

**Online Educational Opportunities for Older People
Lifelong eLearning & eEducation – Dublin City University (DCU) response**

[Christine O’Kelly](#), Age-Friendly Coordinator
[Age-Friendly University Global Network](#), Dublin City University, Ireland
Christine.OKelly@DCU.ie

DCU’s Ten Principles of an Age-Friendly University (O’Kelly, 2015) commits to promoting age-inclusive activities across the institution. Principle 5 - “To widen access to online educational opportunities for older adults to ensure a diversity of routes to participation” explicitly refers to online opportunities. Principle 5 is informed by a number of statements: an EU Council statement (2001) defines access as “The widening of participation in good quality higher education to all sectors of society; the extension of participation to include currently under-represented groups; and a recognition that participation extends beyond the entry to successful completion” (European Commission, 2001), and a 46-year-old list of the changing social contract between higher education and society compiled by the International Labour Organisation (International Labour Organisation, 1975) called on universities to:

- Play an essential role in the general social objective of achieving a greater quality of opportunity;
- Provide education adapted to a greater diversity of individual qualifications, motivations, expectations and career aspirations;
- Facilitate the process of lifelong learning;
- Assume a public service function and participate directly in the process of social change

This list is still relevant and discussed as a road map to improving access routes to higher education for diverse population groups. For the past four decades, lifelong learning and social and economic innovation have been distinct themes referred to in global, European and national policy documents (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2019).

Butcher’s (2020) reflections on widening participation and lifelong learning found that widening participation is complex and context-dependent. Despite numerous efforts within institutions to widen access and support inclusivity, there is no uniform approach to deal with unequal access. While over the past number of years, there has been a significant increase in online courses from Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Open Educational Resources (OER) to specific credited programmes aimed at learners of all levels. It suggests that open online courses offer opportunities to enhance or widen participation in lifelong learning (Cannell, 2017, p. 2). DCU offers a range of MOOCs on the Future Learn Platform. Despite these opportunities, take-up is low, and barriers continue to hinder participation. Cannell identified three categories of barriers encountered by learners participating in formal education. Situational barriers arise from socio-economic disadvantage, location and disability. Institutional barriers arise when support systems and curricula fail to meet learners’ needs; dispositional barriers refer to the subjective impact of prior experience. The most successful path for non-traditional learners is through engagement in informal or part-time learning. The success of DCU’s Love of Lifelong Learning Programme is testimony to this. Participants come to the programme and then become immersed in other programmes and activities in the university. Under the AFU Programme the starting point of a learner’s journey is by offering free computer classes which cover the fundamentals of using technology. This is delivered by Master’s students on a one to one basis for two hours each week over a five week period. The students also offer a follow up to help older people get set up on a device and will also help trouble shoot their continuing queries.

Technology is essential in our lives, either in employment, accessing education, or participating in society as a “*citizen, consumer or economic contributor*”. Schuller (2009, p. 36) refers to equal access to technology as fundamental to social and economic participation. Despite the increased

access to digital devices, a digital divide remains. Several factors contribute to the digital divide, insufficient broadband, a lack of an appropriate device and the knowledge and skills to use it. Navigating and accessing information sites can be challenging. Understanding what one needs to know and critically evaluating websites results in uncertainty, confusion and undermines self-confidence. These factors represent barriers to participation. Opportunities to support good practice and overcome these barriers include peer support, creative and innovative multi-modal delivery and good communication channels between participants and course leaders. Through the AFU Programme DCU offer assistance and advice on devices and regularly offer information sessions on social networking, how to assess the credibility of information on the internet and which device is the most appropriate to the needs of an older user.

Evans *et al.*, (2019, pp. 102–116) explored how the concept of widening access is interpreted and implemented through policy enactment. In an analysis of institutions, differences in approach reflected policies and assumptions about the type of student admitted to programmes. Institutional interests and priorities concerning their position with a global marketised higher education system were also factors. Evans found that a globalised higher education system in which higher education institutions are positioned has homogenised their approach to widening access. While there were subtle distinctions between institutions, their approaches typically attracted mature learners. Specific approaches to widening access aimed at younger people in socio-economic disadvantage were beneficial to supporting access practices that promoted part-time, flexible learning modes. These play an equally important role in supporting access to groups underrepresented in higher education, such as older people and this is demonstrated by how Principle 5 is implemented in DCU under the AFU Programme.

References

- Butcher, J. (2020) 'What has been learned from 20 years of published articles on widening participation and lifelong learning?', HEPI, 14 January. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/01/14/what-has-been-learned-from-20-years-of-published-articles-on-widening-participation-and-lifelong-learning/> (Accessed: 9 May 2021).
- Cannell, P. (2017) 'Breaking down barriers to widening participation'. Opening Educational Practices in Scotland (OEPS). https://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/pluginfile.php/261946/mod_page/content/2/Barriers%20formatted.pdf (Accessed: 4 July 2021).
- European Commission (2001) 'COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality'. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/committees/cult/20020122/com\(2001\)678_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/committees/cult/20020122/com(2001)678_en.pdf) (Accessed: 3 July 2021).
- Evans, C. et al. (2019) "'Widening Access" to higher education: the reproduction of university hierarchies through policy enactment', *Journal of Education Policy*, 34(1), pp. 101–116.
- International Labour Organisation (1975) *Le rôle des universités dans l'éducation ouvrière*. Available at: https://ilo.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay/alma991974163402676/41ILO_INST:41ILO_V2 (Accessed: 12 July 2021).
- O'Kelly, C. (2015) www.dcu.ie/agefriendly.
- Schuller, T. and Watson, D. (2009) *Learning Through Life: Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning: First Edition*. UK: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education. <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Learning-Through-Life-Inquiry-Lifelong/dp/1862014337> (Accessed: 11 May 2021).
- UNESCO, L.L. (2020) *Unlocking the potential of family and intergenerational learning*. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373512> (Accessed: 19 August 2020).
- World Bank (2019) *World Development Report 2019: The Changing Nature of Work*. World Development Report. Washington: World Bank Group. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/816281518818814423/pdf/2019-WDR-Report.pdf> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).