# HOW EQUAL?

## ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND

## RESEARCH PAPERS

HEA | HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY
AN tÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS

OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS

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The mental health of students in higher education in Ireland at present; the challenge for vision impaired young people to navigate entry to higher education; the vital role of higher education in creating an inclusive, multi-cultural society – these important themes are among the 20 papers included in this conference publication. Researchers from a diverse range of agencies, networks and colleges around the country have investigated, compiled evidence, findings and rich insights into the experience and the challenges of participating in higher education in Ireland today. Collectively, the papers create a fascinating snapshot of equity of access to higher education while also delivering a powerful message for change.

All of the papers in this publication begin with an implicit message: that higher education is a hugely important personal and public good, and achieving equity of access to higher education is a *sine qua non* if we want to consider ourselves a true and modern democracy. Equity of access is also required to support the recovery of our economic prosperity and independence, and to regain our position as leaders in global innovation and development. The richness and power of diversity in education is celebrated here, providing a glimpse of what a fully-developed culture of equity and inclusiveness in our system could deliver.

The papers also show that we still have a distance to travel to remove barriers to higher education participation. Geography – where someone lives – continues to dictate the extent and quality of access and supports available to both older and younger students. Distance education options are available, but not with the scale and reach that is required. Many people with disabilities are not yet adequately supported to succeed in our education system. There is still a lack of co-ordinated planning and co-operation among responsible agencies to ensure that graduates of all backgrounds and abilities are assisted in making the transition to work and to playing a full role in their family and community.

Collectively, the papers in this conference publication underline the opportunity we have to transform our higher education system. There is much change on the landscape already, with a newly co-ordinated system of higher education in development and all publicly-funded colleges preparing to enter into formal strategic dialogue with the Higher Education Authority on their achievements to date and their aims and ambitions for the future.

The papers in this publication will undoubtedly help to inform and shape that national dialogue.


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# 1

# FROM 18 MONTHS TO 18 YEARS: SUPPORTING ACCESS TO THIRD LEVEL EDUCATION

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## Abstract

Since its inception in 1951, the National College of Ireland (NCI) has distinguished itself in the provision of access routes to higher education. This paper outlines how NCI, through its Early Learning Initiative (ELI), addresses the complex and multi-faceted nature of educational disadvantage and is improving access to third level in the Docklands. Using a community action research approach, ELI has developed programmes which raise the educational aspirations of families and support children and young people in the Docklands to progress through the education system and on to third level. NCI's access programmes can inform national policy, with its models of best practice used by other third level institutions across Ireland to address systemic issues in access to third level.

## Introduction

Since its inception in 1951, National College of Ireland (NCI) has distinguished itself in the provision of access routes to higher education. As a third-level provider, NCI has a unique relationship with its local community, the Dublin Docklands and **believes that early intervention is critical if educationally disadvantaged young people and their families are to access third level education.** This paper outlines how the NCI, through its Early Learning Initiative (ELI), supports access to third level for its local community in the Docklands. Influenced by Bronfenbrenner (1979), the aim is to enhance children's complex interactions with their immediate environment by providing educational support for them and their families over the course of the children's education.

Research from a wide range of countries has found that early intervention contributes significantly to putting children from disadvantaged backgrounds on the path to development and success in education (Heckman 2006; OECD 2006; Melhuish 2011; Start Strong 2011). Early childhood is the stage where education can most effectively influence a child's development and help reverse educational disadvantage (European Commission 2011). The first three years of life is a period of rapid brain development, when a child's thinking and language structures are being built into the brain. At three years of age, there are already big differences in language and mathematical development between children from rich and poor backgrounds. Vocabulary use at age three is a predictive measure of language skills and reading comprehension scores at age 9–10 (Hart and Risley 1995). The Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) research (2012) found that nine-year-old children from professional families were achieving higher scores in both maths and reading than children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Research highlights that those who start school among the least advanced of their class remain so throughout their schooling and do not go onto third level education (Northwestern University 2007; HEA 2010). If young people are to succeed at third level, they need to begin primary school with the language, concepts and skills required for success throughout their educational journey.

A lot of work has been done in Ireland to address educational disadvantage and improve access to third level education. However, the focus, to date, has been on addressing educational disadvantage both in later childhood and through the formal education system. One major gap in third level access programmes and national policy is the lack of an integrated approach to supporting parents and the communities in which they live to provide positive home learning environments, where children's social, language and mathematical concepts and skills are developed from an early age. This paper will describe the **pioneering programmes developed by ELI in NCI to support children and their families as they progress through the education system, the results achieved to date and the implications for other third level access programmes and national policy.**

## Methodology

The complex and multi-faceted nature of educational disadvantage has to be recognised (Department of Education and Science (DES) 2005). There are no quick fixes and the work is ongoing. While NCI participates in both the disability access route to education (DARE) and the higher education access route (HEAR) and is an active member of the Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA) widening participation strand, it believes that many of the barriers to education lie outside the formal education system. For children to succeed in education, their parents need a positive local community educational network and infrastructure, which will give them the support they require to develop their parenting skills and support their children through the education system. Uniquely NCI's access initiatives begin at 18 months and continue through the child's pre-school years, through primary and secondary school; and ultimately on to third level.

NCI recognised at an early stage the need to generate solutions *with*, not *for*, parents and others in the community. As a result, community action research, with its emphasis on building cross-organisational learning communities to undertake action research projects (Senge and Scharmer 2001; Bleach 2013), is the research methodology used. It encourages bottom-up, flexible, continuous and cooperative change. Up skilling local people to work in ELI programme delivery means that many families who might otherwise have shied away from involvement have embraced ELI.

Operating as a partnership between NCI, local parents, early years services, schools, community organisations and neighbouring corporate leaders, ELI has developed a range of complementary, innovative programmes to raise the educational aspirations of families and support children and young people to progress through the education system and on to third level.

The key to ELI's success is its parent child home programme (PCHP). Originally from the United States, PCHP is an innovative, home-based literacy and parenting programme that strengthens families and prepares children (18 months to 3 years) to succeed academically. Over a two-year period, home visitors model oral language, reading and play in their twice-weekly visits. The families then continue the activities in their own time, thereby enabling the PCHP child and siblings to develop their language, literacy and numeracy skills.

With the lack of success in Maths-based subjects a trigger for non-completion of third level (Every Child a Chance Trust 2009; HEA 2010), ELI's national early years access initiative (NEYAI) early numeracy programme is an important project both locally and nationally. Through this project, parents are learning how to support their children's mathematical development, with early years practitioners noticing how children 'really grasped the concept, reinforced at home and in school. Maths was great fun' (ELI 2012). The models of best practice developed through this project will be used to address the systemic issues in early numeracy in Ireland.

While support in the early years is essential if students are to progress to higher education, they and their parents will need on-going support. This is provided through ELI's stretch to learn programmes (4+) which include various literacy and numeracy projects as well as educational and career guidance programmes. The educational guidance programme in fifth and sixth class plays a key role in raising the educational aspirations of local children and their parents, particularly as decisions made towards the end of primary school can have serious long-term consequences for students.

NCI, as a third level institution, is an important plank in building the educational capital of the community in the Docklands. Holding events in NCI gives children and their families a positive experience of third level as well as making them more aware of third level education in general. As a result of this engagement with NCI staff and the third level 'campus connect' volunteers, some of whom come from the local community, parents feel comfortable in NCI and use it as an accessible point of advice, information and referral for educational issues.

*You see a lot of people going in and out [of the NCI] as well so that you can pop in anytime and just have a chat. Once you get to know people and ask what programmes are going on, if there are any programmes of interest they will tell you and direct you to whichever person –*

[Dockland Parent-2] (Share *et al* 2011a)

**Results**

Over 3,000 children, parents and professionals actively engage in ELI's programmes each year. Feedback from all the participants is very positive with satisfaction rates of 97% (n= 2,304) during 2008–13. An independent evaluation, conducted by the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College found that ELI's cross-sectoral networks were working effectively to enhance educational outcomes for children and their families (Share *et al* 2011a). Children's oral language, literacy and numeracy skills are developing normally for their age and they are starting school on a par with their peers in middle class areas (Share el al 2011b; ELI 2013). The educational aspirations and attainment of the children have increased with students in second and sixth class scoring above the norms, nationally in terms of their educational aspirations and DEIS schools in terms of their educational attainment (Share *et al* 2011c; ELI 2013). Parents are more engaged in their children's learning with ELI's parental involvement activities having a ripple effect as they brought parents, some of whom had incomplete second level education, into NCI, a third level institution, thereby promoting the idea of lifelong learning (Share *et al* 2011a).

**Implications**

Educational disadvantage refers to a situation whereby individuals in society derive less benefit from the education system than their peers. It is closely linked to the issue of poverty with a substantial volume of research, both national and international, indicating that individuals from poorer socio-economic backgrounds and communities are more likely to underachieve in the education system than their peers from higher income backgrounds (UNICEF 2002; Combat Poverty Agency 2003; GUI 2012). While considerable resources are being targeted by the government, the HEA and various access initiatives to support the education of young people in disadvantaged circumstances, the association between socio-economic factors and disengagement from education remains strong (Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills 2010). There needs to be more recognition that inequality in learning achievement begins at an early age and attempts to mitigate educational disadvantage must begin even before a child starts school (UNICEF 2002). The lack of early childhood education supports are a weakness in the existing educational inclusion measures (DES 2005) and have reduced the overall effectiveness of the state's investment in providing access to third level. As Allen (2011) found:

Many of the costly and damaging social problems in society are created because we are not giving children the right type of support in their earliest years, when they should achieve their most rapid development. If we do not provide that help early enough, then it is often too late.

Beginning at 18 months, NCI's access programmes, unlike other third level access programmes, focus on improving the oral language, literacy and numeracy skills of young children, thereby ensuring that they begin primary school on a par with their peers and are therefore more likely to progress through the education system and go on to third level. A large number of parents in the Docklands are early school leavers (Share *et al* 2011a) and while they have high educational aspirations for their children, they are not confident that they have the skills to help their children to go on to further and higher education (Dartington Social Research Unit 2006; DES 2011). ELI has succeeded in developing the knowledge and skills of these parents through the development of networks of supports and knowledge sharing (Share *et al* 2011a).

If, as the HEA (2008) and other research suggests, poverty and disadvantage are as much about the experiences of communities as about the experiences of individuals, the elimination of educational disadvantage requires a similar approach to NCI, which combines both individual and community

development as well as joined-up strategies across education levels. Low educational capital within both the family and the community in disadvantaged areas results in poorly informed choices being made during a young person's formative years. This, in turn, prevents the young person from acquiring the qualifications needed for a third level education (McCarthy 2013). If young people are to have a real chance of taking advantage of the Irish education system, reaching their full potential in third level, and entering a competitive jobs market with confidence, they will require access programmes similar to those provided by NCI.

NCI has a long-standing commitment to widening participation in higher education. The college is a potent symbol in its local community, providing pre-school, primary and second level students and their families with a visual reminder that they have a right to third level education and that, with support, it is within their reach. Through ELI, NCI supports children and their families as they progress into and through the education system and onto third level. NCI's access programmes can inform national policy, with its models of best practice used by other third level institutions across Ireland, to address systemic issues in ensuring that all young people can access a third level education.

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# 2

# GEOGRAPHIC INEQUALITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ACCESSIBILITY AND PARTICIPATION IN IRELAND

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## Abstract

This paper provides evidence of geographic inequalities in relation to accessibility to higher education in Ireland and links these inequalities to previously published work by the authors on the impact of travel distance on higher education participation. Using a geographical information system (GIS)-based network analysis, we calculate basic higher education accessibility measures, demonstrating considerable variation in geographic accessibility across Ireland. We discuss why greater travel distances are likely to lead to a range of additional direct and indirect costs for potential students and show that these costs and distances have a negative impact on the likelihood of school leavers from lower socio-economic backgrounds proceeding to higher education. We also discuss how these distance effects are most pronounced for lower-ability students from poorer backgrounds and how the results are likely to be impacted by changes in the distance cut-off for adjacent and non-adjacent maintenance grants.

## Background and context

Higher education participation is an important policy objective in Ireland as it is increasingly being viewed as a means to promote strong economic development. Previous work examining the determinants of higher education participation has focused on the role of individual level characteristics, such as parental income and social class, along with human capital related variables, such as potential life cycle earnings and opportunity costs (Willis and Rosen, 1979; Lauer, 2002; Wilson, 2005; Gustman and Steinmeier, 1981; Giannelli and Monfardini, 2003; Flannery and O'Donoghue, 2009). More recently, attention has also been paid to the effect of geographic accessibility on participation. For example, Frenette (2006) found that travel distance had a negative impact on university participation in Canada, while Sa *et al* (2006) developed a higher education accessibility measure for the Dutch education system and found that proximity to a university or professional college significantly increased the probability that school leavers continued their education. For Ireland, Cullinan *et al* (2013) examined the impact of travel distance on higher education participation, showing travel distance has a negative impact on the likelihood of school leavers from lower socio-economic backgrounds proceeding to higher education.

There are a number of reasons why travel distance, or geographic accessibility more generally, might impact on the decision to participate in higher education. According to Speiss and Wrohlich (2010), 'transaction costs' tend to increase as distance to a higher education institution (HEI) increases, and this is associated with a lower likelihood of participating in higher education. These transaction costs include direct financial costs such as rent and travel, indirect financial costs such as the costs that could have been saved from living at home, information costs and search costs. Speiss and Wrohlich (2010) also argue that there are potential 'neighbourhood effects' through which the presence of a local HEI can generate 'spillover effects' that influence the behaviour of young people living in the vicinity of a HEI, or that there may be 'information network effects' whereby a HEI provides information about higher education that could influence decisions. In Ireland, McCoy *et al* (2010b) estimate that the costs of attending higher education are twice as high for those living away from home than for those living with their parents.

