University Spaces as Intergenerational Contact Zones: Opportunities and Challenges

This chapter examines the idea of developing university spaces as Intergenerational Contact Zones (ICZs), looking at ways in which new premises might, in time, promote meaningful intergenerational contact. Such facilities also have implications for contributing to the research, teaching, and service missions of universities.

Figure 1: The new Institute for Lifecourse and Society building. National University of Ireland Galway.

Opened in 2014, the Institute for Lifecourse and Society building at the National University of Ireland Galway accommodates several research centers and clusters which collectively address multiple aspects of the life course through research, education, and policy and practice development.

Creating an Institute such as ILAS, which, as noted in this chapter, has the potential to function as an "intergenerational research and teaching hub," could ultimately provide the University with a launching point for a steady stream of innovative research and educational practices - on campus, in the community, and online - for the benefit of traditional as well as non-traditional learners.

In many ways, the idea of developing universities as zones of intergenerational contact is not that novel. If we accept the traditional model of a university, in which young students benefit from the tuition, guidance and wisdom of more senior, typically older, academic staff, then there is at least an implicit assumption that contact between the generations is a core feature of what universities do. Of course, even if it ever existed in the first place, this traditional model of a university is subject to a range of pressing challenges, including:

- Demographic change, with declining fertility, extended life expectancies, and growing migration affecting the supply of and demand for students and academic staff alike;
- De-institutionalisation of the life course, necessitating a reorientation of thinking in terms of where higher education and training fit in to individuals' increasingly diverse and fragmented life trajectories;
- Pressures to make universities more meaningful and relevant to their local communities, contributing not only to knowledge generation but also to local economic and social development; and
Evidence of the proven benefits of intergenerational activities in higher education in terms of, for example, providing mentoring and social and emotional support to students, and offering volunteering opportunities that contribute to personal skills development.

It is within this broad context that the Institute for LifeCourse and Society (ILAS) at NUI Galway should be seen. Research institutes represent a major feature of a university’s strategic footprint, emphasising the institution’s priorities in research and education. In the case of ILAS, the focus is on nurturing applied and interdisciplinary social research with a view to informing policy and professional practice and making a positive difference to people’s lives. ILAS combines existing activity at NUI Galway in relation to such population groups as older people, children and families, and persons with disabilities. As such, ILAS accommodates the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology, the Centre for Disability Law and Policy, the Irish Centre for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Research, the Health Economics and Policy Analysis group, the Community Knowledge Initiative and other, smaller research clusters.

The Institute’s four broadly conceived thematic interests are: Life Transitions and Human Flourishing; Intergenerational Relations; Social Health and Wellbeing; and Civic Engagement and Participation. The “Intergenerational Relations” theme identifies the potential of ILAS to become a “hub for intergenerational innovation”:

“The need for greater connectivity between generations and vulnerable groups in communities to achieve their mutual benefit is fundamental. However, how best to enable this connection is less well-known, particularly where there are multiple issues for communities. Thus, the ILAS is particularly interested in how populations can be connected through participatory approaches to improve the chances of more meaningful intergenerational cohesion. In particular, the Institute wishes to learn more about how resilience of capacity to overcome adversity through social support can be enabled between children, youth, adults and elders, and in the context of disability.” (see ILAS research areas).

Two key factors contribute to the potential of ILAS to pursue this ambitious vision and become the desired hub for intergenerational innovation. First, ILAS coalesces university faculty and staff with complementary program development and evaluation skills. Under the ILAS umbrella, interdisciplinary teams could readily be established to study a wide range of intergenerational models and their outcomes for participants across the life course, their families, participating organizations, and the broader community. Second, ILAS has a distinctive physical environment that is conducive to intergenerational programs. Funded in collaboration between the University and philanthropic sources, the new, purpose-built premises accommodate the various research centers and clusters that are core to the Institute’s mission. The space occupies a green-field site on the northern edge of NUI Galway’s extensive city center campus. Conceived as a space which brings together the research community and its various stakeholders, including ‘ordinary’ citizens and public and not-for-profit organisations, the building provides office space for academic staff, shared rooms for ongoing research projects, a 220-seat state-of-the-art auditorium, seminar rooms with varying capacities, small meeting rooms, an exhibition area and foyer space, and a range of other shared spaces. At the heart of the building is an innovative community café, operated as a not-for-profit social enterprise and providing supported employment for people with learning disabilities. Overall, the ILAS building is already regarded as the most accessible space on campus and has a range of features, such as lifts, power-assisted doors, bathrooms and IT facilities that allow relatively easy access for people with a range of disabling conditions. The building is situated on a large plot of land, with potential for development of community and/or intergenerational garden projects.
Even at this early stage of the Institute’s development, it is possible to identify a number of opportunities, layered upon existing programs, resources and expertise from the centers within ILAS, that would support developing the space as a site for greater intergenerational contact. Within ILAS, there is already good awareness of and commitment to the value of intergenerational programs. For example:

- **The Irish Centre for Social Gerontology** has supported a range of intergenerational activities in recent years, conducting with Age Action Ireland and the Beth Johnson Foundation an initial review of intergenerational programs across Ireland (Finn and Scharf, 2012), offering workshops and training on intergenerational issues, and supervising a doctoral project on intergenerational programs in primary schools (Hanmore Cawley, 2015).

