Student Advocacy in A.I.T

Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Social Care Practice

An exploration into the awareness and perception of student advocacy

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**Declaration**

I declare that this project: ‘Student Advocacy in A.I.T’, is presented is in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Social Care Practice. It is entirely the work of the author and has not been submitted to any other university or higher education institution, or for any other academic award in this institute. Where use has been made of the work of other people it has been fully acknowledged and fully referenced.

Signature_________________ Date___________________________

Lisa Headd 25/11/2010
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Abstract

This research explores understanding, awareness and perceptions of student advocacy and usage of advocacy related services in Athlone Institute of Technology.

A qualitative method was used, involving the administration of questionnaires to members of four different student groups.

Some students had a basic understanding of student advocacy, while for most there was a lack of understanding of the roles of the services that existed. Many felt the student union to be unapproachable, resulting in some students not availing of help from the students union, which is deemed as one of its central functions, to help and support the student.

It recommended that the student union aim to make their service more approachable to students, that students need to be made more aware of the concept of advocacy and the need for student advocacy be investigated further on a much larger scale.
**Introduction**

Advocacy is a vague term and can have many different meanings. It can mostly be associated with people with disabilities or those who may be seen as marginalised in society. For many, advocacy can arise as an inevitable consequence of their work with people who are disadvantaged in some way.

For the purpose of this research advocacy is seen as somebody speaking up/out for themselves or others. Unfortunately, advocacy for students has not specifically been highlighted in Ireland and so it is the aim of the author to explore student advocacy within Athlone Institute of Technology.

The objectives are as follows:

- To explore student understanding and awareness of student advocacy
- To investigate students use and perception of the services in A.I.T.
Chapter 1

Literature Review
**Literature Review**

**Introduction**

The purpose of this review is to examine research that has been carried out on student advocacy and explore relevant literature. The areas to be addressed include definitions of advocacy, models of advocacy and the importance of advocacy for third level students. The services available to students of Athlone Institute of Technology are identified and explored.

**Defining Advocacy**

In recent years advocacy has become the focus of interest for people who are disadvantaged, with many seeing it as a way of enhancing equality of opportunity. Advocacy is an ambiguous term and can mean different things to different people. There are numerous definitions. According to Advocacy Guidelines which were revised by the Citizens Information Board in 2007 it is a “means of empowering people by supporting them to assert their views and claim their entitlements and, where necessary, representing and negotiating on their behalf”. (Advocacy Guidelines, 2007) Advocacy can often be undertaken by a person’s friends and relations, or by persons who have had similar experiences. One of the many definitions of advocacy that can be more closely linked to the topic of advocacy for students is one from IMAS (Including Me Advocacy Service) which defines advocacy as “the process of assisting people to indicate what they want, represent their interests, secure and safeguard their rights and access services and entitlements they require” (IMAS, 2008) It is essentially a process of negotiation on behalf of an individual e.g. Class Representatives on behalf of the students in their class.

Inclusion, empowerment and citizenship are some of the basic principles surrounding advocacy. For the purpose of this research project advocacy is defined as a process by which students are given a voice that represents their needs and requirements in relation to education, welfare and personal issues in college.
Models of Advocacy

Advocacy exists in many models/types. According to the research series ‘The Jigsaw of Advocacy’ the models/types of advocacy include self, peer, professional/personal and citizen advocacy. Firstly, self advocacy is seen as the process by which people are empowered to speak for themselves. It is “a process in which an individual, or a group of people speak or act on their own behalf in pursuit of their own needs and interests” (Bateman, Neill, 2001 pg 18) The widely recognised Neil Bateman is an expert on advocacy for people. Self Advocacy is an important model of advocacy. It can increase confidence and lead to a greater sense of self.

The second model is Peer Advocacy. The principle on which peer advocacy is based is that the advocate has something in common with the person he/she is speaking for. For example in relation to advocacy for students this model is very relevant given that the advocate is working with a person whose difficulties are similar to something they themselves may have experienced. For instance the Students Union, in any third level institution, is normally comprised of past/present students of the institution who have knowledge/experience of student issues.

The third model of advocacy is Personal/Professional advocacy. This model has been described by Inclusion Ireland (2004) as one person helping and supporting another person, when there is a certain problem that may need to be dealt with right away. It deals with specific problems and the advocate works with the individual until the problem is resolved (The Jigsaw of Advocacy, 2003, p.42).

