clearly stating a commitment to ending segregation and that inclusion requires systemic, structural, and cultural change for meaningful inclusion of all students with disabilities. The id+ futures Project conceptual approach is informed by the human rights model of disability and is the basis of its rights-based approach to including students with intellectual disabilities in higher education.

## 2.2 Meaningful Inclusive Education

Article 24 of the CRPD provides for the right to inclusive education, including further and higher education. General Comment 4 (2016) states that inclusion requires systemic, structural, and cultural change for meaningful inclusion. Meaningful realisation of Article 24 requires the implementation of other rights to address social and structural barriers to inclusion. **Article 3** principles, which include self-determination, participation and inclusion, accessibility, gender equality, respect for and acceptance of disability as part of human diversity and humanity, provide the values base of id+ futures. Article 3 principles underpin developed and developing measures and structures in UCC to promote and embed cultural and structural change with commitment to "both the process and outcomes of developing an inclusive education system" (Gen Comm 4, 2016: 12).

Meaningful inclusive education also requires implementation of measures and supports to enable rights interdependent to Article 24 including rights to:

- Self-determination and making choices and decisions: **Article 12 Equal recognition before the Law**
- Inclusiveness in the community, accessible services and a personal assistant: **Article 19 Living Independently and being included in the Community.**
- Work in mainstream employment: **Article 27 the right to work.**
- Inclusion and engagement in public, political and civic life: **Article 29. Participation in Political and Public Life.**

The rights listed above are not an exhaustive list. They are, however, at the forefront of, and threaded through, programme and curriculum development and design, including the provision, and choosing, of co-learning choices in diverse disciplines and modules in UCC. Self-determination and participation require providing opportunities to both construct and make choices and for active involvement in learning at (and the social life of) UCC. We continue to be challenged in how we think about inclusive education, and our ideas are informed by our ongoing engagement with students, whom we recognise as autonomous and individual rights-holders who may require a diversity of measures and support to enable their meaningful inclusion in UCC. A human rights framework cannot be used simply as a checklist to show compliance; it is a framework to point the way to show how rights might be understood, and what structures and practices are required to underpin the real effects of human rights.

## 2.3 Core Values System, Positionality, Reflexivity

The central anchoring values for the work of the id+ futures Project are respect for the dignity, autonomy, inclusion and participation of each person. The id+ futures Project has an unwavering commitment to people with intellectual disabilities realising their right to be included and participate in higher education as others do. the first provision of programmes for students with intellectual disabilities at UCC, these values and commitments have strengthened and shaped/informed the evolution of UCC's offerings from a cohort-based, segregated model to more inclusive learning provision for students with intellectual disabilities.

## 2.4 Building and Maintaining an Inclusive Culture in UCC

The id+ futures Project strategy is that it should be normal for students with intellectual disabilities to be included in learning in this higher education setting. A project like id+ futures requires a whole university approach. The aim was, and continues to be, to develop a community of practitioners and a community of practice to mainstream the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in learning in UCC. For mainstreaming to be transformative, it requires energy and commitment for radical change. This requires a whole university approach including strategic leadership, project vision, management and oversight and people who are engaged in, committed to and supported in delivering co-learning. This work necessitates an environment that is collegiate and collaborative where all contributors are recognised for their disciplinary expertise and willingness to create and contribute to inclusive learning. One of the most critical enablers is relationships between people - how people are supported and enabled to learn as individuals. Therefore, finding the right people to provide support and understand their role as supporters for self-determination and inclusion is important. We continuously aim to marry our philosophy and values and ideals with the practicalities and mechanics of delivering inclusive education and ask ourselves:

- How can we include students with intellectual disabilities in education in line with project values and vision?
- Do we share a common understanding, of the values and skills needed to facilitate inclusion?
- How do we empower students with intellectual disabilities to participate in education?
- How do learning environments, the processes and people within, support the inclusion and participation of students with ID?
- And most importantly, does inclusive education reflect and respond to the voices and priorities of students with intellectual disabilities?

These questions are under continuous review and are of consideration to everyone engaged in the work of the id+ futures project.

## 2.5 Roles and Responsibilities

### *Sponsor*

The Sponsor is a senior academic and member of the senior management team in UCC. Having members of the university leadership team in the project team, ensures that there is institutional leadership support for the project goals and the university-wide implementation of inclusive education.

- id+ Project (2022 – 2024): The project sponsor was Professor Stephen Byrne, Deputy President and Registrar of UCC. In addition to responsibility for the successful implementation of the goals and objectives of the id+ Project, the project sponsor has responsibility for the overall governance of the project including chairing of the steering group, which included members of all the key services in UCC.
- id+ futures Project (2024 – 2026) Professor Nuala Finnegan, Dean of Undergraduate and Postgraduate Studies, assumed responsibility for sponsoring the project, including its governance and chair of a newly convened steering group and an Advisory Committee with oversight of employment placements.