Within this context, this paper presents evidence on the extent of geographic inequalities in relation to accessibility to higher education in Ireland and considers the likely impact of these inequalities on participation in higher education. In particular, it discusses the link between geographic inequalities in relation to accessibility to higher education, the reasons why travel distance might affect higher education participation, and the evidence in relation to these effects. It finds that variation in accessibility to higher education is an important driver of inequalities in higher education participation in Ireland and also outlines how participation is likely to be impacted by changes in the distance cut-off for adjacent and non-adjacent grants.

## Materials and methods

GIS-based network analysis is used to calculate basic higher education accessibility measures. Network analysis is a geographical information system (GIS) function used to calculate the distance covered and time taken in making a journey on a network, such as the road network. It facilitates a range of outputs including, for example, the creation of network-based 'service areas'. These service or catchment areas are defined as regions that encompass all accessible points on a network from a particular location within a specified impedance (e.g. distance or time), and can be calculated for a HEI or some other institution/facility. Given the fact that road network density tends to differ significantly across Ireland, and in particular between urban and rural areas, it is important to use road network travel distances since they provide a more accurate estimate of travel distance than standard Euclidean measures of distance (Cullinan *et al*, 2008; Cullinan, 2010). Once calculated, they provide a visual representation of accessibility and an assessment of the extent of any geographic inequalities in relation to accessibility.

In order to examine the effect of distance on higher education participation, we consider results from a recently published paper by the authors. Cullinan *et al* (2013) presented a binary logic model of the decision of school leavers to proceed to higher education which included a range of individual, school, region and accessibility related control variables. The analysis was based on the 2007 wave of the ESRI's school leavers' survey (SLS). This dataset refers to those who left the secondary school system in the 2004/2005 academic year and the survey contains data on a range of relevant variables, including type of higher education pursued (if any), CAO points, whether or not an individual had undertaken private tuition (grinds) outside of regular school hours while in upper secondary education, as well as a range of school level variables such as gender enrolment mix, the religious sponsorship type of the school attended, and variables related to teacher quality. The survey also provides useful socioeconomic and intergenerational information, including the social class, occupation and education level of school leavers' parents. In addition, data from the 2005 (Q2) wave of the quarterly national household survey (QNHS) was used to construct a regional youth employment rate, given by the proportion of individuals aged between 15 and 24 years that are in employment, excluding those in education. This was used as a proxy for the opportunity cost of higher education participation. Finally, a measure of the distance a respondent must travel to their nearest HEI was constructed using GIS-based network analysis. All of the variables outlined above were used as predictors of the likelihood of participating in higher education.

## Results

Figure 1 presents the distance to (a) nearest HEI and (b) nearest university in Ireland. Overall, Figure 1(a) suggests that while there is a good geographic spread of HEIs across the country and that most areas have relatively good accessibility in terms of travel distance, there are large areas from which an individual would have to travel 50 kilometres or more, as well as areas from which the nearest HEI is over 75 kilometres away. While these areas tend to be more rural with relatively low population densities, the evidence does suggest some geographic inequalities in relation to HEI accessibility. Of course with a finite number of HEIs, some inequality in access is inevitable. The important issue, addressed below, is whether this leads to inequalities in participation.

The map presented in Figure 1(a) does not differentiate by type of HEI, so Figure 1(b) presents distance

to nearest university as another measure of accessibility. In this case the geographic accessibility inequalities are much more pronounced, especially in the south east, south west, and north west. Recently announced changes to the structure and composition of higher education will of course change this picture, though the north west will remain relatively worse off.

**Figure 1: Distance to nearest higher education institution and university**



(a) Distance to nearest HEI       (b) Distance to nearest university
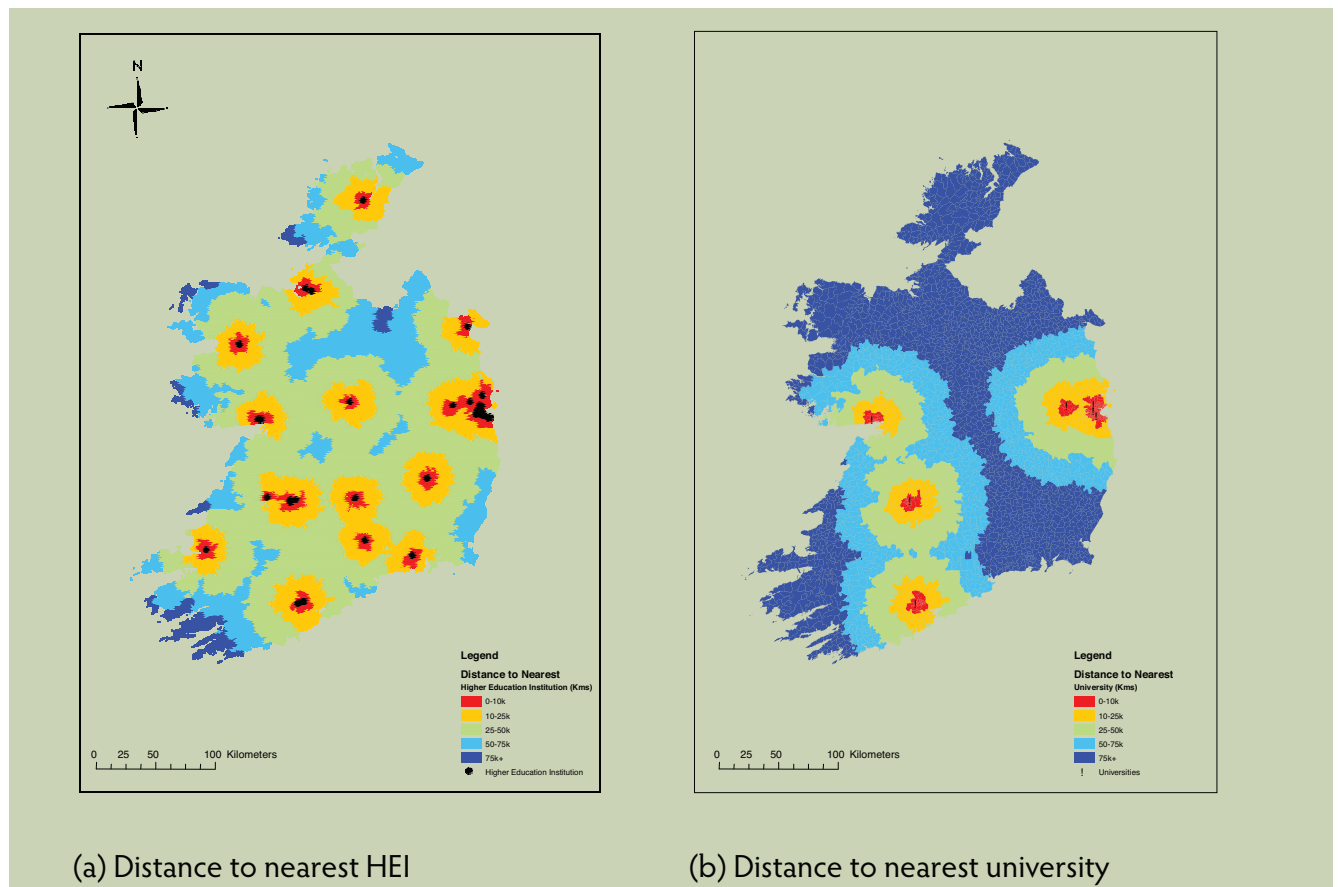
So, while there is some evidence of geographic inequalities in higher education accessibility, it is also important to investigate whether this feeds through to geographic inequalities in participation. To address this, we consider the implications of results from a recent study by the authors (Cullinan *et al*, 2013). In relation to travel distance to the nearest HEI, the paper found that while travel distance was not an important determinant of participation on average across the whole population of school leavers, greater distances were associated with lower participation rates for school leavers from lower social classes. In particular, for every extra 10 kilometres of travel distance, the likelihood of participation decreased by 2.7%. Thus, for a school leaver living 50 kilometres from a HEI, their probability of higher education participation is lowered by 13.5% than if they lived next to the HEI.

The paper also considered how these distance effects resulted in differential higher education participation rates across social classes. For example, Figure 2 shows the estimated difference in the probability of participation in higher education for a school leaver from social class 1 (high) and social class 3 (low). It shows that, in all cases, the difference in participation probabilities is positive, implying that those from social class 1 have a higher probability of participating in higher education than those from social class 3, across all travel distances. For example, if we consider two school leavers living 10 kilometres from the nearest HEI, the probability of progressing to higher education is 5.8% higher for an individual from social class 1 than for an otherwise similar individual from social class 3.

**Figure 2: Estimated difference in higher education participation probability by social class and distance**
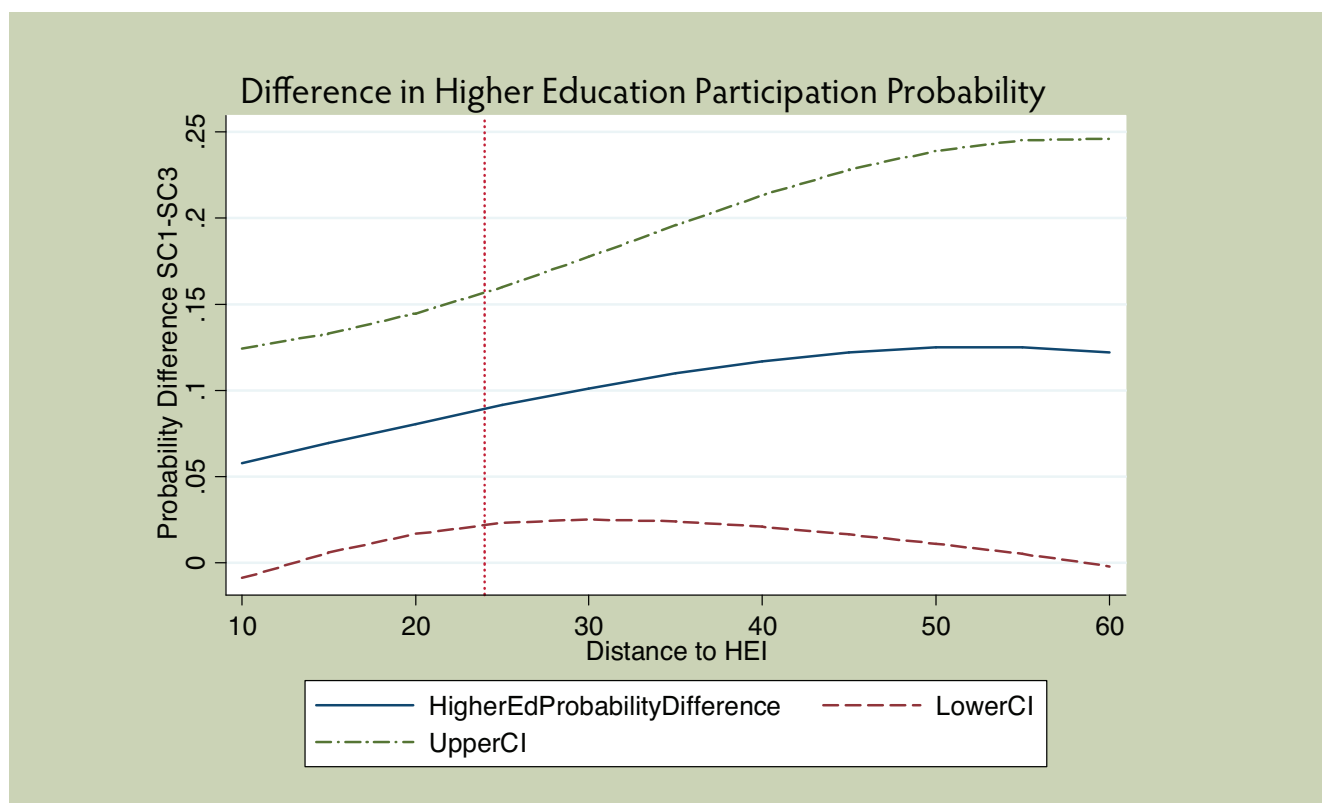


Source: Cullinan *et al* (2013)

Importantly, however, this effect intensifies as travel distance increases. So, for example, the probability differential for the two otherwise similar students would be 12.5% if they both lived 50 kilometres away. This is most likely because the greater travel distances result in a range of higher direct and indirect costs (as discussed earlier) and the impact of these distance-related costs on participation is likely to be more pronounced for those on lower incomes and/or those facing more significant credit constraints, i.e. students from social class 3. Cullinan *et al* (2013) also found that these distance effects are most pronounced for lower-ability students from poorer backgrounds. Overall these results suggest a very significant effect of travel distance on the likelihood of individuals from lower social classes, in particular lower ability students, participating in higher education, even after controlling for other factors likely to impact on the participation decision.

**Conclusions**

A number of previous studies have also examined the impact of social class on higher education participation. In Ireland, Smyth (1999), McCoy *et al* (2010a), O'Connell *et al* (2006) and McCoy and Smyth (2011) have found persistent evidence of social inequality in higher education participation. McCoy *et al* (2010a) and McCoy and Byrne (2011) find that financial constraints contribute strongly to the social inequalities within higher education participation. McCoy and Smyth (2011) and Denny (2010) both contend that the removal of fees for higher education in 1996 has not been sufficient in narrowing the social class differential in higher education participation. They argue that this is likely due to the fact that other direct costs facing individuals have remained high. Other factors such as intergenerational effects and parental income have also been explored as possible determinants of higher education participation; however, the empirical evidence with respect to these has been mixed.