The fourth model of advocacy is Citizen Advocacy. According to Inclusion Ireland (2004) this type of advocacy is when volunteers, trained for this role, and from the community speak for other people who need support. The research series ‘The jigsaw of Advocacy’ describes citizen advocacy as the idea of “a ‘valued citizen’ (someone not having a problem getting heard) working with a person who is discriminated against” (The Jigsaw of Advocacy, 2003, p.40).
Advocacy for Students

The availability of literature surrounding the topic of advocacy for students is very limited. However, a research project entitled ‘Student advocacy in A.I.T: An exploration of students perceptions of advocacy’ carried out in A.I.T. in 2008 found that 55% of students could not define student advocacy. Needless to say the limited availability of literature surrounding the topic bears absolutely no reflection on the services available to students in A.I.T as the third level institute has a wide range of services on offer. A research project carried out at the University of Brighton (UBSU, Student Written Submission, Audit 2008) undertakes to present a coherent view of what it is to be a student at the University of Brighton. It underlines that the importance of a good start in university cannot be underestimated. “It is incumbent on the university to ensure new students are supported with the information and guidance to successfully embark on their academic careers” (UBSU, Student Written Submission, Audit 2008).

Like almost all third level institutions in Ireland the University of Brighton offers a range of services to its students similar to those of A.I.T. The services available in A.I.T include; Access, Chaplaincy, Counselling, Health Service, Student Assistance Fund, Student Tutors, Peer Assisted Student Support(PASS), Disability Support Service, Student Union and the Class Representative system. Most, if not all of these services are available in all Irish third level institutions. Support services for new students in A.I.T. include student tutors and peer assisted support for first years. The Peer Assisted Support service is a recent addition to the student services in A.I.T. It was run in 2009 alongside GMIT’s PAL (Peer Assisted Learning) program. According to the GMIT 2010/11 prospectus PAL is a scheme that offers support between students of the same course. It encourages students to support each other and enhances student’s ability to learn by placing them under the guidance of a ‘PAL leader’ from second, third and fourth years of the same course. This is a prime example of Peer advocacy within A.I.T. Another example of Peer Advocacy in A.I.T is the Student Union and the class representative system. The student union is described as a service that “provides support, advice and information on a wide variety of issues, and represents students throughout the institute” (Student Handbook,
It is an organisation run by the students for the students and consists of three full time officers and six part time officers, all of whom are past or present students of the college. Although the student union in A.I.T was found to be helpful a significant minority found the staff to be unapproachable and many of those who used the service were not satisfied with the results. (Student advocacy in A.I.T, 2008) Students are also represented by class representatives. A representative is elected by their class and is seen as the ‘voice’ of that class. They advocate for their fellow classmates dealing with classroom issues such as problems with the timetable, classroom facilities, programme workloads etc.

The A.I.T. access service offers support to the student throughout their time in college by providing “information to the prospective learner in advance of matriculation and continuing support throughout the duration of the college career” (Athlone Institute of Technology, Prospectus, 2010/11). It facilitates equality of access and participation for all students and similar to the access services available in GMIT it offers a wide range of support to a variety of students such as students with disabilities, adult learners, mature students etc. Athlone Institute of Technology welcomes and encourages applications from students with disabilities. It aims to ensure that these applicants are given an opportunity to enter the Institute and to complete their studies successfully (Athlone Institute of Technology, Prospectus, 2010/11). This service can be seen as an example of citizen advocacy occurring in A.I.T.

Other services available in A.I.T that can be viewed as a form of advocacy for students are chaplaincy, health service and the counselling service. All three are very important aspects of student life at A.I.T. The chaplaincy according to the A.I.T student handbook “is about service and care and helping students to make the most of their opportunities at third-level” (2010/2011.Pg.34) It consists of a large group of students and staff who work alongside the chaplains to help students. The chaplain also holds a mass in the college chapel, allowing for students to attend if they wish to do so. It also allows for students to take time to reflect, pray and relax.

The health service available to students works to promote health education and welfare among students. A counselling service is available in all colleges/universities in Ireland and offers support help and information to all students (GMIT Prospectus, 2010/11). This service advocates on behalf of the students by helping them deal with any personal issues they may be facing, while helping them to carry on with the academic side of college life. The college offers a young
parents support group and although there is no on site crèche available in A.I.T there is a means tested subsidy for registered students using private child minding services. This provides help and support to the student while allowing them to continue with their education. A.I.T offers a wide range of services to students and makes a huge effort to make the lives of its students that bit easier.