### *Core Project Team: The id+ Project (2022 – 2024) and id+ futures Project (2024 – 2026)*

- Project Manager who has responsibility for all operational aspects of the project. This role continues with the id+ futures Project.
- Project Lead has overall strategic responsibility for the project.
- Academic Lead (id+ Project) had responsibility for curriculum development, design and quality of the CSC and CDIP programmes.
- Academic and Research Co-Directors x 2 (id+ futures Project) have responsibility for curriculum oversight and programme quality. They are also Principal Investigators of the research aspects of the project including supervision of the post-doctoral researcher who works closely with co-researchers, four graduates of the CDIP programme, gathering and analysing data.
- Work Placement & Employment Pathways Coordinator teaches the work placement module as well as finding and supporting work placements for CDIP and CSC students.

### *Learning Support Coach*

- An Occupational Therapist provides tailored support and coaching to students, where necessary, to develop capacity to engage fully in all aspects of college life.

### *Practice Educators*

- As part of the id+ Project (2022 – 2024), the CSC and CDIP programmes were overseen by a Practice Educator who was responsible for project coherence and delivery of the cohort-based modules undertaken by students on the respective programmes.

- Under the id+ futures project, cohort-based modules are delivered by contributing lecturers.

*Learning Support Staff*

- Learning Support (LS) staff provide a vital role in two respects (i) supporting individual CSC students in cohort-based modules, where necessary, to be included in learning, , and/or (ii) providing the necessary bridging to support CSC students in attending and participating in co-learning modules.

*id+ Fellows*

- Teaching Fellows are the academic staff who coordinate and deliver the co-learning modules. Each of the four colleges in UCC– CACSSS (Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences), CoMH (Medicine and Health), CoBL (Business and Law), SEFS (Science, Engineering and Food Science) are represented within the project. Fellows become part of a community of practice within UCC and engage in regular meetings to share experiences and seek support and advice from other Fellows. Fellows are offered small financial support to assist the development of co-learning modules (€1500 per module in the first year and €1000 thereafter).

*Peer Buddies*

- Students registered in co-learning are requested to volunteer to provide the id+ students with support as they engage with all aspects of the module learning opportunities. This is an unpaid peer to peer learning support arrangement with which bachelor and masters' students have wholeheartedly engaged and, our emerging research suggests, is mutually beneficial. Peer Buddies are supported throughout the semester by the Project Manager and Academic Lead. The peer buddies can receive an EmployAgility award should they engage for a minimum of 20 hours in the volunteer role.

*Senior Fellows*

- Three Senior Fellows were appointed during the id+ project and these roles continued into the id+ futures Project. The Senior Teaching Fellows take a lead role in mentoring Teaching Fellows and developing the co-learning aspects of the id+ futures Project. The Senior Teaching Fellows also play a role in mentoring staff at the University of Galway as they begin the development of their programme for students with intellectual disabilities and aim to develop co-learning offerings.

*Figure 7: id+ Project Staffing Structure*

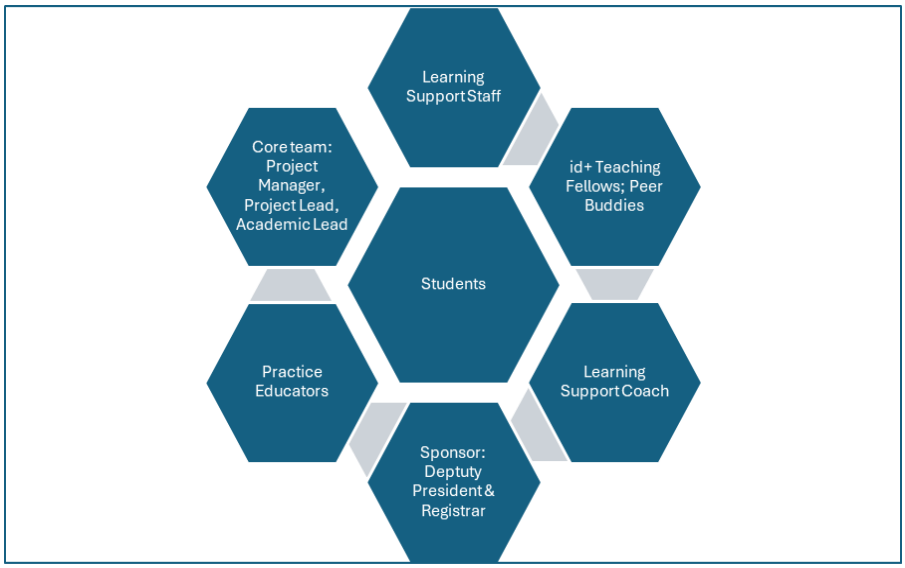
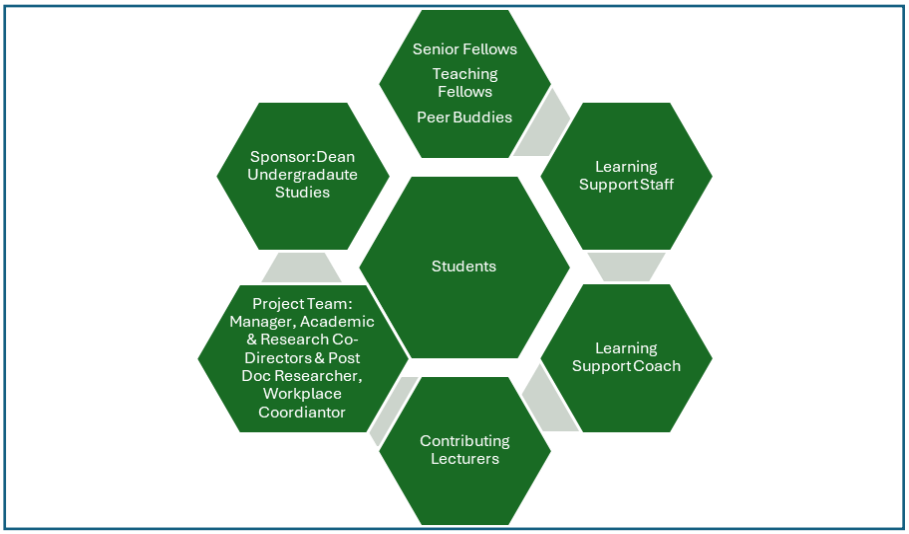