The findings in this paper show that travel distance is also likely to be an important factor in driving socioeconomic inequalities in higher education participation. It shows that there are geographic

inequalities in terms of accessibility to higher education and discusses the reasons why greater travel distances are likely to lead to higher direct and indirect costs for potential students. The results presented also provide strong evidence that these higher costs are borne disproportionately by those from lower social classes who face much lower levels of participation in higher education as a result.

In order to achieve greater equity of access to higher education, the Irish state provides financial aid, mainly in the form of maintenance grants, to individuals in full time education. Eligibility for these grants is based on meeting certain criteria based on parental income levels and geographic distance to the chosen HEI. At the time our sample was making the decision to enter higher education, the grant eligibility limit for the adjacent (partial) grant was 24 kilometres or less while the non-adjacent (full) grant applied to those living more than 24 kilometres from the approved institution. The dotted vertical line in Figure 2 at a distance of 24 kilometres, represents the cut-off distance for the state-funded non-adjacent maintenance grant for our sample. However, over the last three years, this threshold has been increased to 45 kilometres. Thus, the effect of distance on participation for those from lower social classes is likely to have been exacerbated by this change.

The findings of this analysis have important implications for higher education policy in Ireland, especially in relation to equity of access and the design of the maintenance grant system. Ireland, like other countries, has seen persistent social inequality in higher education participation, despite a context of large-scale expansion in higher education places. McCoy *et al* (2010b) found that those from lower social classes who participate in higher education are heavily reliant on the provision of grants from the state. In another study, Mc Coy *et al* (2010a) show that individuals at the margins of grant eligibility thresholds have amongst the lowest higher education participation rates in Ireland. The provision of differential grant payment rates according to travel distance is an acknowledgement of the variation in higher education costs by distance. In the context of the findings outlined above, it can be argued that the stricter spatial criteria may be further disadvantaging those living further from a HEI and the cut-off distances should be reviewed. One possibility would be to consider introducing a number of distance cut-offs in a staggered distance-based payment system.

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# 3

# THE ROLE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN BROADENING ACCESS TO IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION

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## Abstract

Although distance education programmes have been offered by Irish higher education institutions for over 25 years, little is known about those who graduate from these online distance education programmes such as: their socio-economic profile, why they chose distance education and the effect that completing a distance education programme has had on their lives and careers. Drawing on preliminary results from a survey of distance education graduates, this paper seeks to begin to address the gap in research on this cohort of graduates.

This paper argues that online distance education is providing opportunities for higher education attainment in a very flexible manner to students from a highly diverse background who often cannot access higher education any other way. Furthermore, online distance education can play an even greater role in extending access into the future. However, to achieve this potential, the funding model will have to change to that recommended by the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* whereby 'All students, whether full-time or part-time, on campus or off-campus, should be equally supported by the funding model used to allocate resources to and within institutions' (Department of Education and Skills (DES) 2011, p17).

## Background and context

Oscail was established in 1982 as the National Distance Education Centre to provide third level programmes by distance education to adults all over Ireland (MacKeogh, 2003). Distance students are those who complete most, and sometimes all, of their studies online and at a distance from a campus. Oscail had graduated over 5,500 students by 2011. By way of comparison, the DCU access service has graduated 600 students over 21 years (DCU Access Report, 2011). While both services seek to broaden access to Irish higher education; the access service seeks to accommodate those who would be highly unlikely to attend university if not financially supported and Oscail accommodates those who are in a position to pay fees but who are not in a position to attend. For those who can neither attend nor pay fees, funding is available under the Springboard initiative for specific Oscail courses which aim to provide students with identifiable skills that are required in the labour market.

In its policy paper on *Part-time higher education and training in Ireland*, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) states that if Ireland is to increase higher education attainment, increased flexibility and broader routes of access will have to be incorporated into higher education provision (HEA 2012a, p3). This increased flexibility will be required not only to provide 'second chance' education to adults who, due to family, work and other commitments, cannot attend full-time (or part-time) on-campus, but also for the increasing number of the Irish workforce (and those not in work) who require reskilling/upskilling and continued professional development.

## Higher education participation and the role of part-time and online distance provision

There have been a number of studies on the participation in full-time Irish higher education (Clancy 1988, Clancy 2001, O'Connell *et al* 2006, McCoy and Smith 2011). These studies have noted that social inequality continues to persist in accessing higher education. McCoy and Smith emphasise the importance of financial constraints while a study by Flannery and O'Donoghue (2009) found that parental education was a significant factor when deciding to proceed to higher education. A study on Irish part-time undergraduate students (Darmody and Fleming 2009) revealed that just 14% 'had a father with a third level degree' (p76).

A traditional way for adults to access higher education has been through part-time education. However, a recent HEA paper confirms that there are 'much higher levels of participation in full-time courses compared to part-time' (HEA 2012b, p11). The same paper goes on to state that 'in the university sector 12% of all undergraduates participate on a part-time basis, compared to 20% in the institutes of technology' (HEA 2012b, p11) and also notes that a large percentage of those studying part-time undergraduate courses are on Level 6 and 7 courses.

There are certainly more full-time courses available. While there is no comprehensive database of part-time or online courses, an explorative study identified approximately 760 full-time, 75 part-time and 17 online/distance courses available at Level 8 in Irish HEIs. In many ways, the lower participation in part-time courses and their lower provision is understandable given the current funding mechanisms. If students are primarily funded to attend full-time courses then institutions are incentivised to provide such courses.

Online distance education can be seen as a more flexible method of delivering part-time education. While it may not suit all students wishing to undertake part-time higher education courses, it is likely to suit an increasing number of those students and, for many potential students, it is likely to be the only way they can access third level education. The number of students undertaking flexible learning programmes (i.e. distance, e-learning and in-service) in the Irish higher education sector has been published by the HEA for 2010/11 and 2011/12. Overall numbers are relatively small. For example, the number of students undertaking flexible undergraduate courses in HEA funded institutions was 2,954 in 2010/11 and 2,750 in 2011/12. However, it is likely that these figures are an underestimation. As noted by the HEA: 'Distance education and off-campus provision in the universities are currently not included in the HEA recurrent grant allocation model (RGAM)' (HEA 2012a, p5). Therefore, it is possible that universities which are providing flexibly delivered courses are not classifying the students taking such courses as distance, online or off-campus students.

More importantly, there is an increasing recognition that if Ireland is to increase its international competitiveness then there will be a growing need to continually upskill and reskill the adult population. One of the most effective ways to achieve this goal is through flexibly delivered online distance education programmes. The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* noted: 'In the coming decades, the delivery of higher education in Ireland must be characterised by flexibility and innovation' (DES 2011, p17). Given this goal, and the increasing efficacy of online technologies which assist online course delivery, it is opportune to look at the contribution which online distance education has made in the past so as to give an indication of its likely contribution in the future.

## Methodology
A web-based survey was designed using surveymonkey.com. Web based surveys are cost effective, fast and flexible (Cook, Heath and Thompson, 2000). They are also very suitable when endeavouring to contact widely dispersed populations. The questionnaire employed a mix of closed and open questions and consisted of 21 questions in total. A five-point Likert scale was employed for eight questions (104 sub questions), with respondents choosing between two extremes of a continuum. Positive responses (e.g. very relevant/strongly agree) are given a high score and negative responses (e.g. very irrelevant/strongly disagree) are given a low score. A numeric value is allocated to represent strength of opinion. A value of three represents the middle position; anything less than three represents varying degrees of disagreement/irrelevance etc; anything greater than three represents agreement/relevance etc.

The online survey was sent to 226 recent (2012 and 2013) Oscail graduates between June and September 2013. 77 graduates responded to the survey representing a 34% response rate.

**Key findings and discussion**
The socio-economic classifications employed in this research are those used by the Central Statistics Office (CSO).

*Characteristics of the sample*
The majority of respondents (61%) had completed a Level 8 Bachelor degree, while 39% had completed a Level 9 Masters' degree. A majority (63%) of the 226 graduates were male. This differs somewhat from Irish (Darmody and Fleming 2009) and international (Callender *et al* 2006) research on part-time students which found that over half of participants were female.

The numbers of graduates are broken down as follows:

*Table1: Oscail DCU graduates (2012 and 2013) by gender*

|  | Male | Female |
|---|---|---|
| BA | 43 | 65 |
| BSc | 44 | 2 |
| MSc | 56 | 16 |
| Total number | 143 | 83 |

The gender weighting is reflected in the response rate. 52% of respondents were male while 48% were female. 75% of respondents were from the 30–49 age groups with 17% in the 50–59 age categories. The remaining 8% is divided equally between age groups 18–29 and 60+.

70% of respondents were in full-time employment and 10% in part-time employment.

*Location of students while studying*
96% of respondents were Irish with the remaining 4% from other EU/EEA countries. 37% of Irish respondents were located in Dublin while completing their studies. The remaining respondents were widely dispersed across 15 other counties.

It is known from research that distance from a higher level institution has a negative impact on access to full-time participation 'for those from lower social classes' (McCoy 2013). Costs associated with travelling, or having to live away from home while studying, present a significant barrier to access for many students. McCoy *et al* (2010b) estimate that such costs make higher education twice as expensive. In 2013 approximately €350 million was required to fund the system of maintenance grants for Irish higher level full time students (Oireachtas report, 2013). Online education can help overcome the barrier to access which travel and accommodation costs present.

*Social class*
In their study of part-time students, Darmody *et al* (2005, p.76) found that 'the level of attendance at part-time courses is the highest among higher professional, lower professional and non-manual groups'. The current research confirms those findings; 85% of the respondents to the survey classified themselves in the three social classes mentioned by Darmody *et al* (see Table 2).

*Table 2: Social class of respondents*

| Social Class | Respondent |
|---|---|
| Employer/manager | 10% |
| Higher professional | 44% |
| Lower professional | 32% |
| Non-manual | 9% |
| Skilled manual | 1% |
| Semi-skilled manual | 1% |
| Unskilled manual | 0% |
| Own account worker | 3% |
| Farmer | 0% |
| Agricultural worker | 0% |

However, when determining the socioeconomic characteristics of full-time undergraduate students we look at the social class and educational attainment of their parents.

The largest single group of respondents (30%) came from a background in which their father was a skilled manual worker (see Table 3). 53% of respondents categorised their mother as a 'homemaker'. The national plan for equity of access to higher education (HEA 2010 p21) identifies 'persistently low participation in higher education by students from low to middle income backgrounds'. Although the social class categories do not exclusively reflect bands of income, skilled/semi-skilled/unskilled manual workers tend to fall into the low to middle income bracket and homemakers are unpaid workers.

*Table 3: Social class of parents of respondents*

| Social class | Father | Mother |
|---|---|---|
| Employer/manager | 12% | 4% |
| Higher professional | 23% | 6% |
| Lower professional | 7% | 17% |
| Non-manual | 4% | 5% |
| Skilled manual | 30% | 5% |
| Semi-skilled manual | 8% | 4% |
| Unskilled manual | 4% | 4% |
| Own account worker | 3% | 55%[1] |
| Farmer | 9% | 0% |
| Agricultural worker | 0% | 0% |

*Highest education attainment in full-time education*
The largest group (31%) of respondents were from backgrounds in which the full time education of their father had stopped at primary level or included no formal education (see Table 4). The 2011 census tells us that young people in this category are very unlikely to attend full time higher education. 57% of respondents' fathers and 50% of respondents' mothers had ceased education by lower secondary level.

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[1] 53% of respondents indicated that they had interpreted 'own account worker' as 'homemaker'.

28% of undergraduate respondents had finished their full-time education at secondary school while another 38% of undergraduate respondents had completed a third level non-degree qualification prior to completing their Level 8 degree with Oscail. Participation at third level from lower income groups is likely to be characterised by involvement in lower status courses (Fleming and Finnegan 2011), for example at Level 6 or 7, where the required points for entry are lower. What we are possibly seeing in the Oscail research is the result of this working its way through the system. Distance education appears to be providing an opportunity for those from lower socio-economic groups, who have completed Level 6 or 7 programmes of study on a full-time basis to upgrade to a Level 8 degree while working or attending to other commitments. On top of this, for a substantial proportion of Level 8 graduates (28%), this was their first entry into third-level education.

The above analysis suggests that online distance education is multi-functional, providing some with their first opportunity to complete higher education and others with an opportunity to upskill or build on an existing lower qualification. For others who already hold a third level degree (34% of undergraduate respondents), online distance education is likely to be providing an opportunity to reskill.

*Table 4: Highest education attainment in full-time education (undergraduates and postgraduates combined)*

| Highest full-time education | Respondent | Father | Mother |
|---|---|---|---|
| Primary (including no formal education) | 0% | 31% | 20% |
| Lower secondary (e.g. inter/junior cert) | 0% | 26% | 30% |
| Upper secondary (e.g. leaving cert) | 21% | 20% | 30% |
| Third level (non degree) | 28% | 9% | 10% |
| Third level degree or higher | 51% | 14% | 10% |

*Table 5: Highest education attainment in full-time education (undergraduates)*

| Highest full-time education | Respondent (undergrad) | Father | Mother |
|---|---|---|---|
| Primary (including no formal education) | 0% | 32% | 21% |
| Lower secondary (e.g. inter/junior cert) | 0% | 27% | 31% |
| Upper secondary (e.g. leaving cert) | 28% | 12% | 25% |
| Third level (non degree) | 38% | 12% | 13% |
| Third level degree or higher | 34% | 17% | 10% |

*Table 6: Highest education attainment in full-time education (postgraduates)*

| Highest full-time education | Respondent (Postgrad) | Father | Mother |
|---|---|---|---|
| Primary (including no formal education) | 0% | 28% | 10% |
| Lower secondary (e.g. inter/junior cert) | 0% | 24% | 28% |
| Upper secondary (e.g. Leaving cert) | 7% | 31% | 42% |
| Third level (non degree) | 11% | 7% | 10% |
| Third level degree or higher | 82% | 10% | 10% |

*Overcoming barriers to access*

Needing to work or be available for work presents a significant barrier to accessing full-time education and was the primary reason given by participants for choosing to study by online distance education (see Figure 1). 69% of respondents rated not being able to afford to give up their job as 'very relevant' to studying online while 48% rated wanting to work full time as 'very relevant' to them. The second most relevant reason for choosing online distance higher education was the amount of control it gave participants over their own time management. Online distance education provides more flexibility than part-time education which is important to those who work long hours or have family commitments which militate against them committing to attend courses at specific times each week.