**Conclusion**
The forgoing paragraphs have provided an overview on the definitions of advocacy and the different models of advocacy. Examples of student advocacy in Athlone Institute of Technology were identified and examined in the context of the models that were identified. The literature review has established that there is a dearth of literature available on student advocacy. The primary sources of information are student handbooks. It is considered that this research project could contribute towards filling the gap in literature on advocacy for students.
Chapter 2
Methodology
Methodology

Introduction
In this chapter the author introduces the research method. An account is also given of the research procedure, its sample participants, limitations and any ethical issues that may arise throughout the research. Given that the aim is to explore student’s awareness of the advocacy services available within AIT and their use of these services, a practical methodology approach was important.

Research Methods
There are two types of research methods; qualitative and quantitative. According to Bryman (2004) quantitative research “can be construed as a research strategy that emphasises quantification in collection and analysis of data” Qualitative research can be “construed as a research strategy that usually emphasises words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data” The advantage of quantitative research is that you can collect a significant amount of diverse information easily. However, a disadvantage may be that you do not know how accurate or true your respondents have been (Beins, 2004). The advantage of qualitative research is that you can gain useful insights into the complexity of people’s behaviour. However this research can take significantly longer than quantitative research. (Beins, 2004)

The research method chosen by the author is quantitative research. The reason for this was because it was the best research method to gather information quickly and easily given the short space of time allowed to carry it out. This research is conducted through use of a questionnaire.

A questionnaire asks specific questions which can make it easier for participants to answer. Questionnaires consist of two types of questions; open questions and closed questions. With a closed question participants are “presented with a set of fixed alternatives from which they have to choose an appropriate answer” however with an open question participants “are asked a question and can reply however they wish” (Bryman, 2004)
Participants
As the authors aim is to explore student advocacy in AIT it was decided that a random sample would be best. Random sampling is “a process of sampling that specifies that each person in a population has the same chance of being included in a sample as every other person” (Beins, 2004). As students are the key participants in this research, it was decided selecting them randomly around the canteen would be the best option. By doing so it would give a better chance of gaining a full random overview of student’s thoughts on student advocacy.

Sample Characteristics
The sample population consisted of 20 participants. There was an equal ratio of male/female. Five students were chosen randomly from each of the following years; 1st, 2nd, 3rd & 4th. The school of study from which they came from varied from business, engineering, science and humanities & hospitality.

Limitations
A limitation of the study was that there were only 20 questionnaires given out making it hard to generalise the results obtained and apply them to the larger population. Also the small student sample may present limitations because a bigger sample would be able to take in more opinions and the results may present different findings.

Ethical Considerations
It is very important that the participant does not feel pressurised into participating in the research. Participants must always be informed of their rights regarding their participation in the research project and to do so the questionnaire will have a cover sheet explaining why the questionnaire is being carried out, for whom and that their participation is fully anonymous and confidential.
Chapter 3

Results
Results

Introduction
This chapter presents an analysis of the results. As outlined in the methodology, the author used a questionnaire to investigate student’s understanding and awareness of advocacy and students perceptions and use of services available in AIT.

Results

School of study in A.I.T

A majority of the participants were from the humanities and hospitality department, 40% (n-8). This was followed by 25% (n-5) of business participants, 20% (n-4) of engineering participants and 15% (n-3) of science participants.

Year
Five participants were chosen from each of the following years; 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th year. They were chosen at random resulting in the variation of participation between each department.

**Male or Female**
There was an equal ration of male and female participation within this questionnaire. 50% (n-10) were male, 50% (n-10) were female.

**Objective one: Investigate students understanding and awareness of student advocacy**

**Q.1. Understanding of student advocacy**
Within this question students were given a list of terms where they could tick one or more of the boxes which they felt were more appropriate in relation to student advocacy. It was established that a majority of students had a good understanding of student advocacy. 45% (n-9) stated student advocacy was providing a voice for students. The second most common answer was that it offered help and support to the student with 30% (n-6) of participants ticking this box. 25% (n-5) did not understand the term. Of this 25%, 20% (n-4) were first year students. No participant felt it was something that made life easier for the student.

![Pie chart showing understanding of student advocacy](Figure 2)
Q.2. Below is a list of services available in AIT. Please tick the boxes of the services you are aware of.