*Figure 8: id+ Futures Project Staffing Structure*




## 3.0 How co-learning has evolved in UCC

As outlined in section 1.2, the mechanism for delivering co-learning to CSC students is to house undergraduate and postgraduate modules under one module code. This is a mechanism we have developed to draw in existing modules to allow students with intellectual disabilities to learn alongside undergraduate and postgraduate registered students. In creating the conditions for students with intellectual disabilities to be included in co-learning modules, there are several questions that arise. We must consider:

a) if a module is suitable for co-learning. Here is a hint: we have discovered pretty much all modules are suitable for co-learning.

- What level is the module? Is it an introductory or more advanced module?
- Can it accommodate or be adapted to accommodate students with different learning styles, abilities, and levels of achievement?

b) what needs to happen to create the optimal conditions for everyone to learn in the module?
   - Where is the module taught? Is the area accessible to students with different needs? Not just in terms of physical accessibility, but sensory and other needs as well.
   - What is the teaching format? Is it a large lecture theatre? Is it small groups? Is it seminar, participatory, or a mixture of all the above?
   - What is expected of students and what can students expect?
   - The ultimate question is, what is the likely best learning experience for id+ Project students?

## 3.1 CSC students and meaningful inclusion in co-learning modules

It is important that the students are fully included in co-learning modules. We learned from our earliest experiences there is a risk that CSC students may appear to be "guests" or involved in a tokenistic way in modules unless key considerations are attended to. Some of the ways to consider this have included ensuring that students participate in the whole module or simply parts of the module where learning works best, such as tutorials, small group projects or presentations, or in practical aspects of modules. Whether a module is inclusive of students with intellectual disabilities or delivered just to a cohort of students with intellectual disabilities, there are several pointers that can be followed:

- Structural changes to the learning materials, for example, easy read design using visuals and keywords, making any supplementary learning materials detailed, and scaffold what students are required to do so it's relevant to their learning. This scaffolding helps to reflect the diversity of students' abilities and needs. That requires giving explicit instructions relevant to the objective or the content, and presenting students with very simple decision-making contexts, commonly based on those binary choices like yes or no, before additional choices or any other complexities are presented.
- Ensure full access to the virtual learning platform being used for co-learning modules, when appropriate. This enables students to have an authentic experience, access to all materials, submit assessment online, view announcements and discussion boards, etc.
- Socialise inclusion for all students within your module and classroom. Talk to all students about your commitment to inclusive education and the programmes being offered in your institution. Explain that the module has a diverse cohort and brings in students from a range of programmes across the university. Care should be taken not to single out students with ID as somehow different. It is best to take a broader approach to explain diversity in cohort, diversity in engagement, etc.

## 3.2 Co-learning and students: making informed choices

The provision for co-learning opportunities was and continues to be accompanied by supporting students to make informed choices about their co-learning modules. The following are the steps involved to support students to make informed choices about co-learning modules:

- id+ Fellows 'pitch' their co-learning module, via a short video to the id+ students at least two weeks before the start of semester. Videos are accompanied by an easy read version of the module descriptor. The videos outline the content, the teaching and learning approach, the location, whether students are offered whole/part of the module (and why) and what might be expected in terms of participation and assessment. The videos also provide students with some information about what to expect in terms of student numbers in the class and any other relevant details about the wider cohort participating in the module (e.g. visiting students, degree programmes, etc.). The videos are presented to students in a group setting with time set aside for discussion of each video, the video content and consideration of modules. The videos, and accompanying easy read module descriptors, are made available on Canvas and can be viewed as and when suits students as they make their choices.
- Students explore the content and are given at least 2 weeks to make their module choices. Students rank their choices (the reason for ranking is also discussed) in the event of modules being over-subscribed.