Most significantly, 86% of respondents either strongly agreed (51%) or agreed (35%) that, given their circumstances, they could not have completed a degree any other way. One respondent commented: 'With a full time job and a family I needed flexibility when completing my college work.'

**Figure 1 Percentage of respondents who reported that the given reason was important to them in their decision to study by online distance education**
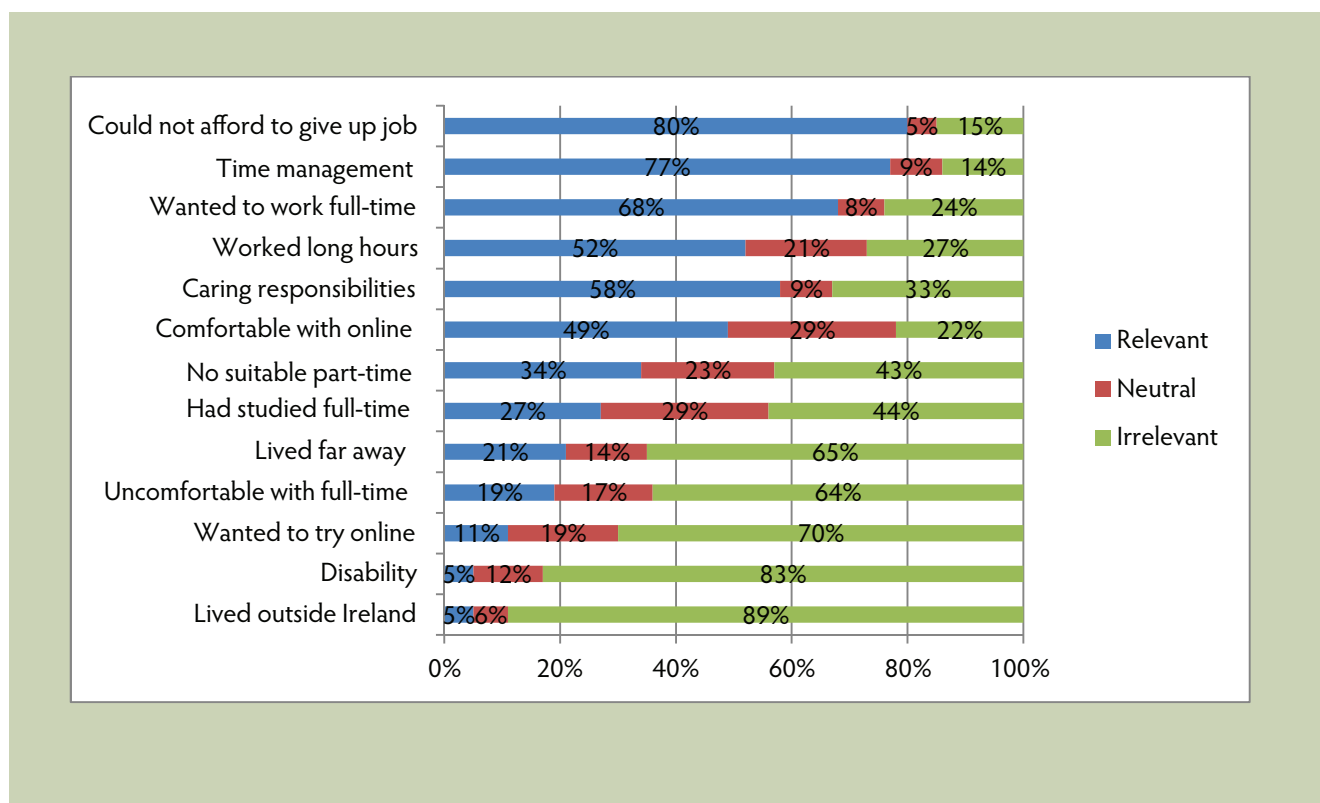


**Conclusion**

One of the recommendations of the recent HEA report on *Part-time and flexible higher education in Ireland* was that 'Data collection and evaluation systems are further developed to strengthen the evidence-base on [the] background and routes of entry of part-time students' (HEA 2012b, p5). This paper is a small contribution to this data collection and evaluation recommendation.

The paper indicates that online distance education has an important role to play in broadening and deepening access to higher education in Ireland.

However, even compared to the funding of part-time provision, the funding of distance education in Irish universities is practically non-existent. As noted above, 'Distance education and off-campus provision in the universities are currently not included in the HEA recurrent grant allocation model (RGAM).' (HEA 2012a, p5) The HEA has stated: 'A proposal to include distance education and off-campus provision as part of the HEA funding model is being considered in 2012.' (HEA 2012b, p9) If online distance is to fulfil its potential to act as a major facilitator of the upskilling and reskilling of the Irish adult population then the current exclusion of distance and off-campus provision from the HEA recurrent grant allocation model needs to be ended. In the recent paper on *Part-time and flexible higher education in Ireland*, the HEA welcomed the following quote from a respondent to its earlier consultation paper: 'It is time to start thinking of doing away finally with the idea of full-time and part-time … then we will have only 'students' and the question will be 'how many credits are you taking?'' (HEA 2012b, p9)

On the other hand, if the system of financial support for higher education continues to be directed at full-time course provision, then it is likely to be the delivery format that will grow, and at the expense of more flexible options.

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# 4

# A CASE STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF THE CLASSROOM ON THE INTENTION TO PERSIST AMONG NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

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## Abstract

A mixed-methods case study supports the thesis that what happens in the classroom can influence students' intentions to persist in higher education. Specifically, classroom based social integration (Tinto, 1993) can influence the intentions of non-traditional first year students to persist in higher education. Two questionnaires (n=126 and n=84) as well as five focus groups and 28 interviews provided quantitative and qualitative evidence for the research findings. Classroom based social integration correlated with educational commitment ($r_S$=.35; $r_S$=.53). Qualitative data analysis provided additional supporting evidence for this quantitative data. This study offers support for the role of the classroom in influencing non-traditional students' persistence. This has significant positive implications as the lowest rates of progression in higher education are found among lower socio-economic groups (Mooney *et al*, 2010; McCoy *et al*, 2010).

## Introduction

The present research is a case study of the 'intention to persist' of the first year students in the Wexford Campus of the Institute of Technology Carlow. The Wexford Campus is an outreach higher education institution with a significant non-traditional student representation. The focus on non-traditional students is increasingly relevant as higher education moves from educating a limited number in society to a mass enterprise, with increased numbers of mature and low socio-economic status students (Mooney *et al*, 2010; Fleming *et al*, 2010; McCoy *et al*, 2010; HEA, 2008). While Mooney *et al*, (2010) have recently provided data in this area it is still at the beginning stages. The HEA study found that the lowest rates of progression are found among lower socio-economic groups, the very groups who have the lowest levels of entry to higher education (Mooney *et al*, 2010). McCoy *et al* (2010) also found that younger students from lower non-manual socio-economic groups had lower levels of retention in higher education. If there is poor retention of under-represented student groups this will have a negative impact on the fairness and equality of higher education and society (RANLHE EU lifelong learning project, 2009).

It is intended that the mixed methods approach to the present research will examine the influence of the 'classroom' by focusing on classroom based social integration. As RANLHE (2010) argue, retention and withdrawal can only be understood in the cultural and institutional context in which it occurs. Thus the classroom context becomes ever more important as a point of contact with students.

## Literature

The theoretical framework of the study proposed is that of adapting the social integration approach of Tinto (1993, 1975) with a classroom based modification suggested (Tinto, 1997). Research indicates that non-traditional students including mature students are more likely to feel isolated and have limited opportunities to participate in the wider social aspects of student life (Harvey *et al*, 2006; Smith, 2008). Additionally, first-generation students were found to have lower levels of involvement (Harvey *et al*, 2006). Jones (2008), also in a UK context, similarly reports that students from deprived areas may find social integration particularly challenging, feeling culturally isolated. Dickerson and Stiefer (2006) in a US review explain that when non-traditional students enter the 'new culture of college' they can experience feelings of isolation, feel like strangers and experience feelings of incompetence and inadequacy.

Furthermore, a mixed methods study by Wyatt (2011) highlighted that non-traditional students did not consider engagement an integral part of the college experience, college was just another part of their busy lives. Bean and Metzner (1985) have explained that non-traditional students experience an environmental press that differs from traditional students. This press includes, (a) less interaction with students and faculty and less involvement with extracurricular activities, (b) class related activities very similar to traditional students and (c) much greater interaction with the external or non-college environment.

Social integration is a core concept of Tinto's (1993, 1975) model of persistence and support for the influence of this concept on student persistence is strong both theoretically and empirically (Astin and Oseguera, 2005). Student-to-student and student-to-teaching staff contact, two aspects of social integration that are the focus of the present study, have received empirical support (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). However, the applicability of the concept of social integration to non-traditional and commuter students has been questioned (Bean and Metzner, 1985). Furthermore, the critiques of Tinto's (1975, 1993) model have been significant and wide ranging (Rendon, 2000; Tierney, 1992; Attinasi, 1989). For example, the empirical relevance of the Tinto model for non-traditional students and its applicability in different educational contexts was raised by Longden (2004).

Allowing for the mixed nature of the support, a modification to Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory is a course of action that demands investigation (Braxton, 2000). Classroom based initiatives leading to social integration and to educational commitment and thus to persistence are under-researched (Tinto, 1997, 2000). Tinto (1997: 599) explains that '… little has been done to explore how the experience of the classroom matters, how it comes, over time, to shape students persistence,' pointing out that research has not ignored the classroom as a field of study but it has not been connected to the field of student persistence.

One of the purposes of this study is to examine the key role of student-to-student and student-to-faculty interactions in classroom environments as components of social integration and thus persistence factors. For many students who commute, who have obligations outside college, the classroom may be the only place where integration or involvement can take place (Tinto, 1997). The classroom is the one common experience students have (Tinto, 2000). Thus the influence of social integration in the classroom was investigated.

**Methodology**
The present researcher took a pragmatic position that allowed for a mixed methods case study to answer the research question. The students of Wexford campus were chosen as a convenience sample to answer the research questions. Furthermore, a purposive sample of the first year students was decided as most appropriate to answer the research questions using the literature as a guide. First year students are the cohort most likely to discontinue their higher education studies (Mooney *et al*, 2010; Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008). Five focus groups and 28 interviews were conducted. Further, two questionnaires were distributed in the college; to students at induction (n=126) and at the end of the academic year (n=84).

There were 126 respondents to the induction sample questionnaire and 84 respondents to the end-of-year sample questionnaire. The demographics of both samples were similar. The samples had approximately 70% females, 40% mature students, 50% having attended further education, with 201–300 the most common range of leaving certificate points and 36% of students not entering college via CAO points. One in three of the students was in regular employment, three out of four were concerned about educational finances with 70% of students having a dependence on student grants. Students attended the campus because of the available courses but also for cost and convenience reasons. Over 60% of students resided with their families during the academic year. Approximately 50% of students'

parents did not attend higher than the junior/inter certificate level of secondary education. Related to this, less than 20% of students' parents attended higher education. Furthermore, students had a bias towards lower socio-economic groups and social class status not traditionally well represented in higher education. This demographic data provides a profile of a less than typical traditional higher education student body, which research in an Irish context indicates may have lower rates of progression (Mooney *et al*, 2010; Eivers *et al*, 2002; Morgan *et al*, 2001; Healy *et al*, 1999).

## Findings and discussion

Social integration with classmates ($r_S$=.35) and social integration with teaching staff ($r_S$=.53) correlated with educational commitment, a measure of students' intentions to persist. Thus the greater a student's social integration with classmates and teaching staff, the greater the intentions to persist. Qualitative data analysis provides additional evidence that social integration with classmates and teaching staff had a motivating impact on students persisting in college. For example, one student commented:

> From very early in the year the staff seemed to all know my name and little things like that are a big help when you're feeling a bit overwhelmed. Yes, I think the relationships with staff in particular would make a big difference to me in terms of motivation to complete my course.

Another student, Joan, explains how her peers are a motivation:

> … it's the people that [are] making you stay here …[the] class and your own little group that you hang around with for lunch and everything … The ones that you can go talk to,… and the people in your class group. They are the ones motivating me …

Analysis of qualitative data further revealed that classroom based social integration was created through active teaching methods that further reinforced the involvement of students. Thus, the core research question can be answered in the affirmative – what happens in the classroom influences the intentions of first year students to persist in higher education. Specifically, classroom based social integration influences the persistence intentions of non-traditional students. This finding has positive implications for non-traditional college settings. For non-traditional students the classroom context is crucial. The one experience students share is the classroom, and for some students it may be their only educational experience (Tinto, 2000). This study offers support for the role of the classroom and the individual teacher in influencing students' intentions to persist.