A list of services was given with this question and participants were allowed to tick multiple boxes. 100% (n-20) of the participants were aware of both the student union and class representatives. The chaplaincy service was the next service most students were aware of, 85% (n-17). This was followed by 70% (n-14) of students knowledgeable of the careers officer. 65% (n-13) of participants were aware of the counselling service, with 60% (n-12) sharing awareness of the disability advisory support service, the health service and student tutors. The least known service was the peer assisted student support with a mere 15% (n-3) of participants acknowledging awareness of it.

**Student Awareness of Services Available**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Services Available</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Union</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Representative</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Careers Officer</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaplaincy Service</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselling Service</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability Advisory &amp; Support</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Assisted Student Support</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Service</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Tutors</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1
Q.3. How did you become aware of these services?

A majority of students, 60% (n-12), became aware of these services through friends. 50% (n-10) became aware as a result of the induction day. 45% (n-9) learnt of these services through their lecturers, 20% (n-4) via the student handbook and 10% (n-2) became aware as a result of doing this questionnaire.

Of the 25% that stated ‘other’, one participant said they found out during “mental health week/shag week” while another revealed they learnt of services from the “student union & personal experience” The third participant became aware through “the website of AIT”.

Figure 3
Q.4. If there are services you were not aware of, do you believe knowing about the service/s at an earlier stage would have helped you?

Of the 45% (n=9) that said yes it would have helped, a common theme that appeared throughout their answers was that had they known about the services they “would have used them and previous problems could have been resolved” 25% (n=5) of participants said that they didn’t know with one participant stating that “maybe peer assisted learning could have been of benefit in first year”. An equal amount of participants said no and 5% (n=1) had no comment.

Q.5. What do you think is the most effective way to make students more aware of such services?

55% (n=11) believed student email and posters around the college were the best way to promote awareness of such services. 40% (n=8) believed in class via the lecturers and through class representatives via texts were the most effective way while 15% (n=3) of participants chose “other”. Participants in this percentile suggested “information sessions in the first of second week of college” as a way of promoting awareness and “putting information on the telly’s over the canteen doors (if still there)”
Q.6. Have you ever availed of any of the services mentioned in Q.2?

70% (n=14) said yes they have availed of services and 30% (n=6) said no they had not. A majority of those that said no simply stated that they “had not needed to use the services yet”. Of those that said yes the services they listed were; the student union, class representative, careers officer, counselling service, health service, student tutor, disability service and support and the chaplaincy service.

Q.7. If you answered yes to Q.6, how would you rate the service you received?

As only 70% (n=14) said yes the total population for this question is 14. 7% (n=1) rated the service they received as adequate, 50% (n=7) rated the service as good and 43% (n=6) rated the service as excellent. Although these percentiles portray a positive view of services there were some participants who had commented negatively on services such as the student union and the health service. One participant said “the health service is very basic and sometimes I found the staff to be rude”. In relation to the students union it was thought that “the students union can be ignorant towards you & sometimes unhelpful”.

Q.8. Have you ever wished to avail of any of the services in Q.2 but failed to do so for any of the following reasons?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t feel comfortable</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt embarrassed</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t feel the services were approachable</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No comment</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants were given a list to choose from in this question. 40% (n=8) of those who answered this question failed to avail of services because they didn’t feel comfortable. 20% (n=4) failed to
do so because they felt embarrassment. 10% (n-2) didn’t feel the services were approachable. 15% (n-3) said other and stated that they had not needed to avail of the services yet and 15% gave no comment.

**Q.9 All classes are appointed class representatives. Are you aware of what their role is?**

![Figure 6](image)

As you can see a majority of participants have an understanding of what the role of a class representative is. 70% (n-14) of participants who answered yes, all gave similar descriptions of the role of a class representative. These descriptions included “class reps represent the student in their class, inform them of events/ issues etc”, “class reps act as a mediary between the students and lecturers” and “class reps organise class parties, take complaints to lecturers”
Q.10. If yes, do you feel students voices are well represented through the work of the class reps?

50% (n=10) of participants felt that student’s voices were well represented while 5% (n=1) said they weren’t and 30% (n=6) felt things could be improved. Those that felt students voices were well represented had positive comments to follow such as “our class reps have always supported us and helped us in any tough situations we were going through individually or in a class”, “class reps fight for the students needs, they try and make the student comfortable” Of those that felt things could be improved one participant said that “it depends on the class rep, I’m sure some class reps are very proactive” 15% (n=3) gave no comment.