Starting a co-learning module:

- Where feasible, Teaching Fellows may meet id+ programme students before the module starts to talk more about the module and to answer any questions about the module content, approach or assessment.
- Learning Support (LS) staff are assigned to support CSC students in co-learning modules. LS staff role may vary depending on students' requirements.
- Peer Buddies have a significant role, meeting students to accompany them to lectures (particularly first lectures) and providing support in class, where needed, and in assessment, where relevant. The id+ students may meet with their peer buddies ahead of the module starting to get to know each other.

In summary supporting students to make informed decisions about co-learning choices involves the following steps:

1. Group modules depending on variables (e.g. disciplines/thematic areas, number of weeks offered etc.).
2. Lecturers/Fellows 'pitch' modules via a concise, accessible, short video.
3. Present and discuss co-learning module choices with students.
4. Make pitch videos and easy read module descriptors available for a minimum of 2 weeks.
5. Students rank their choices in order of preference.
6. Arrange for students to meet Lecturers/Fellows and Peer Buddies.

## 4.0 Research: Experiences of Co-Learning

To understand the perspectives and evaluate the experiences of all stakeholders involved in co-learning in UCC, we undertook research in 2023. We present below the research design and a snapshot of findings followed by a brief explanation of the next research phase.

### 4.1 Study Design and Participants

Qualitative data were collected via anonymous, online surveys comprising open ended questions and semi-structured interviews. Forty-two peer buddies (32 complete responses) and 148 students (92 complete responses) in co-learning modules undertook the survey. Thirteen CSC and CDIP students, ten Teaching Fellows and fifteen Peer Buddies participated in individual, semi-structured interviews (Figure 8). The study received ethical approval from UCC's Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC 2023_120) and the research was undertaken in 2023 and 2024.

*Figure 9: Research Participants & Methods*

| | Online Anonymous Qualitative Survey | Semi-structured Interviews |
|---|---|---|
| CSC & CDIP Students | | 13 |
| Peer Buddies | 32 complete<br>From 42 responses | 15 |
| Students in Co-Learning Modules | 92 complete<br>From<br>148 responses | |
| Teaching Fellows | | 10 |

### 4.2 Findings Snapshots

Initial analysis of the data organises the findings under four themes: effects of creating conditions for co-learning, mutual and multiple benefits, skills development and challenges.

### 4.2.2 Effects of creating conditions for inclusive learning settings

Respondents in all categories recognised how creating the conditions for students with ID to learn with and alongside students registered on undergraduate and postgraduate modules had multiple effects. This included enhancement of the institutional culture of UCC and fostering integration of students with ID. Additionally, there were reflections on how including students with ID contributed to challenging stereotypes of ID and prompted realisations of social inequalities.

#### *Enhanced Inclusive Culture*

Students on id+ project programmes highlighted UCC as an environment where diverse groups of students are welcomed:

> "Because it's (UCC) a great place and it welcomes all types of people from all aspects." (id+ Project student #13)

UCC is recognised a place where students with intellectual disabilities can belong:

> "We have a student ID, and we have a graduation like everyone else." (id+ Project student #1)

> "I like the interaction and you kind of felt more included in UCC." (id+ Project student #3)

Similarly, other research respondents spoke of how the inclusion of students from the id+ Project programmes highlighted an institutional commitment to inclusion and enhanced a culture of inclusion in higher education:

> "It added to the inclusivity of UCC and also in higher education in general." (Student Survey)

The inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in university was highlighted as an element of a broader view of inclusion and challenging universities as exclusive environments:

> "Um, because I suppose people's perception of university is quite academic, which it is, and for some people they might think well, 'it's not for me'. It's something that, you know, it's beyond my socio-economic background or ability, etcetera. So, I do think that projects like the id+ project is beneficial in just making academia accessible and inclusive for everyone. Which again, it should be." (Peer Buddy #2)

It was also recognised that integration into university life is not solely concerned with academic and learning aspirations but extends to possibilities for social integration:

> "I know a student who I work closer with was always really excited to see me, always had a hug for me, and I think in terms of learning, like, their integration that's probably—their social integration is probably as important as their academic integration." (Peer Buddy #14)

The effects of how the infrastructure for co-learning was developed university wide was highlighted as a positive benefit too by Teaching Fellows:

> "So again, it's not, it's not just confined to people with people with intellectual disability, it's where, umm, the environment can be inclusive to allow all, to allow everybody engage." (Teaching Fellow #5)

The engagement of Teaching Fellows in the id+ Project provided enhanced opportunities for academic staff to collaborate with colleagues with shared values in a collegiate environment:

> "But I think for us it created connections with people in departments, I would never have otherwise known, so I think there's a kind of a wider kind of inclusivity." (Teaching Fellow #3)

The dynamics of inclusion at the institutional level and amongst academic staff was also recognised by students on id+ Project programmes. Respondents recognised that

including students with ID in learning has positive effects for everyone concerned and overall fostered social integration as students with and without ID engaged with each other.