The implications of the study concern a higher education institution commitment to education rather than retention, developing social and educational communities, the provision of social supports, teaching staff development and the use of multiple teaching methodologies. These institutional recommendations are linked to the focus of this particular study on the classroom, thus are not comprehensive or holistic solutions to the student persistence. For policy makers the present study is of relevance with increased access to higher education contributing to a diversification of the student population (HEA, 2011).

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# 5 FISH IN WATER: IS MATURE STUDENT ACCESS TO IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCED EQUALLY AND FAIRLY?

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## Abstract

This paper interrogates the nature of mature student access to higher education and how the principle of inclusion operates for 'under-represented' students. It questions whether targeting mature students as a homogenous group attracts under-represented learners to higher education or if it merely facilitates advantaged learners to reproduce their advantage through the provision of mature access routes.

### Introduction

Education is predictive of life chances, and the costs of non-participation are high. The expansion of Irish higher education has been impressive with a growth in numbers that has expanded over six fold in the last four decades (OECD, 2006). However, this expansion has taken place almost exclusively with 18 to 21 year olds (OECD, 2004). Furthermore the beneficiaries of the expansion of higher education 'have been drawn disproportionately from managerial and professional classes' with the consequent risk that participation will become further entrenched among the middle and upper classes (OECD, 2006). Access to higher education, and the specific notion of widening participation, is predicated on the awareness that particular groups are underrepresented in higher education. As the higher education system expands, the question of who benefits from participation, and the consequent privileges it offers, becomes critical. As Watson suggests, 'the one absolutely iron law about widening participation is that if you want the system to be fairer it has to be allowed to expand.' (Watson, 2005)

This paper is based on a doctoral study on the policy and practice of access courses for mature students in higher education. The access courses in the study are foundation courses. Successful completion of these access courses guarantees access to mature students to specific undergraduate programmes in one university. There is a dearth of research on access courses in Ireland and on the student experience of mature access courses in Ireland. The policy of targeting all mature students as a single homogenous category has not been interrogated to date. This research attempts to redress this imbalance by reviewing a cohort of access students through a social reproduction lens.

### Social reproduction

Michael Apple offers the analogy of a swimming pool to illustrate the potency and potential of social reproduction to advantage one group over another

> In all too many cases, the situation that has been created is the equivalent of an Olympic-length swimming pool in which a large number of children already drown. The response is to lengthen the pool from 100 meters to 200 meters and give everyone an 'equal opportunity' to stand at the far end of the pool, jump in, and then swim the doubled length. However, some children come from families who are affluent enough to have given their children swimming lessons or have sent them to expensive summer camps, whereas others could not even swim the earlier length because of not having such economic advantages. Yes, we guaranteed equality of opportunity, but basically all we really did was put in place another stratifying device that ratified prior advantages in cultural and economic capital. (Apple, 2001)

Apple's anecdote is apposite, and highlights the relative sophistication of the dynamics of social reproduction. The metaphor of the swimming pool can be applied to the main focus of this research, and can be seen as the general access policy, which invites all mature students to access the higher education pool. What will be explored in this paper is whether the longer swimming pool benefits those already resourced (in essence those 'fish in water), and further disadvantages those students who never had the resources to learn to swim.

Secondary to this, deriving from the theories of Bourdieu, this paper disaggregates the mature students in an access cohort to establish if maturity, and the possible benefits that accrue with age, offer additional strategies or advantage to older students.

**Bourdieu and education**

The French scholar Bourdieu explored the dynamics of social class, and how members of higher social groups adopted various methods to protect and reproduce their social positions. Bourdieu also developed significant new terminology and methodological frameworks in the course of his research. The central question explored in *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* is the manner in which dominant structures, such as class and power, are produced and reproduced. The term 'reproduction' refers to the production, reproduction and persistence of the dominant group in replicating their advantage and power.

**Profile of mature students on part-time access courses**

This paper reports on a larger research project which developed a profile of the students who registered to access courses for mature students in an Irish university. The profile illustrates several characteristics and challenges involved in attracting and supporting mature students to progress to higher education. This study illustrated the number of students who do not continue or complete their access programme. Of the 121 students in the original cohort, just under three quarters (72%) completed the part-time programme. Their reasons for withdrawing are as varied as their individual stories. Of the 14% who withdrew, mental health and family responsibilities were among the reasons cited. The numbers withdrawing highlights the challenges involved in pursuing part-time study for adults, particularly as so many of them are managing so many other challenges in their lives.

The gender distribution of the students varied by course, with equal male-female participation in the arts and commerce courses, but over twice the number of males in the science course. This is significant, as although females outnumber males in higher education, their representation in the science and engineering areas is low.

The age profile of the access students varied according to the course choice. The students' motivation to study tended to reflect the age of the student, with the younger students more likely to be extrinsically motivated and registering on the more vocational science and commerce courses. The arts course attracted more students who were intrinsically motivated, citing the wider benefits of learning, rather than a specific motivation for learning to earn.

The familial and marital status of the access cohort offers some interesting insight, as over half the students (58%) are single and even greater proportions (63%) are not parents. These patterns suggest that part-time access is not family-friendly and is not attracting parents or those with familial responsibilities. This is hardly surprising, as the courses are all part-time and students cannot claim any financial support or assistance while on the programme. This highlights the inequity of current policy on part-time education, which does not fund students who need to attend higher education on a part-time basis.

The issue of funding and finance is critical in the discourse on access for mature students in higher education. The access courses in this study do not attract state funding, and the participants must pay

tuition fees. The case study university remits a portion of the tuition fee for those students on low income. Half of the participants in this research (n=61) qualified for this fee remission. However, the requirement for fee remission, and the funding of the access courses, highlight how marginalised and vulnerable the courses are. Typically the applicant must present as 'supplicant' to qualify for fee remission, and is therefore framed in a deficit manner in order to participate in the access programme.

The socio-economic background of the access student group is predominantly in the non-manual (d) group, with a significant proportion of students (n=55%) coming from this group. This finding is an encouraging one, as the non-manual group is a specific target group for HEA policy in widening participation in higher education for underrepresented groups (Higher Education Authority, 2008). It is also valuable as the students reported on their own status, and not of their father, which is the methodology in the Equal Access Survey. However they were also asked about the family of origin and this offers a slightly different profile. The socio-economic profile of the fathers of the students in the access cohort suggest a relatively well resourced group of students, with over one third of the students (38%) coming from the three higher social groups.

Critically in the context of access and the role of adult education in redressing educational gaps for second chance learners, there is little evidence in this study that those using access have a 'second-chance' profile. This reflects Grummell's analysis of Irish adult education policies as based on the 'second-chance myth' (Grummell, 2007). Almost a quarter of the students on the part-time access courses (23.1%) had prior third level experience. If access mechanisms are designed to attract under-represented learners, why do they attract students from non-target higher socio-economic groups, with prior third level experience?

The issue of motivation, and its significance in participation in adult education and training was significant in this study. As noted elsewhere in exploring age and course choice, this research found a slight difference between the younger and older mature students in how they define their motivation. The younger mature students tend to describe extrinsic motivational factors more readily than intrinsic factors. Yet, intrinsic motivation would appear to be a greater predictor of success in engaging with education. The older students in this study indicated intrinsic motives for applying for the access course. Their motives support the view that maturity, and the possible benefits that accrue with age, offer additional strategies or advantage to the older students.

However, the profile of the access cohort in general suggests that access policy, as it applies to targeting mature students as a homogenous group, advantages those more resourced learners. This profile has highlighted a significant number of resourced students who have the time and money to participate in part-time access. Many of the students have engaged with formal education prior to the access programme, and their profile does not coincide with the assumptions made of access as 'second-chance' as so many of the access students have already engaged with post-compulsory education, and have been successful at it. The policy of targeting mature students as an under-represented group may throw the net too wide, and fail to target those learners who are most in need of additional support to access higher education.

### Access students and habitus

Bourdieu suggests '... when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world about itself for granted.' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p127) The analysis in this section suggests particular patterns and trends that are mediated by class and age. For students in the higher social groups, the choice of higher education is always a possibility. They have various reasons for not choosing the path at an earlier age, but display few anxieties about their suitability or entitlement to participate.

> It just had always been at the back of my mind since, I don't know, since I was about 12. Because both my parents had been to college. They both came here to ——. [Student from higher SES]

The students from the lower social groups describe backgrounds where education was not an option.

*And the attitude at home is 'why are you doing that …. You're earning good money … are you crazy? And sometimes when you have that attitude coming from your background you're going yeah, maybe [I am]. [Student from lower SES]*

Some understood that education was important, but wasn't normal or achievable. Many of them display anxieties about their participation in access education, and remain unclear about their options or choices. They describe a lack of support and consequent lack of conviction about their right to access education.

*Sometimes I feel I don't belong here, I feel – I can't put it in words. I feel like an alien. I feel like … I shouldn't be here. I feel very unsure. [Student from lower SES]*

The same student describes her experience of her first exam and how none of her friends or family wished her well or asked her how she had got on when it was over.

*They just wouldn't say anything. Like with my exam coming up there was no feedback, no 'good luck', not even amongst the people I know. There was no-one.*

The older students from the lower social groups tell stories of how their life experience has altered their life course, suggesting that their maturity can compensate for some of the deficits they described from their early lives. Their life stories suggest that their maturity equips them to manage their access route with greater skills and confidence than their younger peers.

*Yeah, I feel I have as much a right to be here as anybody. And I wouldn't be conscious at all around campus. The first day I came for my student card I felt very conscious about my age. Not that anyone would have batted an eyelid. But it's just yourself really, isn't it? [Older student]*

The stories of the older students support the value of targeting mature students as part of a policy in widening participation. However, older students from the lower social groups remain in the minority. Students from the higher social groups display a sense of entitlement that supports them on their access route. They reproduce their early advantage, using a route that was never designed for their group, but which facilitates them in reproducing the same advantage that they have enjoyed in the past. They are 'fish in water'.


## Conclusion

The dynamics of social reproduction are 'so integrated into our everyday consciousness; that it is extremely hard, not to say almost impossible, to raise oneself to the *point of view of reproduction*.' (Althusser, 1971) This reproduction theory, while subject to challenge in some of its most extreme interpretations, has shaped the discourse on class mobility in education for the last number of decades. The work of theorists such as Bourdieu offer a framework to critique education. The stories of the access students can be viewed through a social reproduction lens which helps refocus the debate on access.

The dynamics of social reproduction explain the relative absence of some adults from the higher education classrooms. An awareness of these patterns should inform the policies and practices of access to education in Ireland.

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# 6

# CHALLENGING QUESTIONS ON A REDEFINITION OF 'SUCCESSFUL PARTICIPATION' FOR NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## Abstract

Successful participation in higher education is a contested term and could be measured in several ways. From one perspective it could be viewed and measured through completion rates. Through this lens, failure to complete a programme or course of study could represent an unsuccessful outcome. Other perspectives pay less heed to programme completion and more to employment opportunities upon graduation. Yet the measurement of success, from these quantitative perspectives alone, does not consider other, qualitative, learning outcomes and experiences that can be personally, vocationally and professionally beneficial.

This is especially true for non-traditional students who face many additional challenges and opportunities. Among these is immersion in the social and cultural milieu of the institution, involving novel experiences to be faced. A limited amount of research has been carried out to date, on the post-entry experiences of these student cohorts at higher education in Ireland, and already there are questions arising about the need for greater adaptation by both the student and the institution. This paper critically considers the concept of 'successful participation' especially from the perspective of non-traditional students.

## Introduction

Efforts to widen participation in higher education have had mixed results over recent decades, both in Ireland and in the UK. While increased numbers of non-traditional students have enrolled in higher education (HEA, 2013a) there have been some noteworthy shortcomings. These include an insufficiently clear conceptualisation of widening participation (Jones and Thomas, 2005), signs of stratification as evident in the UK system (Gallacher, 2006, Jones and Thomas, 2005), the absence of some socioeconomic groups in Ireland (McCoy, 2010), and persistent social inequalities in both Ireland and the UK (O'Connell *et al*, 2006, McCoy and Smyth, 2011). Efforts to broaden participation in Ireland are set to continue with particular focus on making the transition from second to third level easier for all students (HEA–NCCA, 2013).

The Irish government aims to develop a coherent and sustainable system of higher education to meet the economic and social needs of the country, within its broader ambition to create an export-driven knowledge economy (HEA, 2013b). Ireland has 39 higher education institutions in receipt of public funding of over €1.5 billion annually which serve over 200,000 students (HEA, 2013b). Related government policy often reflects the theme of 'investment in human capital' (Olaniyan and Okemakinde 2008). However, under such a neo-liberal agenda 'economic' and 'social' objectives can become merged (Jones and Thomas, 2005), with the result that principles like 'successful participation' in higher education are measured solely in quantitative outputs such as completion rates and employment statistics.

Research suggests that this reductionist perspective, which promotes a product driven culture in education, can particularly marginalise people from lower socioeconomic groups resulting in many students believing that higher education is not for them (Marks, 2010). This is also often associated with lower levels of self-efficacy which has shown to result in some students distancing themselves from

others in order to 'self-protect' (Keane, 2011). In an attempt to help address this, the current paper aims to promote a narrative that supports a broader conception of 'successful participation' for all students.