Q.11. Are you/ have you ever been a class rep?

90% (n=18) of those studied have never been class rep while 10% (n=2) have been a class rep. Participants were asked to skip to Q.13 if they answered no to this question while those who answered yes continued onto Q. 12. As a result the total population for Q.12 was 10% (n=2)

Q.12. As class rep, having dealt first hand with the student union, do you feel the student body is well represented with regards to issues that are out of the student’s control? i.e. the proposed hike in student fees

Of the 10% (n=2) of participants who had been class rep, 5% answered yes and 5% answered no. The participant who answered yes felt that the student body “was well represented, the voice gets heard” The respondent who felt that the student body weren’t well represented felt that the “current student union does not often best represent the views of the students. They are at times unapproachable and sometimes act without cause”
Q.13 If you have dealt with the students union with any issues you may have had, please tick the appropriate box/es that best describes your experience

[Diagram showing percentage distribution]

As you can see from the above graph, 30% (n=6) of respondents had not availed of the service. 25% (n=5) felt the students union could have been more helpful with some stating that “they didn’t seem bothered” and that they “don’t really do much”. 20% (n=4) felt that they really listened and wanted to help and dealt with issues as fast as possible. One participant thought “they were very helpful and made sure I was comfortable before I left the student union office” while another participant said “they were willing to do what they could if the situation got worse”. 5% (n=1) felt the service wasn’t approachable.
Q.14. **Is there anything you would like to change in relation to the services available to you as a student?**

This was an open question and allowed participants to answer freely revealing any changes they would like to see. The following is a graph to portray the most common answers received.

![Changes students would like to see in services](image)

A majority of participants, 65% (n=13), felt there was nothing they would change however, 20% (n=4) said they would like to see services more approachable, 10% (n=2) would like to see more advertisement of what is available and 5% (n=1) said more help for students.

**Summary of findings**

The findings of this research showed that a majority of students have a basic idea of what student advocacy is. The student union and class representatives are the two main services known by all participants with a majority of those aware of the role of the class representatives. Most participants learned of the services through friends. 25% of participants felt the student union could have been more helpful while 20% felt that services could be more approachable.
Chapter 4
Discussion
Discussion

Introduction
The aim of this research is to explore student advocacy in A.I.T. The objectives outlined are firstly to investigate student’s understanding and awareness of advocacy and secondly to investigate student’s perceptions and use of services in A.I.T.

Discussion of findings

Objective One: Investigate students understanding and awareness of student advocacy
As stated previously there is a limited amount of research on the subject of student advocacy in Ireland. A mini research project carried out in A.I.T. on the subject found that 55% of students could not define what student advocacy was. (Student advocacy in A.I.T, 2008) Although this may be the case, the results of this questionnaire have revealed that a majority of students have a general idea of what student advocacy means. Overall 75% were aware of student advocacy; this is compared to the study ‘Student advocacy in A.I.T’ where 45% were found to have an understanding. When participants were asked what they understood by student advocacy a majority of students stated it was something that offered help and support to the student and provided a voice for students. It is clear from the literature review that students have the right idea of what advocacy means with it being defined as “the process by which students are given a voice that represents their needs and requirements in relation to education, welfare and personal issues” However 25% of students failed to understand what it was. In light of what was discovered in the literature review, that 55% of students did not have an understanding of student advocacy, the 30% decrease can be seen as an improvement of student understanding.

Although most students had a good understanding of student advocacy, a majority were not aware of all the student services available in A.I.T. All students were fully aware of the student union and class representative system; a majority were aware of most of the other services however only 15% were aware of the peer assisted support service. Although it can be seen from the literature review that the service is relatively new, it would seem that there is a lack of awareness among students of what this service has to offer. This is unfortunate as 45% of students felt that had they known about some of the services they would have used them. One
particular student felt that peer assisted learning would have been of benefit in first year had they known about it. The lack of awareness surrounding this service cannot be viewed as a fault in promoting the service as many students such as third and fourth years would not have had this option when they started first year, however it was found that the 15% who were aware of the service were all second years. No first years were aware of peer assisted support, which is worrying as it is clear from what the service offers that it would be of great benefit to first years. When asked what people thought the most effective way to increase awareness of such services a majority of students chose student email and posters around the college. 15% chose other and gave their suggestions on ways to promote awareness which included “information sessions in the first or second week of college” and placing advertisements on the televisions in the canteen area of the institute. Ideally information sessions would seem the best way to approach promoting awareness however one would argue that placing advertisements on the televisions in the canteen would be more effective as many students may not attend information sessions and lose out on gaining information that may benefit them in the long run. As the canteen is seen as a student friendly area where students can relax there is a higher possibility of students noticing the advertisements and hence a higher awareness of services may be observed.