- **The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre** has completed the evaluation of Foróige’s Big Brothers Big Sisters of Ireland youth mentoring program (Dolan et al., 2011a, 2011b).

- **The Community Knowledge Initiative**, which fosters community-university partnerships, runs the ALIVE student volunteering program which supports, amongst countless other activities, training in basic IT skills for older adults.

- The community café already acts as a site for mutual interaction between researchers from the various centers and clusters, students attending classes in the building’s seminar rooms, community stakeholders using the building for meetings, and 'ordinary' citizens.

- Since the building opened in 2014, it has hosted a range of events that provide opportunities for interaction across age groups and across the centers and clusters based in ILAS. This has included, for example, conferences exploring family support, workshops on community engagement in different geographic contexts, and public lectures.

Moreover, ILAS and its centers are well connected to local and national NGOs, such as Age Action Ireland, Age Friendly Ireland and Foróige, which also share an interest in intergenerational programs. In this respect, and notwithstanding the need to embed an intergenerational approach within the everyday life of the Institute, transforming the ILAS building into a model for an ICZ is starting from a reasonably solid foundation.

Enhancing the intergenerational research component of the ILAS facility also has implications for expanding the University’s capacity for serving multi-generational groups of learners in university and community settings. For institutions of higher education, demographic aging has contributed, and will increasingly contribute, to a more age-diverse student profile. We also see a wide range of strategies for engaging older adult learners. While some universities establish separate schools or divisions devoted to providing older adults with easier access to degree and non-degree bearing educational programs, others embrace the challenge of mainstreaming older adults into “regular” classrooms, having them share instruction with “traditional” students. However, it is not necessarily clear to faculty with teaching assignments how to exploit this added age- and experience-diversity within the student body to enrich qualitatively the educational experience and bolster student learning outcomes.

Considering its diverse faculty, multi-disciplinary focus, and assorted classroom spaces, ILAS is well positioned to play a leadership role in addressing the question, "What are some effective ways to transform 'multi-generational' classrooms into intergenerational classrooms?" One of the ILAS classroom spaces has the potential to be converted into a classroom laboratory of sorts for developing and assessing strategies for framing and sustaining the involvement of older adults in age-integrated learning experiences. A select group of ILAS faculty and advanced students could be assembled to study the four dimensions of anticipated benefit: impact on individual learners; impact on participating educators; impact on the University; and impact beyond the University. Akin to the early childhood demonstration labs that many universities establish to develop evidence-based, age-appropriate curricula for early childhood education programs, this would be an intergenerational classroom lab. Beyond being the focal point for research in this area, such a lab could be used to offer professional development programs for training educators in effective intergenerational learning strategies that can be implemented in diverse university and community settings.

Other opportunities also exist, not least those that can build upon the educational programs spearheaded by ILAS centers. For example, the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology (ICSG) has conducted several lifelong learning initiatives which have a distinct intergenerational component and, potentially, could involve other ILAS centers:

- In 2015, a team based at ICSG joined with the Active Ageing Partnership - a collaboration of three national age-sector organisations - to develop the Touchstone program. This initiative involved delivering an education and skills development course supplemented by project management training to people aged 55 and over, with a view to enhancing participants' civic engagement skills. Adopting an adult education approach, the pilot Touchstone program in Galway was evaluated highly favorably by participants, leading to implementation of a diverse range of social action projects. This model can now be built upon not only to encourage future participants to engage in intergenerational initiatives but also to open up civic engagement opportunities to people of all ages.

- Also in 2015, in partnership with Penn State University, ICSG delivered a training workshop aimed at developing intergenerational leadership skills amongst people who had previously been involved in IG programs. Modeled on the emerging idea of an "Intergenerational Leadership Institute", the workshop sowed the seeds that might lead to the formal establishment of a local ILI chapter in Galway, based at ILAS. The workshop delivered skills training that would help
volunteers to plan and implement intergenerational programs in areas in which they have content knowledge and expertise. For example, a retired horticulturist who goes through this ILI training might be willing to play a leadership role in developing an intergenerational friendship garden on the grounds of the ILAS facility.

Alongside such opportunities, there are, however, also a variety of challenges and obstacles that may yet hinder the development of ILAS as a meaningful ICZ. Two such challenges include:

- The fact that intergenerational programs have (at least not yet) been identified as being a core feature of the wider University mission. While ILAS and its constituent research centers and clusters have played a leading role in raising the profile of such programs in Ireland, without dedicated resources the foundations of intergenerational programs, and of ICZs, will remain relatively weak. Having the space to conduct intergenerational activities is an excellent starting point, but staffing and financial support for such activities is also needed.

- All ILAS centers and clusters have national and international reputations for the quality of their research work and for the ways in which they engage with public policy and professional practice. Inevitably, each unit is fully committed to developing their activities within their particular area of specialism, in relation, for example, to persons with disabilities, children and families, and older people. Regardless of the benefits arising from intergenerational programs, this may leave relatively limited space for work that adds value to the disparate activities of each center/cluster. Locating within ILAS a champion or leader for intergenerational programs might represent a key challenge in the years ahead.

These challenges are by no means insurmountable. However, unless they are addressed, the substantial opportunities that exist to transform the ILAS building into a model intergenerational contact zone may remain unrealized.

References


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