## Towards a conceptualisation of 'successful participation'

Central to any policy which aims to promote greater access and to widen participation (HEA, 2013b) in third level education is the concept of 'successful participation' for all students. The meaning of 'successful participation' should therefore be a matter of debate, and such considerations should be evident in all policy reforms and changes. However, despite the absence of such a debate, there appears to be an axiomatic understanding of what is meant by 'participation' and more importantly 'successful participation' in all policy documents. This is notwithstanding the fact that the term 'participation', alone, is contested and lacks a consistent definition within the research literature pertaining to participation in higher education. It has been suggested that participation equates to 'admission rates' (Clancy, 1997). In virtual learning environments, the use of technology can measure participation in terms of recording connections, but this requires careful handling to ensure that critical engagement is taking place (Saadé *et al*, 2012). Marks *et al* (2010, p.348) indicate that participation 'signals a desire, however vague, to enter higher education'. Others do not promote any definition for 'participation' and suggest that it is locally defined in context (Ferrier, 2013). The term 'engagement' has also been used to deepen the meaning of participation and is exhibited by students' 'eagerness to learn and taking part in discussions' (Weimer, 2011). What is clear is that the term participation can be interpreted very differently depending on context and the cohort it is intended to impact.

There is 'conceptual and empirical detail and messiness' surrounding participation in Irish higher education (Loxely, 2013). There is also evidence of somewhat competing discourses in Irish higher education policy and reports (Loxely, 2013). The Hunt report (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) and its subsequent follow up System Configuration report (HEA, 2013b), for example, set out goals for higher education, which generally serve utilitarian objectives aligned with the promotion of the knowledge economy. While some aspiration is expressed that higher education institutions should improve with respect to access and participation, the 'logic of the report is that the social follows the economic' (Loxely, 2013). The student experience is set so that it is aligned with the world of work which is too often reinforced by the dominant discourse (Loxely, 2013). From this perspective, the social and personal benefits of participation in higher education, however defined, can be all too easily relegated in place of quantitative outcomes such as completion and employment rates. This can, in turn, have clear implications for how 'successful participation' is viewed and expressed in higher educational policy and research. For example, a pragmatic understanding of successful participation is evident in much of the research and policy on increased 'access and participation' for under-represented groups which again measures the success of initiatives through the use of enrolment statistics and completion rates (McCoy, 2010). However, numbers entering and completing third level programmes in Ireland do not fully express the very broad spectrum of individual accomplishments, group victories and successful participation stories that are being written annually in higher education.

## Success and attrition: rethinking the negative connotations

In policy reports on Irish higher education the term 'successful' is normally applied to completion, engagement, progression and transition (HEA, 2010b), but very rarely to 'participation'. In recent reports, one will not find 'successful' and 'participation' combined (HEA, 2010b, HEA–NCCA, 2013), although it may be implied that there is an expectation that (through the promotion of wider access for all students) 'successful participation' would be an anticipated outcome (HEA, 2010a). However, 'successful participation' in third level education cannot be promoted without first exploring the concept of success.

Student attrition in higher education, for example, is generally understood as a failure on behalf of both the student and the institution and has been the subject of much research:

A positive first-year student experience is crucial to achieving the goals of higher education; failure to address the challenges encountered by students in their first year contributes to high drop-out and failure rates, with personal and system-wide implications (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p56).

Grasping the true meaning of attrition, however, is not always easy and errors can be harmful to proper policy development. It is important to distinguish between academic dismissal and voluntary withdrawal. In the case of voluntary withdrawal, research suggests that it is often the result of an institution that 'may be unwilling or unable to meet the needs of its most creative and challenging students' (Tinto, 1975). Tinto, later, recognised the shortcomings of his own model and cautions against thinking everything is understood (Tinto, 1982). Eventually, he argued that retention is a function of the match between the student's academic capabilities, interests and motivation, and the institution's academic and social characteristics (Tinto, 1993). From this perspective, voluntary withdrawal, reflected as a negative in the institutions' retention statistics, may represent a successful outcome for that student who may have found (through 'successful participation') that the programme they enrolled in was not aligned with their needs or expectations. In alternative cases, the student may have gained all that they required from the programme before voluntarily withdrawing, again reflecting a successful participation for them. This is reflected in a study of students who left third level education before graduating, conducted by Rummel *et al* (1999), which found that students leave for a variety of reasons and that for many students leaving was a result of a positive occurrence in their lives. Rummel *et al* (1999) go on to suggest that this can also often represent a positive outcome and success for the host institution:

From a student's perspective, exiting a university where these things are not available is a positive occurrence. Similarly a university cannot be all things to all students.

Rummel *et al* (1999) conclude that initiatives need to focus on social adjustment and not just academic adjustment. This still leaves open the manner in which you might characterise these student experiences as 'successful participation'. Google's Kuzwell (2013) suggests that the only person that can declare you a failure is yourself (Kuzwell, 2013). Perhaps, in an era of increased globalisation and performance pressures, the subjective aspects of success and participation should be better reflected in the educational discourse and policy surrounding higher education in Ireland. This is particularly true for non-traditional students.

Research suggests that success in retaining students from lower socioeconomic groups, and through non-traditional routes, requires a strong policy commitment to access and retention, backed up by practical action (Yorke and Thomas, 2003). A strong sense of 'belonging' is at the heart of 'success' and this is most effectively nurtured in mainstream activities in the academic sphere (Thomas, 2012). A vision of students as forming a 'community of scholars' as distinct from a consumer or customer view of students, is one of the dichotomies present in contemporary conceptualisations of higher education (Prendergast, 2012).

**Understanding the role of higher education institutions**
There are a variety of reasons why students, and particularly non-traditional students, enrol in higher education including a desire for learning, skilling, reskilling, to make good use of time, and wanting to be a better role model (Marks, 2010, Kearns, 2013). Perhaps this reflects a variety of visions of what a university or a higher education experience is about, as well as a variety of intentions amongst those entering. Intentions are generally classified as being 'instrumental' and 'non-instrumental' (Kearns, 2013). Kearns (2012) finds that:

While there is no disputing that many mature entrants to HE will harbour career and employment goals as a significant motivator for entry to HE, this is by no means a universal driver nor, in many cases, is it the only reason for undertaking further study. Intention to HE study can encompass

goals relating to self-improvement and self-development, personal transformation or a cathartic exercise dealing with perceived past failings in the education sphere.

A vision, therefore, of what makes for a 'successful' higher education institution in the 21st century can influence evaluations of successful student participation. Despite the dichotomies in understanding the role and function of universities, it is generally agreed that they are crucial in safeguarding democracy and reforming society (Prendergast, 2012). In modern western society, universities are dedicated to making and transmitting new knowledge and are the arbiters of what counts as knowledge (Gregory, 2012). In this respect, knowledge itself has become commodified (Kearns, 2012). However, this is not the only role that institutions of higher education have to play and many students do not enrol on programmes solely to gain knowledge. For many the experience is more important than the knowledge gained. Consequently, a broader understanding of 'successful participation' may require a much larger debate on the role of higher education in contemporary society. What is clear is that the dominant characterisation and measurement of 'success' and 'participation' currently employed in educational policy does not capture all student experiences that represent successful participation stories.

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# 7

# STUDENT CENTRAL: AN INNOVATIVE PROGRAMME TO SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTIES AT NUI MAYNOOTH

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## Abstract

The issues for students with mental health conditions at third level are complex and increasing. This presents challenges to third level institutions in how best to support these students. Retention is a particular concern for these students, and as such, there is a need for effective and structured supports. NUI Maynooth (NUIM) and National Learning Network (NLN) collaborated to develop Student Central to meet the academic support needs of students with mental health difficulties.

This paper will evaluate the role of the Student Central programme in supporting students to participate successfully in third level education. This will be discussed in the context of increasing levels of students with mental health difficulties and the complex needs that can present. The impact of this programme will be evaluated and discussed as it relates to broadening access and progression for individuals with mental health difficulties.

## Background

For many third-level students, starting college represents a time of transition and change. It is known that rates of mental illnesses peak in young adulthood, approximately 75% of all psychological disorders emerge before the age of 25 (Kessler *et al*, 2005). A large scale study into youth mental health in Ireland, *My World Survey* (Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2012) demonstrates the severity of mental health issues facing students: 43% of students have, at one point, thought that their life was not worth living, 21% have engaged in deliberate self harm and 7% have attempted suicide.

Research from the association of higher education access and disability (AHEAD, 2008-2012) indicates that there has been a 70% increase in the number of students with a mental health condition accessing third level education from 2008/09 to 2011/12. While this is a very positive development, research conducted on nine universities in the UK suggests that students with mental health conditions have the lowest retention rate of all categories of disability (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011). Irish research found that students with mental health conditions are more successful in higher education once supported appropriately (Pathways to Education, 2010).

The National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM) disability office has recorded an increase in the past four academic years; the numbers of students who registered with a mental health condition increased from 49 to 64. Students with a mental health condition require documentation from a psychiatrist in order to register for supports. These figures only represent students with a diagnosis who choose to disclose their disability. Actual figures of students with mental health difficulties at NUIM may be even higher as up to 70% of people with mental illness choose to hide their condition (Mac Gabhann and Stevenson, 2010). This is particularly important in the context of a student mental health and wellbeing policy, emphasising the need for mental health promotion across the campus as a whole.

The traditional learning support model often does not meet the needs of students with mental health conditions. Their learning support needs are fluctuating, individual and varied. In response to the growing numbers and complex needs of this cohort, NUIM and National Learning Network (NLN)

proposed a model of support focused on academic skills development and progression. Higher education institutions, both nationally and internationally, use a variety of support models for students with mental health conditions that are grounded in other disciplines, such as occupational therapy, counselling or psychiatry. NUIM and NLN developed an innovative model which employed an assistant psychologist on the ground with the supervision and support of a multidisciplinary team which included a clinical psychologist and educational psychologist. The programme is geared to be aware of the diagnosis and its impact, but to work with the student on the functional impact of that condition in an academic environment.

Student Central provided a number of key functions to NUIM students in its first year in operation.
- The assistant psychologist met with students who were referred to the service by NUIM disability office and developed tailored, goal orientated, academic support. The focus was on individual academic skills development which empowered the students to access the curriculum and embed themselves in the NUIM community. There were also other skills developed such as wellness maintenance, stress management, self advocacy and social skills. The skills developed are key transferable skills needed to engage in third level and beyond into their career and employment.
- The assistant psychologist acted as a liaison between other support services such as the medical centre, counseling and a student's own mental health services. Since the service was academically focused it meant that non-academic issues could be referred to appropriate professional services within NUIM or outside the university.
- Awareness and training sessions were provided for academic staff and support staff across the university. This also helped to raise awareness of Student Central as a new service which encouraged referrals from all sectors of the university to the disability office.
- Research analysis and evaluation is an essential component of Student Central. It assisted in forecasting trends and issues which were arising as the academic year progressed and developing the service in the future.

### Methodology
The data was collected while the service was in full time operation (October 2012–May 2013). Detailed records were kept throughout the programme and each month a report was compiled and data analysed. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from the students who accessed Student Central by means of an online questionnaire. A series of Likert-type response items and open-ended questions were designed to measure student's attitudes towards the programme.

### Results

### Attendance
During the first year of the Student Central service, a total of 67 students registered for support. A total of 569 appointments were scheduled from October to May when the service was in full time operation. Attendance peaked with the beginning of each semester and examination periods. The service is available for two days per week during the summer months for those students who require support for repeat exams and postgraduate students completing theses. There was an average of 8.5 meetings per student. Most students attended the service between five and 10 times. Three students only attended once, and three students had over 20 meetings, depending on support needs.

### Gender
Males were less likely to use the service, with two thirds of the students accessing Student Central being female. It is interesting to note that seven of the eight students who registered later in the year (after February) were male. This is a third of all the males registered with Student Central.

## Diagnosis

Students registered with the service have complex and overlapping diagnoses. Comorbidity was the rule rather than the exception, with 58% of students presenting with more than one diagnosis. Females presented more frequently across all of the mental health conditions excluding ADHD and Asperger's.

## Age

58% of the students were between the age of 18-23, and 42% were classed as mature students. These students over the age of 23 may have been enrolled on an undergraduate course, postgraduate course or return to learning course.

## Entry routes

The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) is a college and university admissions scheme which offers places on a reduced points basis to school leavers with disabilities. 58% of first year undergraduates who access Student Central came though this route. In fact, three quarters of all first years who accessed the service came though a non-traditional entry route, such as DARE or the mature entry route.

## Course

The majority of students (62%) came from arts courses. The next highest cohort was science students. However, science students noted that it was difficult for them to attend due to timetable constraints and the high contact hours in the course. Many of their support sessions focused on time management and fitting the work that needed to be completed into the short amount of time outside lectures available to them.

## Year

First year students were the main users of the service. The numbers dwindled as the students moved up through the college. There was a peak again with postgraduate students. Many of these students were coming back to education after some time, or were adapting to a new diagnosis. These students were in a period of transition in their lives, and this can be a vulnerable time in terms of mental health and wellness.

## Nature of support provided

The top four sessions related to assignment planning, essay writing skills, time management and exam preparation, with these sessions, along with initial meetings, accounting for 58% of all meetings. Other sessions focused on issues such as stress management, social skills and linking students with their relevant academic advisor in their department.

## Student survey

All 67 students who registered with Student Central were sent an online questionnaire in May 2013. This survey was available online for one month and students were invited to participate. In total, 29 students responded, which represents a 42% response rate. Almost half the students rated the knowledge and effectiveness of the Assistant Psychologist as excellent. Half rated the ability to get a convenient and timely appointment as excellent. 45% said that the extent to which the service met their needs was excellent. Only one student gave a rating less than 'good', and this was in the category of ability to get an appointment. All other categories were rated by all students, as good or very good or excellent.

Students were asked specifically about the strengths of the service and how it benefitted them throughout the year. Some sample responses are provided below:

> It helped me on an ongoing basis to evaluate my progress, strengths and areas I needed to focus on.