> "But I felt it might be good because I'd be with other students and people without ID as well, so they could kind of maybe get a chance to know people with ID and we get to know them and different, share different experience." (id+ Project Student #2)

The engagement in and participation of students with ID in lectures gave rise to consideration of how people with ID are stereotyped, often in negative and paternalistic ways.

### *Challenging Stereotypes of ID*

Teaching Fellows in co-learning modules highlighted how the inclusion of students with ID helped to challenge their own perceptions of people with ID and stereotypes about capacity to engage in knowledge production and take the lead in learning situations:

> "I was definitely surprised that one of the students, the ID students, was one of the strongest leaders and in the group and a couple of examples of where they, umm, they actually came up with the main ideas for the creative group work." (Teaching Fellow #5)

Similarly, the presence and participation of students with ID in co-learning provided other students registered in modules with opportunities to experience diversity in action and challenges stereotypes that characterise people with ID as incapable or requiring care and protection:

> "But it definitely enhanced the students' learning experience because it's just good for to open their minds as well to the diversity of people that are out there and to recognise that people with intellectual disability can come into college and learn, that they're not here to learn how to support people who are in need, you know. Because sometimes with intellectual disability there's a certain amount of—there's a stereotype of vulnerability or inability. (Teaching Fellow #9)

Peer Buddies recognised too that students on the id+ Project simply wanted to be included and participate in college life and demonstrated a willingness to get involved in a welcoming environment:

> "My mind was blown at how just get up and get on with it they are and they just really want to just be like one of us and they are one of us. Like, that's what I thought during and like, they're just so willing to learn and they're well able, they're able to learn, you know, and exactly like us and how welcoming, I suppose, like UCC and I suppose our module especially was as a community. And the way they just melted right in. Which is good. They just blended right in." (Peer Buddy #3)

Students, such as Peer Buddies, who worked closely with students with ID recognised how their peers with intellectual disabilities did not enjoy the same opportunities in life as Peer Buddies expected:

> "But actually, one big positive impact the project had on me was actually the fact that I stopped taking things for granted in the sense that, you know, I took my independence for granted. I took my college education somewhat for granted, but I found after the after participating in the project that, you know, my independence and my, um, kind of opportunities aren't the same for everyone." (Peer Buddy #2)

In addition to recognising the value of education and diversity, respondents also highlighted the multiple and mutual benefits of co-learning for all stakeholders. This is explored in the next section.

### 4.2.3 Multiple and Mutual Benefits

Multiple and mutual benefits were identified for everyone involved in co-learning. This included recognition that university is a space where voice and participation is valued and encouraged, where students with ID feel supported in their learning. Students in co-learning also valued the lived experience perspectives of their peers with ID and Teaching Fellows recognising the benefits of co-learning for all students and for themselves.

The presence and participation of students with ID in lectures encouraged other students to participate and provided a model for participation and leadership from the lecturer (Teaching Fellow):

> "I thought the way they (id+ Project students) interacted with the lecturer and the class normalised people speaking up in class, making the class interactive in a positive way. i also thought the way the lecturer allowed them to participate in a way that encouraged their learning was really cool." (Student survey)

Students with ID were enthused about the opportunity to learn in co-learning modules:

> "Good. I really liked. It was nice to kind of mix with other people like." (id+ Project Student #2)

A significant aspect of the experience for id+ Project students was being included in learning and having Peer Buddies whom they recognised as a significant source of friendship and support:

> "And they made us feel welcomed when we joined up with the different buddies. We'd buddies for different modules. So, they were helping us with our assignments." (id+ Project Student #9)

Peer Buddies recognised how changes made to content and delivery of material were of benefit to them:

> "So, it benefited me as much as it probably benefited them to kind of condense and synthesise the information." (Peer Buddy #7)

Students expressed appreciation of students with ID lived experience and insights as valuable contributions in class discussions:

> "I think, yeah, when you hear lived experience, it's a lot more powerful than even just learning about it from a textbook." (Peer Buddy #5)

What also became clear is that while students learned from each other, they also formed connections as student peers which reinforced students with ID sense of belonging in the university community as they encountered people in various settings outside of designated lecture times:

> "Yeah, and then like I won't use her name but like I met one person when I was in there on Wednesday doing a different thing and she remembered me from a module. So, like it's good when you come back and you meet someone then and 'Oh, how are you doing?" (id+ Project Student #6)

The connections between students emerged as reciprocal as Peer Buddies benefitted too from developing new connections, based on mutual interests:

> "I formed great friendships from it as well. Like, even just half an hour ago I ran into [name of id+ student] and we stopped and we had a chat, and he complimented my jacket, and we were talking about music." (Peer Buddy #4)

> "I know a student who I work closer with was always really excited to see me, always had a hug for me, and I think in terms of learning, like, their integration that's probably—their social integration is probably as important as their academic integration." (Peer Buddy #15)

Teaching Fellows highlighted how the inclusion of students from the id+ Project provided benefits for everyone involved in co-learning:

> "I mean there's value all around directly for the students in our program, for the students in the id plus, for us as lectures and as researchers, I just feel it's a really brilliant opportunity for every and anyone that can be involved in it." (Teaching Fellow #6)

> "The learning experience for students was definitely enhanced." (Teaching Fellow #9)

> "But I feel that, you know, the benefit to my students, as in my degree students, has been huge, you know." (Teaching Fellow #1)

The benefits extended beyond opportunities for engagement and learning as some Teaching Fellows felt a palpable sense of joy in engaging in co-learning:

> "I think it's probably been one of the most enjoyable academic years for me in a very long time". (Teaching Fellow #3)

> "But the enjoyment and the pleasure that I got out of those classes was probably better than any classes I've had in the twenty-odd years or thirty years that I'm teaching, you know." (Teaching Fellow #1)

In addition to the joy and enrichment of learning experienced, respondents also highlighted the importance of the skills they developed. These are explored in the next section.

### 4.3.4 Skills Development

Research respondents identified a range of skills that they felt they had developed due to their participation in co-learning. These skills included personal development and social skills, principally for id+ students and Peer Buddies.

#### *Personal Development and Social Skills*

Students with ID recognised their own growth and development and its contribution to how they interact with other people:

> "And I'm more comfortable and confident when I'm talking to other people and connecting to everyone else." (id+ Project Student #12)

Similarly, some Peer Buddies articulated an increased sense of self-confidence in expressing themselves and recognised increased competencies in a range of communication skills.

> "I feel as though, I felt more confident in my communication skills. That, like prior to doing the project, I felt as though I was less confident in communicating with anyone really, but I found afterwards that I feel a bit more confident in my communication skills." (Peer Buddy #2)

> "Erm, I think it enhanced, definitely, like, listening skills." (Peer Buddy #8)

In addition to communication skills, Peer Buddies developed an understanding of, and the skills to participate in diverse settings, such as group work:

> "It makes you more empathetic in the sense of I was thinking a lot more of what is a manageable task to ask someone to do in terms of the group project." (Peer Buddy #5)

Peer Buddies identified the development of their social skills as a key aspect of their engagement in the project:

> "And again, like it's, by working, by being a part of the project is actually another form of education outside of the classroom whereby you learn from people and you learn kind of social skills, I suppose. You know, how to understand people from, say, different backgrounds different let's say needs, different perspectives and things." (Peer Buddy #2)

*Pedagogical Skills*

Teaching Fellows reflected on their teaching skills and the potential for developing new pedagogical approaches that are inclusive:

> "Yeah, very positive teaching learning experience, I'd say, overall. I think I learned a lot about, you know, my own teaching abilities and teaching experience and making things a little bit more inclusive in terms of Easy Read guides and things like that." (Teaching Fellow #7)

Teaching Fellows reflected not just on their own skills but on the related aspect of creating an environment for inclusion:

> "So it challenges you as a teacher, as a pedagogue and all those kind of lovely fancy words, but it may make you kind of a better practitioner, I would say, because you are thinking of a lot of different—or you're trying to keep a lot of different plates up in the air. But that is, you know, a necessary part of being a good teacher, being—and providing your learners with good learning experiences, that they consider what the environment is like when they work with people with a lot of additional needs and different challenges. So I think it's—it would be a very worthwhile experience for anyone who's seeking to get involved." (Teaching Fellow #9)

Despite the recognition of skills development as noted in this section, several challenges also emerged which are explored next.

### 4.3.5 Challenges

Several challenges were identified during the research. This includes recognising challenges that were either pre-existing or had not been anticipated. The challenges identified also include resistance from some students to co-learning, impact of the physical infrastructure associated with traditional university teaching formats and environment and structural obstacles for students with ID.

*Recognition of Challenges*

Teaching Fellows highlighted challenges in adapting teaching materials, such as PowerPoints and delivery of material to diverse student groups, and in doing so recognised that such challenges are likely to be felt by other students:

> "And as I said, all those challenges, they're good. It means that you probably weren't really—you know, that those challenges were probably felt by the other students before there was ever people with id+." (Teaching Fellow #10)

Peer Buddies, in particular, highlighted challenges that emerged during their engagement with id+ Project students.

