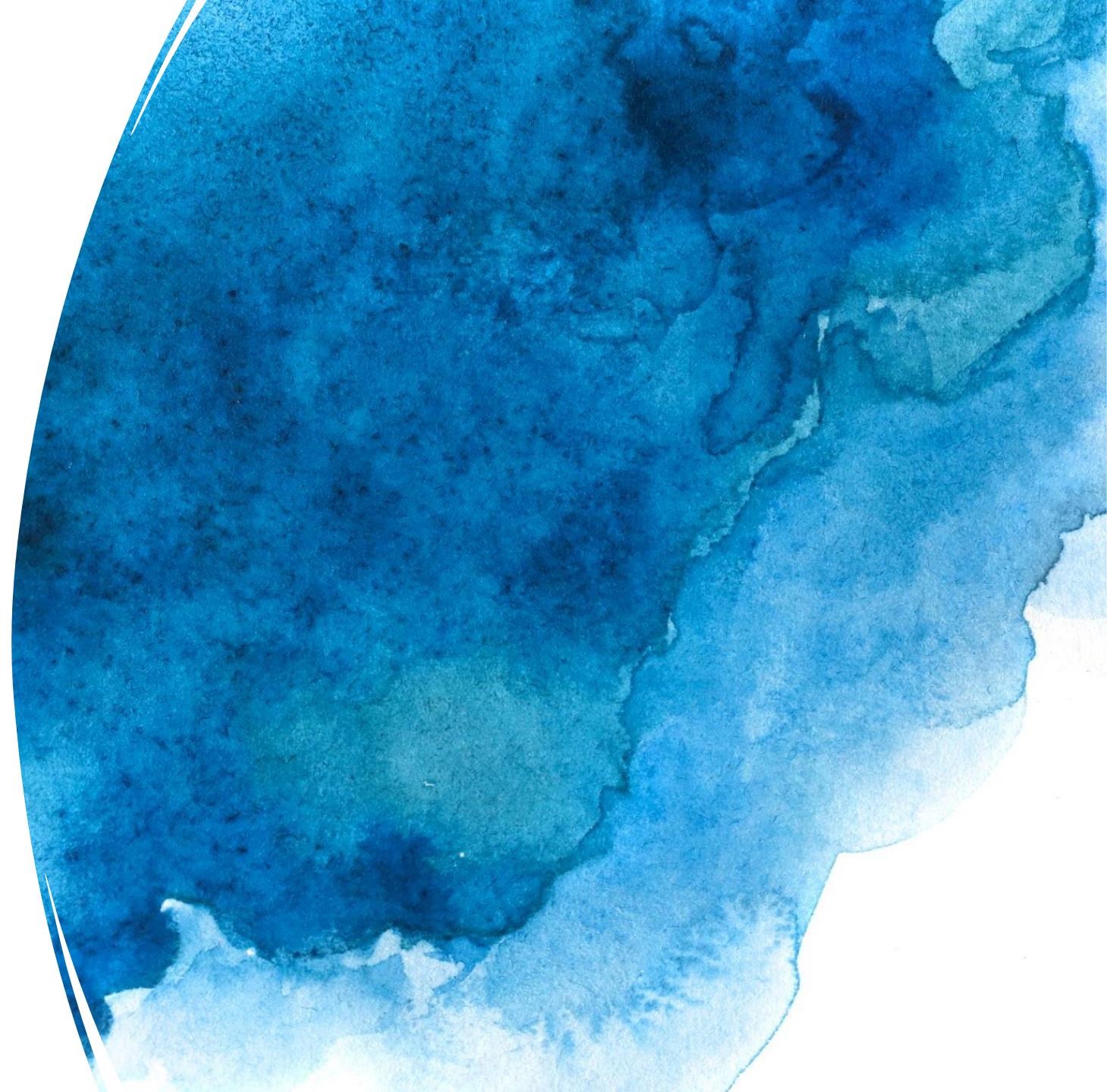


Fostering positive institutional change: the need for genuine critical awareness

Nicola Ingram, University College Cork

Ningram@ucc.ie



HIGHER EDUCATION AND GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT LANDSCAPE

- Contemporary graduates now face both substantial underemployment and a struggle to find work that utilises their knowledge and skills, and this continues to disproportionately affect those from working-class backgrounds and those from racialized minority groups
- Alongside these diminishing returns and the parallel expansion of initial participation rates, the financial cost of participation in higher education in England has shifted from the state to students, with the introduction of tuition fees in 1999.
- This burden continues to grow with decreases in the loan repayment salary threshold and planned increases in interest rates in line with rising inflation.

THE VALUE OF A DEGREE

- Tuition fees paid for by students have been justified on the grounds that higher education qualifications lead to increased earning power via graduate employment (see for example the Browne Review 2010; DfES 2003).
- This provides good grounds for students to expect their degree to facilitate employment success, and for government to be reactive to signs of labour market struggle.
- The value of a degree is becoming narrowly defined in policy discourses by employment outcome and earnings.
- This move has a negative differential impact on post-92 and newer universities, who recruit larger proportions of working-class students, and on universities located in the North of England and Wales, whose graduates earn less than those based in London and the South of England (OfS 2021).
- Leads to a lot of institutional busy work around ‘student experience’ and ‘employability’.
- The problem with an approach based on enhancing employability at the individual level is that structural issues are regularly denied or at least obscured

KEY ISSUES AND THE CONCEPT OF BELONGING

- Despite attempts to make HE more accessible there remain persistent inequalities in access, experience and outcomes.
- Groups particularly affected are those from lower socioeconomic groups, students of colour and students with disabilities.
- Belonging has become a key concept for institutions in terms of being seen to address inequalities.
- Belonging has a relatively long history in HE research (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009; Bathmaker et al., 2016; Thomas, 2018; Gravett and Ajjawi, 2022).
- Renewed interest in the wake of the socially and academically disruptive pandemic and a focus on ‘rebuilding diverse student communities (Curnock Cook 2021)

FROM BELONGING TO MATTERING

- Belonging - post-pandemic buzzword with built-in deficit assumptions about what (mostly non-traditional) students need and lack.
- Students who ‘belong’ do so because they feel an ‘affective affinity’ with institutions.
- How can we expect to generate a sense of belonging without getting to crux of what it means for non traditional students to feel as though they matter in institutional spaces.

INSTITUTIONS FEAR TO DWELL IN DISCOMFORT

- It is difficult to confront our failures both as institutions and as actors within institutions.
- More comfortable celebrating diversity or performing inclusion rather than recognizing for example institutional racism or classism.
- Solutions tend towards one off events/fun activities
- More embedded initiatives are often predefined by management/academic/professional services staff who are already inculcated in the structures that need to be challenged.

CRITICALITY AND CHANGE

- “Solutions cannot be piecemeal, but shake at the very foundations of our institutions” (JOSEPH-SALISBURY 2020, p. 74)
- Change needs to be embedded in the everyday, in all of the spaces of the university, as well as all of the people.
- Belonging cannot be contained to discrete events, one off lectures, individual seminars. It has to permeate for people to feel that they matter.