> The personal touch offered by the service … I did not feel like a number but like a person.

*[It] supported me during times of crisis.*

Students were asked for suggestions on how to improve the service and if they did not attend regularly, what prevented them from doing so. Some sample responses are provided below:

*Lecturers, particularly course coordinators, should know about this facility and should be able to recommend it to students when they go looking for help.*

*I didn't attend regularly as I found it difficult to leave my apartment. This was due to my anxiety and depression.*

## Implications and discussion
The findings from this study suggest that this service has provided a valued support to students with a mental health condition, in terms of developing academic skills, helping to maintain wellness and recovery, and acting as a support in times of crisis. This service will continue to develop to provide for the needs of this group of students. Some areas that we hope to focus on in the next academic year are outlined below:

1. **Reducing stigma and encouraging disclosure**
   It emerged that young men were unrepresented in the Student Central service and that something needs to be done to encourage them to use the service from the start of the academic year and not just when things start to fall apart. People suffering from psychiatric symptoms, even if severe, often do not seek professional help (Bebbington *et al*, 2000). A study of 16 to 24 year olds in Britain reported that lay sources (friends and relatives) were preferred for mental health problems (Biddle *et al*, 2004). Young men are particularly reluctant to seek help unless severely distressed, which may be important in understanding the high suicide rate for men (Biddle *et al*, 2004).

2. **Support with transitions**
   We are interested in researching and developing an outreach initiative that would work with adolescents with mental health conditions and assist these students with the transition from school to college. We are also interested in exploring how workplace related skills can be integrated into the programme and how students can be supported in the transition to employment.

3. **Co-morbidity**
   This trend has been highlighted in the statistics drawn from the first year of Student Central, as 58% of the students presented with more than one diagnosis. As Student Central has a practical, academic focus, we were able to look at the functional difficulties that the student experiences and devise strategies to overcome these difficulties. With this perspective, the needs of the student are the focus rather than the diagnostic label.

4. **Access to adult mental health services**
   Many students who have a longstanding diagnosis will have accessed the community CAMHS teams in their teens and will be transitioning to the community adult mental health teams. Singh *et al* (2008) found that transitions from CAMHS to Adult Mental Health Services (AMHS) in England are a significant health issue for service users and service providers. Continuity of care can be an issue for young people who 'graduate' from CAMHS but are not accepted by adult services. This is also an issue in the Irish health service. Many students are on maintenance only, which means they only see a psychiatrist once every six months. It can be difficult to access supports outside of this, unless the student can afford private support. It is important the university is cognisant of its responsibility to students and the boundaries of this responsibility.

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# 8 AN ACADEMIC ENRICHMENT PROGRAMME FOR DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN IS A KEY INTERVENTION IN HELPING ENSURE GIFTED LEARNERS PROGRESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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## Abstract

This study focused on a unique action research project called the Centre for Academic Achievement (CAA). This university based study involved planning, implementing, evaluating and improving an afterschool academic enrichment courses for promising learners from a socio-economic disadvantaged background. This qualitative study investigated whether this short-term educational intervention had any academic or social effects on the primary school students attending courses at the CAA.
After two cycles of action research four main themes regarding the influence and effects of the study emerged:

- There are academic benefits for promising learners that attend enrichment programmes
- An increase in self-esteem for disadvantaged students may be linked to attending enrichment programmes
- The importance of fostering links between school, university and socio-economic disadvantaged communities is recognised
- The importance of using action research to improve programme development and also to help improve the lives of participants is suggested.

## Introduction

A needs analysis conducted by local school principals in Ballymun and Coolock found that little was being done to challenge the high ability students in their schools (Tobin 2006). The principals also reported that the children who were doing well in school were trying to conceal their achievements in order to fit in with their peers. The DCU access department, which has links with 32 designated disadvantaged (DEIS) primary schools in the locality, decided to address this problem. The department approached the Centre for Talented Youth Ireland (CTYI) to set up a new joint centre (The Centre for Academic Achievement- CAA) to ensure that these underserved high ability students were being academically stimulated. CTYI specialises in enrichment courses for gifted children but there would not be as many students from low income families on the programme compared that of middle or high income families. Indeed this low representation of socio-economic disadvantaged students is apparent in many gifted programmes worldwide (Gagné et al, 2011; Ford and Grantham, 2003; Borland et al 2000) and not just in Ireland.

### Brief descriptor of the Centre for Academic Achievement (CAA)

The Centre for Academic Achievement (CAA) project was set up in 2006 to try to meet these needs. The CAA provides afterschool academic enrichment courses to potentially gifted children, aged between 10 and 12 years old, who are from a socio-economic disadvantaged background. The courses all take place on the university campus. Over 1,000 students have attended courses since the programme began. Students are nominated by the school to come on a course and then proceed to attend over 6 Wednesdays afterschool 1 of 3 courses on offer in a term. Different students attend in each of the three terms during the school year and these students are also given the opportunity to attend additional summer courses.

Table 1 below depicts some of the courses that students have been given the opportunity to study:

| Medicine | Music production | Creative writing |
|---|---|---|
| Code breaking and puzzles | Forensic Science | Chemistry |
| How to make an app | Superhero science | Engineering |
| World of Harry Potter | Veterinary science | Computer gaming |

**Table 1 A sample of the courses that have been offered on the CAA programme**

The overall objectives of this after school programme for these potentially gifted students from disadvantaged areas were to:

- Encourage students to be interested in learning outside the school environment
- Encourage students to take an interest in subjects outside the curriculum e.g. engineering, chemistry and marine biology
- Provide support to schools to tackle educational disadvantage
- Promote positive attitudes to education in the community
- Encourage parents to support academic achievement
- Encourage students to embrace university life by basing the classes within a university campus.

**Research carried out at the CAA centre**

It was decided that research would be carried out in parallel to the centre being set up, with a focus being on whether the design & content & setting of the courses had an impact on the students involved in the programme. It was hoped that the following questions would be addressed during the course of the research and analysis of the data:

1) Do the students benefit academically from attending the programme?
2) Does the programme benefit the students' personal and/or social development?
3) Is the programme well managed and respected by the children's parents and primary school teachers?
4) As a result of attending a course, are the students more likely to attend DCU or another third level institution when they are older?

It was also hoped, but not expected, that some level of social change would occur where it was not just a single child's aspirations that had changed for the better, but that the community as a whole would be positively affected by the programme.

**Literature review**
**Definition of giftedness**

Academics have so far not agreed on one all-encompassing definition for giftedness due to the wide variety of areas in which a person can be gifted.

In Ireland, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment have put together 'Draft Guidelines for Teachers' on 'Exceptionally Able Students' (NCCA 2007). They use the following definition for the purpose of their guidelines with 'exceptionally able' being described as:

> Students who require opportunities for enrichment and extension that go beyond those provided for the general cohort of student (p.7).

After considering the above definition for some time I suggest that a suitable descriptor of a successful programme for potentially gifted children could be 'where potentially gifted students with limited resources require additional supports to reach their potential'. This is extremely appropriate in relation to this study where the disadvantaged community that these high ability students are based impacts strongly on their upbringing and education.

## Definition of disadvantage

It is important to define the term 'disadvantaged' with respect to this piece of research. There are many definitions of what it means to be disadvantaged. For the purpose of this paper the terms socio-economic disadvantaged and disadvantaged are interchangeable, though the author is aware that the term disadvantaged has other connotations outside this piece of research. The most suitable definition of disadvantaged used for the purposes of this paper is, in my opinion, an amalgamation of two authors' definitions: when a person's learning and development is adversely affected (Pretorius and Machet 2004) by circumstances of social and economic deprivation (Hanks, 1990).

The students who attend the CAA programme live in Ballymun, Coolock and the surrounding areas, which are in the Dublin 7, 11 and 17 postcodes. Clancy (2001) found that young people in these aforementioned postcodes were very unlikely to go on to third level education.

The findings from a survey carried out by Ballymun Partnership in 2002 included the following worrying statistics:

Of the respondents no longer in full-time education:
- 32.5% of these finished their education in primary school
- 63.1 % finished their education at secondary school level
- Only 4.4% went on to complete a degree or non-degree qualification at third level education (CSO 1998). (Ballymun Partnership, 2003, p.5)

In fact, just 12% of new entrants to all higher education institutions in Ireland in 2004 attended a designated disadvantaged school (O'Connell et al. 2006).

However, there is strong evidence that this community wish for more local children to go to university with 99.6% of respondents in the Ballymun study stating they wanted their children to progress to third level education (Ballymun Partnership 2003 p.9). Therefore a project such as the CAA enrichment program, based on a university campus, was an ideal way to introduce some of these at risk children to a university setting while at the same time nurturing their academic talent.

## Curriculum of enrichment programme

So how does the content of an enrichment programme, such as the CAA enrichment program, help to challenge these gifted learners? Diane Montgomery (Montgomery 2009) has formulated the following key points to achieve a successful enrichment programme (p.11), which I have summed up in the following diagram:

**Figure 1 Factors that contribute to a successful enrichment programme**

## Methodology

An action research methodology was used for this study. Focus groups, interviews and surveys are the data collection tools that have been used to aid in uncovering what changes the CAA programme has had for its participants. Figure 2.on the next page shows a detailed timeline of when each step of the field work was carried out. In the first cycle of action research 298 questionnaires were filled in by various stakeholders, and 1 focus group involving 5 parents was carried out. The second cycle involved planning the implementation of the suggested improvements, acting to facilitate these improvements and changes, with observation and then reflection allowing the researcher and participants to comment on how successful these changes were. This cycle involved individual interviews with 5 children and 1 school principal, 3 focus groups involving 3, 4 and 3 parents respectively, and 288 questionnaires filled in by various stakeholders. At all times the importance of ensuring that all changes made to the programme would positively influence the students experience of learning, and to a lesser extent their lives, was foremost.

## Results and discussion

The constant comparative method of coding (Glaser 1978) was used to analyse the data gathered from the questionnaires, focus groups and interviews. The findings from the coding analysis are succinctly summed up in Figure 3, which is depicted directly after Figure 2.

**First Cycle Action Research**

**2.Act**
CAA pilot programme May 2007, 16 students. Followed by larger intake of children from autumn 07 onwards

**1.Plan**
Idea for CAA programme broached, planning begins Feb 2007

**3.Observe**
Intake of students in autumn 2008 and spring 2009, & related parents & teachers, fill out surveys,some attend focus groups & interviews

**4. Reflect**
Autumn 2009-Spring 2010: Researcher analyses data obtained from observation period & suggests changes to programme due to her own observations & that of the stakeholders

**Second Cycle Action Research**

**2.Act**
The following changes made during programmes in Spring 2011:
- courses now 6 weeks long rather than 4 weeks
- follow up science pack given to students
- in service teacher training at 4 schools carried out.

**1.Plan**
Autumn 2010: Researcher plans how to implement suggested changes

**3.Observe**
Intake of students in Feb & May 2011, & related stakeholders, fill out surveys, some attend focus groups & interviews

**4. Reflect**
Autumn 2011-Spring 2012: Researcher anaylses data gathered during observation and reflects on success & future direction.

**Fig 2. Action Research Timeline**

**Coding Analysis**

**Theme 1** — Academic Benefits of Enrichment Programmes for Promising Learners
- Learnt new things & interested in subject
- Stimulated promising learners & changed attitudes towards a subject/learning
- Broadening Academic Horizons & Importance of Practicals /hands-on learning
- Discussing Subject During/After Class & Carrying Out Activity

**Theme 2** — Increase in Self-Esteem & Related Personal Benefits for Disadvantaged Students Attending Enrichment Programmes
- Increase in Self Esteem
  - Made new friends, kids proud to be picked, parents proud, new envt

**Theme 3** — Importance of Fostering Links Between School, University & Disadvantaged Community
- Family Involvement
- Link to school
- Link to University
- Disadvantaged