Objective two: Investigate student’s perceptions & use of services in A.I.T.

Students were asked if they had ever availed of any of the services available in A.I.T. 70% said yes and 30% said no. For those who had not availed of the service they simply stated that they had not needed to use them as of yet. This can be true for many students who can go through 4 years of college and not feel the need to avail of any services. When asked how they would rate the services they received, 7% (n-1) rated the service they received as adequate, 50% (n-7) rated the service as good and 43% (n-6) rated the service as excellent. At first glance these results look positive; however services such as the health service and student union received negative comments. One participant found the health service to be very basic and the staff within to be rude. With regards to the student union one participant stated that “the students union can be ignorant towards you and sometimes unhelpful”. A similar attitude was found among A.I.T students in 2008 where the research project ‘Student advocacy in A.I.T’ revealed that although a majority found the student union to be helpful, a significant minority found the staff to be unapproachable and many who had used the service were not satisfied with the results. Over all
55% of those that found it helpful rated the services as good/excellent, however those that rated it poor/very poor (20%) found the service unhelpful and unapproachable. When compared to this study it was found that overall 30% of students were unhappy with the service they received from the student union. This shows a 10% increase in the findings of a similar question in the research project ‘Student advocacy in A.I.T’ carried out in 2008. This begs the question ‘Are the right people in the students union for the right reasons?’ When looking back at the results one would wonder if people in the student union are genuinely interested in helping the student or more concerned with their own personal status.

Students were then asked if there were any services they failed to avail of for any of the following reasons; they didn’t feel comfortable with the service, they felt embarrassed or they didn’t feel the services were approachable. A majority of those who answered said they failed to avail of services because they didn’t feel comfortable or felt embarrassed. One would wonder if this bears any reflection on the feelings of some students who felt some services were unapproachable however due to the fact that participants did not elaborate on their answers it is merely speculation.

Most students were able to identify what a class representative was and when asked if they felt the student voice was well represented through the work of class representatives the results came back mostly positive. 50% agreed that students were well represented and relayed this view through comments they left such as “our class reps have always supported us and helped us in any tough situations we were going through individually or as a class”. A significant minority of the group felt things could be improved with one participant saying that “it depends on the class rep, I’m sure some class reps are very pro-active”. This once again reiterates the question ‘are the right people in it for the right reasons?’

Of the 20 participants who completed the questionnaire only 2 had been class representatives. The 2 participants were asked if they felt that the students union well represented the student body in relation to issues outside of the student’s control. The results were 50/50. One participant felt that they were very well represented while the other echoed the continuing theme throughout this research that the “current student union does not often best represent the views of the student. They are at times unapproachable and sometimes act without cause.”

Participants were then asked to give a description of their experience with the student union. The results were diverse with some revealing they were very happy with the service and others
feeling they could have been more helpful. The majority of participants stated however that they had not availed of the service yet but given the views of some students one would speculate as to the reasoning behind this. However it is fair to say that many students go through college without ever feeling the need to use any of the services and this could very well be the case here as in the final question students were asked if there was anything they would like to change about the services available to them as students and a significant number of participants stated that there is nothing they would change.

**Evaluation of Method**

The author opted for a quantitative method for the research; this method worked very well; however a qualitative method may have allowed for a more in depth analysis.
Chapter 5

Conclusion
Conclusion
The overall aim of this study was to investigate how aware students are of student advocacy in A.I.T. Before this could be established, the author needed to research other literature in relation to advocacy for students, however due to limited amount of published research, the literature review focuses on definitions of advocacy, models of advocacy and the importance of advocacy for third level students. The services available to students of Athlone Institute of Technology are also identified.

Questionnaires were used as the method of research, which were given to students from each year in the college.

The research gives us a very good indication that most students have a fair idea of what student advocacy is.

Although a majority of students felt the services available were good there was a minority that felt some services were unhelpful and unapproachable.

