Unilink: A Shared Service Model
Dr. Clodagh Nolan, Declan Treanor, Claire Gleeson, Kieran Lewis
Trinity College Dublin Disability Service
Higher Education Authority Conference 7th Nov 2013

Introduction

Unilink is a confidential, practical, evidence-based occupational therapy service for students who may be experiencing mental health and/or physical and sensory disabilities. Unilink is an innovative service between the Disability Service and the Academic Discipline of Occupational Therapy at TCD. The approach used within Unilink is noted within the Recovery Model, as espoused by A Vision for Change (2008) as well as a combination of occupational therapy theory - the Person-Environment-Occupation Model (Law, Cooper, Strong, Stewart, Rigby & Latta, 1996) and the social model of disability (Terzi, 2004; Swain and French, 2003; Barnes and Mercer, 2010).

The service has grown over the past few years from supporting 21 students with disabilities within Trinity College Dublin in 2004-05 to over 450 students with disabilities in HEIs across the Dublin region in 2012-13.

Unilink has been recognised nationally by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), the Mental Health Commission and the Oireachtas Committee on Mental Health, as a model of good practice in supporting students within college. It has a proven track record in ‘Institutional Leadership’ and collaboration in supporting students with disabilities. It has a formal code of governance and its mission is to enhance the quality of the student experience for students with disabilities.

Aim of the Poster

In line with the shared service approach advocated by the National Strategy for Higher Education 2030, the Unilink service has developed a shared service model with other Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) across the Dublin region and now provides a Unilink service to Dublin City University (DCU), Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), University College Dublin (UCD) and Marino Institute of Education, with the central hub within Trinity College Dublin.

The aim of this poster is to outline the development and implementation of the Unilink shared service model within these 5 HEIs across the Dublin region.

What does Unilink do?

In response to student needs Unilink has developed a number of approaches including:

• Occupation focused assessment using the Trinity Student Profile (Nolan, 2011), and other OT assessment tools.
• Individual Collaborative Meetings focusing upon occupational performance (Physical, sensory and cognitive) in the areas of leisure, student role and activities of daily living with the person.
• Assessment of the occupation of a student and adaptations to the occupation of being a student.
• Group and individual orientation programmes for students with disabilities.
• Leisure Enhancement Groups for students on the Autistic Spectrum.
• Individual Unilink Self-Management Programme
• Assessment and advice on sensory processing needs and environmental adaptations
• Tailored Reasonable Accommodations

Implementation of the Unilink Shared Service Model

Unilink Shared Service Outcomes

Discussion

Within the present economic climate of ever reducing funding, the provision of a shared service such as the one outlined here, can be seen purely as a cost saving exercise. However, the Unilink Shared Service Model has been built upon a foundation of collaboration between the Disability Service and the Discipline of Occupational Therapy in TCD, and has been developed with the aim of fostering collaboration and the sharing of good practice between student services in various HEIs. The rationale for developing the Unilink Shared Service Model is outlined below:

• To disseminate an effective Occupational Therapy approach to enabling students with disabilities to engage in their student role.
• To embed the service within each HEI’s structures and ethos, to allow for an integrated approach to supporting students.
• To provide an alternative occupation focused student support service with practical outcomes for the student, which is complementary to existing disability, counselling and health services.
• To ensure quality and fidelity of this approach in various HEI settings.
• To foster collaboration between student services in various HEIs.
• To disseminate various approaches, policies and procedures, and administrative systems that can developed and adapted to different HEI settings.
• The creation a central hub of expertise, training, innovation, research, supervision, peer support and clinical governance in support of the model’s development.

Future of Unilink as a Shared Service Model

The Unilink Service has successfully engaged in a rigorous e-tender process to provide an on-campus Occupational Therapy service within DCU, DIT, and UCD. Unilink is also provided to Marino Institute of Education, on an off-campus basis, where students come into TCD to meet with Occupational Therapists from the service. Unilink aims to develop further over the coming years, in providing both on-campus and off-campus services to students.

The Unilink service has developed a strategic plan in line with the TCD Disability Service’s 3 phase student journey. As part of this plan, Unilink will be collaborating in a Transition to Employment project (http://www.tcd.ie/disability/career/Transition-to-Employment.php), supported by funding from the Genic Trust. This project aims to develop an approach to supporting students into the workplace, and is a collaboration between all of the HEIs availing of the Unilink shared service.

Conclusion

Over the past 10 years, staff within Unilink have developed an effective, research based service, which has consistently been shown to enable students to engage in college and support retention. The development of the shared service model over the past three years has shown that this approach is transferrable between HEIs.