> "One of the challenges that I had was trying to keep the students focus. So, try to refocus them, you know, keep them back on track. That was a bit of a challenge,

> uhm. But again, in doing so we just kind of discussed we, you know, kind of, I saw their point of view and they hopefully saw my point of view." (Peer Buddy #2)

Acknowledging the challenges faced by students with ID caused some reflection on how addressing those challenges may highlight difference:

> "I guess I've learned the challenges that people with intellectual disabilities face on campus. I guess, like, you do notice, like, they struggle with inclusion and stuff because, you know—yeah, I guess they are on the outside even when they're inside. And I guess you are made more aware of that because, I mean, all the supports are in place, which are really good and work really well, but I guess, like, you do stand out when you're getting more supports, whatever. So, I mean, I know it's all good and it has to be done, but I guess I am more aware that you could feel on the outside." (Peer Buddy #10)

The challenges outlined above were accompanied by references to what may be the more obvious challenges presented in the terms of logistics and infrastructure as explored in the following section.

### *Logistics and Infrastructure*

The physical infrastructure emerged as a critical factor for Teaching Fellows who recognised that the traditional university formats spaces, including large lectures and teaching spaces may not be conducive to inclusion:

> "I think the fact that my only option in terms of the spaces that I teach in are big, large lecture theatres that do not accommodate a style of teaching that might be different to, you know, just me standing and talking to all of these students." (Teaching Fellow #3)

The physical infrastructure emerged as a concern too for students on the id+ programme who use mobility aids:

> "Um…Well, as I was saying earlier and you all here will know, if on your first day you won't know where the ramps are, especially because I am in a wheelchair and you have to find them and then you could be late for class." (id+ Project Student #6)

Similarly, some Peer Buddies highlighted challenges that simply were not apparent to them prior to their engagement with the id+ Project:

> "And then and then actually you always feel we make big steps, but we don't, like we do in a certain sense. But then I do think that, yeah, especially on campus like you, I think that just also physically it's not really accessible for everyone and I was not aware of that at all before." (Peer Buddy #1)

### *Resistance*

Despite the value placed on social inclusion and a diverse learning environment, concerns were raised about the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities, as anticipated by a Teaching Fellow:

> "I worry about that and how my, say, degree students are going to react, respond." (Teaching Fellow #1).

There were some mixed responses to the student survey about perceptions of the quality of content when students from the id+ Project were included in lectures. There were some expressions of concern:

> "I think for the ID students and the course it was a great opportunity to experience co-learning and I believe it is important for both parties to be involved with one another to further inclusive societies. However, from a learning experience point of view I believe that the content was reduced to its essentials rather than the detailed content we would usually work with in class." (Student survey)

This view was acknowledged, though not always by responses to the Peer Buddy and Student surveys

> "..Most students engaged positively with the ID+ students, others were less positive as they felt it "distracted from course content". I personally disagree but can see why they might say this." (Peer Buddy Survey)

> "I think the inclusion of id+ Project students in our module was positive. It is hard for me to understand why this inclusion would be negative. Seeing an individual's ability before their disability is so important and I think our class really embraced this - especially when working on our group presentations, all members of the group really gave their all and contributed in ways that were unique to themselves." (Student Survey)

The above viewpoints appear to point to some dissonance amongst the student body about including students with intellectual disabilities for a variety of reasons.

### *Structural Barriers*

Students on id+ programmes were alert to the continuing structural gaps that prevent their inclusion in mainstream settings, such as university:

> "Because I felt the fact that I had a disability there was no chance for me to go to college but when I saw that there was a course for people with intellectual disabilities, I said this is my chance to come to UCC." (id+ Project Student #2)

While recognising the opportunity that the id+ Project afforded them to attend university, this student highlights how specialist provision for students with intellectual disabilities has provided the route to university, yet policy gaps remain:

> "Uhm, I think because we're on the ID plus project, we can't access the disability department. (id + Project Student #2)

Students on the id+ programmes highlighted how the delivery of teaching, needs to take account of the needs of students with intellectual disabilities:

> "A lot of my fellow students with ID needed more kind of class interaction. There wasn't much of that. A lot of the degree students were talking, or their lecturer was talking to them more than. Being more involved like is teamwork kind of like." (id+ Project Student #3)

### 4.3.6 Summary

The findings presented in this report are a snapshot of the data captured during research undertaken in 2023 and 2024. It highlights considerable positive effects of co-learning for all involved: students with intellectual disabilities, students in co-learning modules, peer buddies and Fellows. It captures how commitment to democratisation of knowledge in traditionally exclusive learning institutions is possible when there is a concerted and strategic approach and effort to meaningfully include students with intellectual disabilities. The data illustrates how co-learning has benefits for individual students and educators, for social integration and inclusion and brings joy to those involved. The data, however, does also highlight several areas that require further exploration and research including the perception of lesser quality materials and learning for some students who participated in this research. Additionally, physically inaccessible environments and using inclusive teaching methodologies in large class settings continue to be issues of concern.