In conclusion, it is the view of the author that this research highlights a lack of awareness among students in relation to student advocacy within the college. Ultimately this lack of awareness may lead to students not looking for help due to the fact that they do not understand that the services are there for that reason, or due to the fact that they may not be comfortable using the service.

Recommendations

- Students need to be made more aware of the concept of student advocacy.
- The Students’ Union needs to make themselves and their service more approachable.
- There is a need for services to be better advertised around the college.
- There is a need for a comprehensive study conducted throughout Ireland to investigate awareness of Student Advocacy in other college and 3rd level institutes.
Reference

List
Reference List

- Athlone Institute of Technology, *Prospectus 2010/2011*
- Athlone Institute of Technology, *Student handbook/diary 2010/2011*
To whom it may concern,

My name is Lisa Headd and I am a 4th year Social Care student in A.I.T. As part of my B.A. (Hons.) in Social Care Practice, I am required to conduct a small research project. The project is a study on the understanding and awareness of student advocacy and the perceptions and use of the services available to students in AIT. As part of the research I ask you to complete the following questionnaire. Your participation in this study is voluntary and if you do not wish to participate you may withdraw at any time. If you choose to participate there is no need to sign your name as the information is confidential and anonymous and will be destroyed. I only ask that you answer as honestly as possible and to consider your answers before putting them to paper.

Lisa Headd
In what school are you studying in AIT? (Please tick appropriate box)

- Business
- Engineering
- Humanities & Hospitality
- Science

Year: 1st [ ] 2nd [ ] 3rd [ ] 4th [ ]
Male: [ ] Female: [ ]

Q.1 What do you understand by student advocacy? (Please tick appropriate box/es)
- It offers help and support to the student
- It provides a voice for the student
- It’s something that makes life easier for the student
- I do not understand what it means
- Other

If other please explain:

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

Q.2 Below is a list of services available in AIT. Please tick the boxes of the services you are aware of.

- Students Union
- Class Representatives
- Careers Officer
- Chaplaincy service
- Counselling service
- Disability Advisory & Support service
- Peer Assisted Student support
Q.3 How did you become aware of these services?
- Friends
- Lecturers
- Student Handbook
- Induction Day
- Saw it in this Questionnaire
- Other
  If other, please specify

Q.4 If there are services you were not aware of, do you believe knowing about the service/s at an earlier stage would have helped you as a student?
- Yes
- No
- I don’t know
  Please give reasons for your answer:

Q.5 What do you think is the most effective way to make students more aware of such services?
- Student email
- In class via lecturer
- Class rep via group text
- Posters around the college
- Other
  If other, please specify:
Q.6 Have you ever availed of any of the services mentioned in Q.2?
Yes [ ]
No [ ]
If yes, please specify which services:

Q.7 If you answered yes to Q.6, how would you rate the service you received?
Poor [ ] Adequate [ ] Good [ ] Excellent [ ]
Please explain your answer:

Q.8 Have you ever wished to avail of any of the services in Q.2 but failed to do so for any of the following reasons: (Please tick appropriate boxes)
I didn’t feel comfortable [ ]
I felt embarrassed [ ]
I didn’t feel the service/s were approachable [ ]
Other [ ]
If other, please explain:

Q.9 All classes are appointed class representatives. Are you aware of what their role is?
Yes [ ] No [ ] I don’t know [ ]
Please explain your answer:

____________________________________________________

____________________________________________________

Q.10 If yes, do you feel that student’s voices are well represented through the work of the class reps?
   Yes, very well  □  Things could be improved  □  No, not at all  □
   Please give reasons for your answer:

____________________________________________________

____________________________________________________

Q.11 Are you/ have you ever been a class rep?
   Yes  □  No  □
   If yes, please answer Q.12  if no, please move on to Q.13

Q.12 As class rep, having dealt first hand with the student union, do you feel the student body is well represented with regards to issues that are out of the student’s control? E.g. The proposed hike in student fees.
   Yes  □  No  □  I don’t know  □
   Please give reasons for your answer:

____________________________________________________

____________________________________________________

Q13 If you have dealt with the student’s union with any issues you may have had, please tick the appropriate box/es that best describes your experience:
   They really listened to me & really wanted to help  □
   They dealt with my issue as fast as possible  □
   They could have been more helpful  □
   They weren’t helpful at all  □
The service was unapproachable
I have never availed of this service
Please give reasons for your answer:

Q.14 Is there anything you would like to change in relation to the services available to you as a student?

Thank you for your time and cooperation