A more detailed analysis of the research aspects of the id+ and id+ futures Project is beyond the remit of this report. However, it is worth noting that more recent research undertaken as part of the id+ futures Project, has embraced a more inclusive approach. Four graduates of the CDIP programme undertook research training April – July 2025 with lecturers and researchers from the Schools of Law and Applied Social Studies in UCC. The purpose of the training, which was collaborative in nature, was to upskill the graduates to become co-researchers. In September 2025, a post-doctoral researcher skilled in inclusive research methods, began working with the co-researchers continuing training in interview skills before embarking on data collection and subsequently data analysis.

## 5.0 Conclusion: Next Steps

The id+ futures Project continues to aim to create structures and practices with the intention of transforming the potential of rights into embedded and felt realities. We have created structures and mechanisms and recruited people in this work. It is challenging work. There continues to be structural and other barriers to including people with intellectual disabilities in higher education, and there are gaps in legislation and policy. Advocating where and when we can close those gaps is also part of what we do. Working through a rights frame means constantly challenging systems and structures that need to do more to ensure that the rights of people with intellectual disabilities are respected and upheld. This, however, is only the beginning of a process

that “strives to comply with Article 24 of the UNCRPD and the guidance provided by the Committee” (O’Callaghan et al, 2025: 11).

In our efforts to translate values into practice, we strive to create a community of practice, and our values create the conditions to get there. The aim is cultural diffusion ensuring that students with intellectual disabilities are part of the tapestry of university life; therefore, how we work must model our values. We provide leadership in terms of strategy and articulating values, and we aim to do so by embracing a flat rather than a hierarchical structure. It is vital to recognise that everybody is invited to be part of id+ futures, and everybody that comes forward to be involved, bring their own disciplinary and pedagogical expertise and experience. Effectively, we need to practice what we preach and actively collaborate with others as autonomous equals as co-learning develops. This requires developing relationships that are based on: shared values, a willingness to devote time to building those relationships, understanding where people's starting points are, and what people's interests and motivations are, is key to this project. We need to model what it looks like in action, respectfully address any misinterpretations - because misinterpretations do arise - and find ways to collectively evaluate what we do.

Imposing values does not work; values must be shared and understood as shared thus requiring a clarity of values and focus. The id+ futures Project, as discussed (see 2.0 id+ futures and Co-Learning in UCC: The Conceptual Framework), is based on the philosophy and values of the CRPD. It is important to be able to consistently not only speak to those values, but to demonstrate their embodied effectiveness. As always, leading out on a values-based work requires living the values too. Values, of course, do not remain static either. While we can articulate and commit to our core values, we need to give space to further development and provide regular opportunities for reflection and collaboration. We have committed to culture and practice change. We are not assuming that those values are understood, particularly in terms of practical changes and practices, which is the challenging part. We have worked at translating values into observable practices and behaviours, and this requires ways of working that are organic, dynamic, reflective and responsive. We do this through collaboration, recognising students as partners, committing to progressive development of the project, being responsive to literature, engaging in research and providing opportunities for gathering and responding to feedback.

## 5.1 Summary

We conclude this report with some recommendations. These recommendations are offered at this stage of the process of strengthening and striving for inclusive education.

Funding:

- Funding for including students with intellectual disabilities in third level requires consistency and continuity to facilitate mainstreaming of inclusive education for students with intellectual disabilities and their peers. This includes resourcing to build an infrastructure to support co-learning and include students with intellectual disabilities in learning and assessment.

Collective understanding/definition of inclusive education:

- Have a clear and shared conceptual framework for inclusive co-learning. As we have outlined in this report, the id+ futures project has adopted as its conceptual framework Article 24 of the CRPD which provides for an explicit right to inclusive education.

Recruit:

- Lecturers/Teaching Fellows – start with a limited, committed pool of people to establish proof of concept.
- Peer Buddies – students in co-learning modules.

Provide Support:

- Induction session for Lecturers (Fellows) and Peer Buddies (separately)
- Regular check-ins/roundtables with Lecturers and Peer Buddies to support practice, build capacity and knowledge.
- Learning Support staff: focus on student; liaison with Lecturers and Peer Buddies

Reflect/Review/Innovate:

- How is co-learning working? Gather views/feedback/data from students, Lecturers, Peer Buddies.
- What is working and why? What is not working and why?
- How to build capacity for co-learning, for example recruit Senior Fellows

Support:

- Students with intellectual disabilities in their advocacy for inclusive education and learning.
- All stakeholders engaged in policy and in the university community to engage in dialogue regarding inclusive education for students with intellectual disabilities.

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