**Theme 4** — Importance of Using Action Research to Improve Programme Development & also Improve Lives of Participants
- Program Design & Mngt comments
  - Well Organised
  - Excellent Staff
  - Gratitude
  - Subject preferences
  - Science Lab preferable
  - More courses & more students
- Providing Follow-up Pack
- Introducing Teacher Training
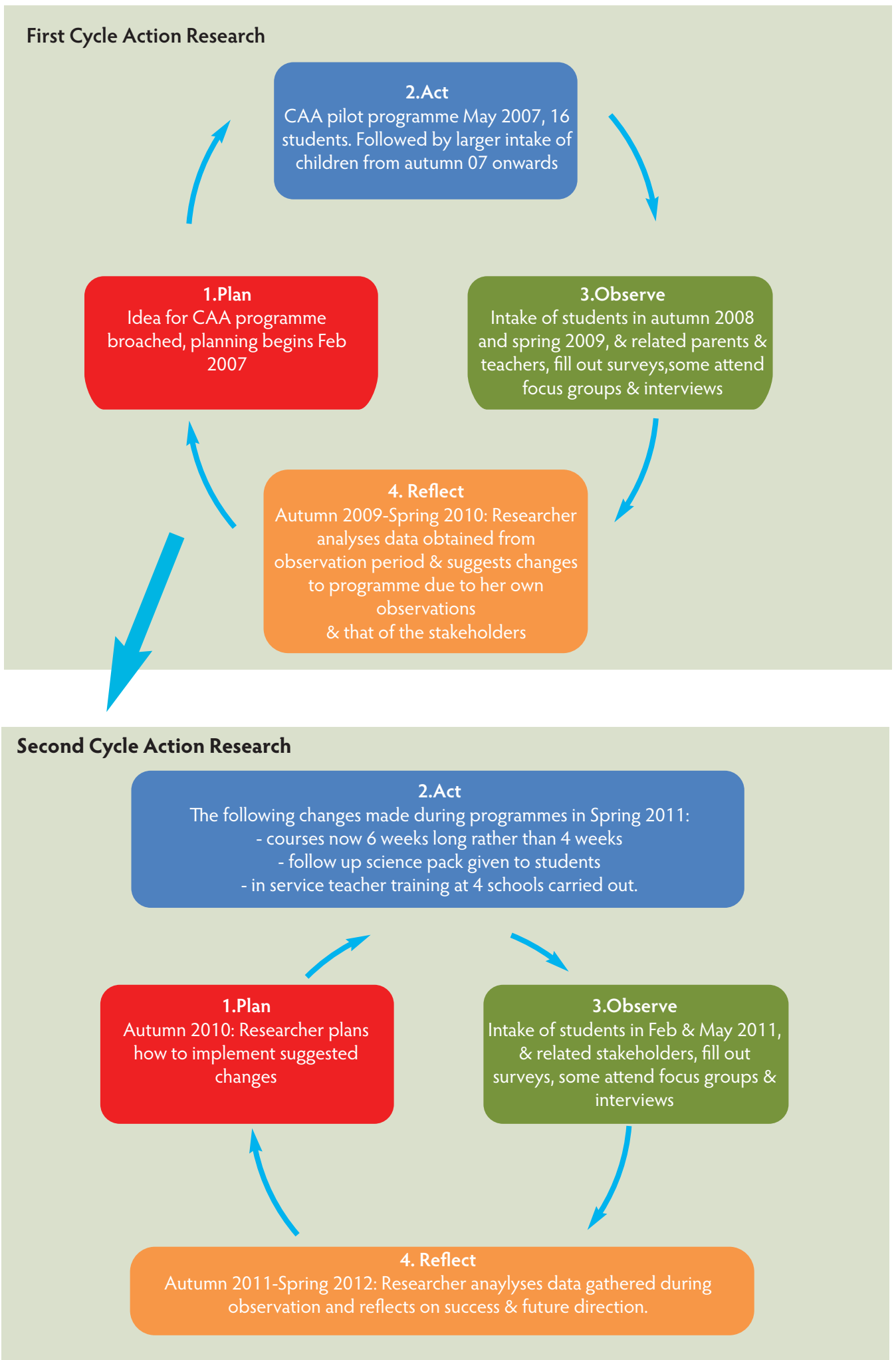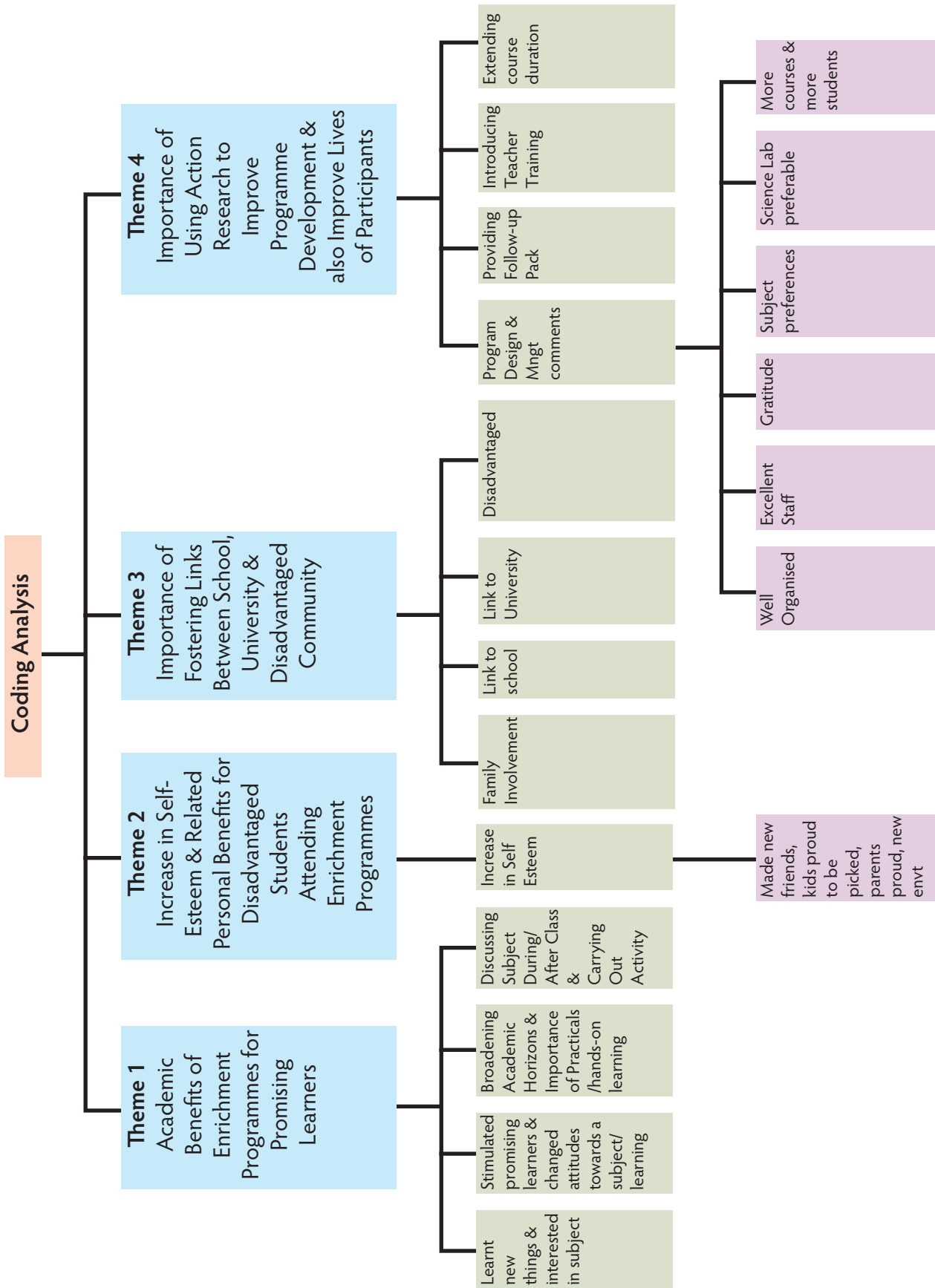- Extending course duration

Figure 3 Diagram depicting the findings and the levels of coding analysis undertaken

The four themes that have been generated from the coding analysis were:

- Probable academic benefits for promising learners that attend enrichment programmes
- A perceived increase in self-esteem for disadvantaged students may be linked to attending enrichment programmes
- The importance of fostering links between school, university and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities
- The importance of using action research to improve programme development and also to help improve the lives of participants.

**Conclusion**

At the start of this paper it was noted that four research questions would be answered during this study. These questions were:

- Is the programme well managed and respected by the children's parents and primary school teachers?
- Do the students benefit academically from attending the programme?
- Does the programme benefit the students' personal and/or social development?
- As a result of attending a course, are the students more likely to attend DCU or another third level institution when they are older?

After analysing all the data using coding, all four questions were answered with the affirmative as detailed in a previous study by Healion (2013).

All of the parents or school teachers who filled out questionnaires, or attended focus groups, perceived the programme to be extremely well run and were very satisfied with the management of the programme.

The students benefited academically on this enrichment programme by
- Learning new material
- Having the opportunity to experiment
- Being given the chance to question and express their opinions
- Having exposure to a new learning environment.

It was not surprising that there were academic benefits for the students in attending the CAA programme; after all if an education enrichment programme does not produce any scholastic advantages then this programme should not be operating.

However, more surprising were the personal benefits for many students attending the courses. Evidence as detailed in Healion (2013) showed that attending courses at the CAA had raised the self-esteem of many of these students, as perceived by many parents and teachers, with the majority feeling more confident in their academic abilities. As well as many students feeling more comfortable with their academic talents, many parents also expressed their pride at their children's abilities. Some teachers also emphasised how special it was for these children to be picked to take part in the CAA project. It is hoped that this positive change in the belief in the student's abilities by themselves, their parents and also to some extent their school teachers, is evidence of a critical change in this community. Hopefully this generation of children can start to believe that they too can progress to third level education if they wish.

Ample proof has been given in Healion (2013) that attendance on the CAA programme has raised the aspirations of many of these students, and their parents, that these children can indeed attend higher

education when they are older. It should be said this change in attitude as a result of attending a six week course can become a permanent change in belief is doubtful. More continued educational and emotional supports are needed as these students continue their educational journey through both primary and secondary school in order to cement this transformation.

**More collaborations needed between universities and communities, employers and schools**
It is vitally important to form links between third level institutions, schools, families and communities to nurture the academic talents of promising learners from disadvantaged areas. What is most important is that each link shouldn't be thought of as an individual relationship, but instead the various links should collaborate together to improve the educational advancement of these at-risk children (O'Brian 2008) . Partnerships between schools and parents are key to increasing learning motivation in children (Council of the European Union 2011).

I suggest that the CAA is a unique programme in bringing together collaboration between universities, schools, families and the community to nurture learning in potentially gifted at-risk learners, and suggest that more joint projects between these different partnerships, rooted in critical theory ideals, should be advocated. Woodrow and Thomas (2002) even push these boundaries and suggest that workplaces should be included in a collaborative strategy to promote learning in all abilities from impoverished backgrounds by providing opportunities for children to visit their company or for the company to provide guest lectures or other support.  I would agree with this recommendation and hope in the future to include interesting guest speakers from companies to come in and do workshops as part of CAA courses or special events.

I suggest the model below effectively summarises the linked relationships that need to be made in order to ensure that a promising leaner from a disadvantaged background has the best chance to reach their potential.
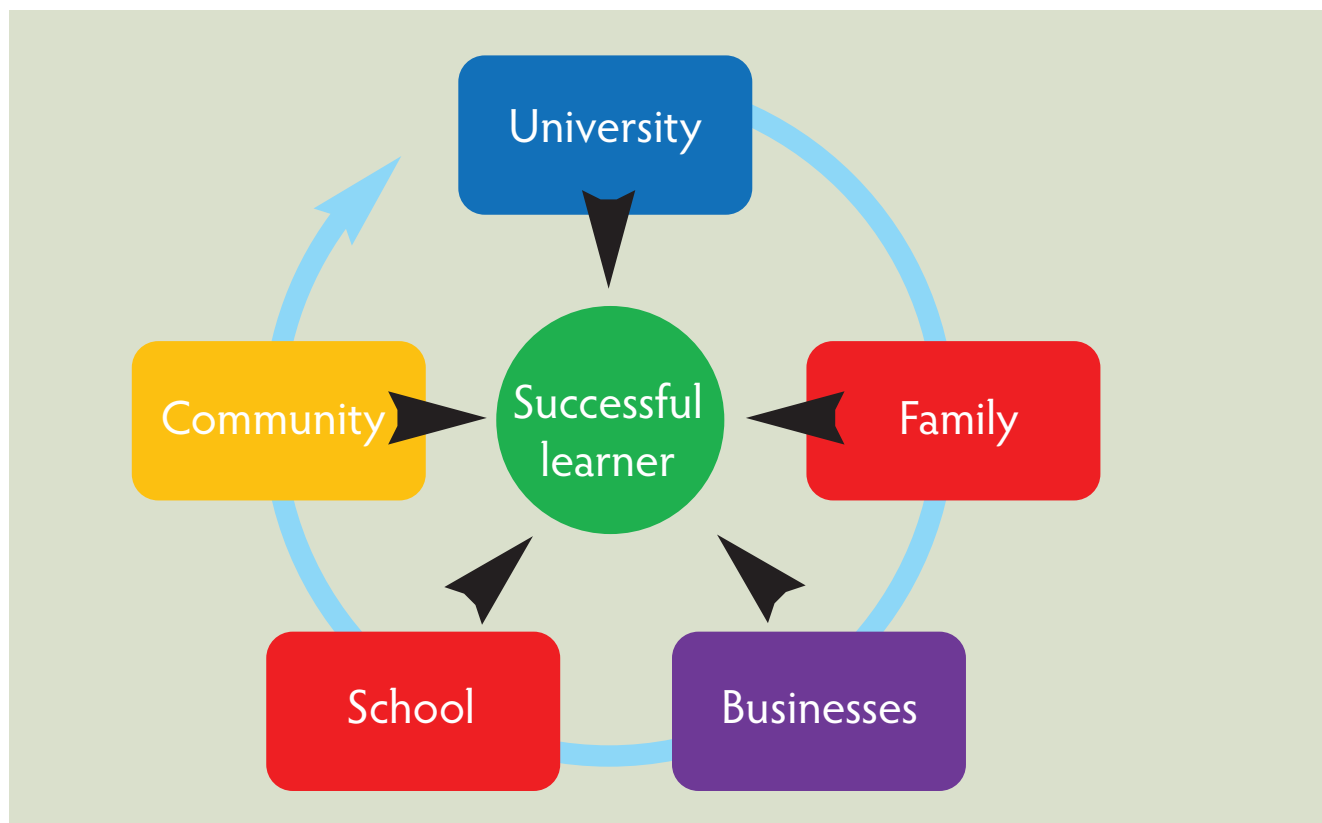


**Figure 4 Collaborative partners that maximise the success of a high ability learner with a disadvantaged background**

Even though the CAA programme is only a small project, evidence suggests that it has improved the lives of the participants by increasing their self-esteem, improving their academic ability and raising their aspirations, as supported by existing literature in this field. However, to ensure that the academic abilities and confidence of these students continue to develop more educational interventions are necessary with the same children until they finish secondary school.

The CAA programme is not a panacea for all the educational problems of these high ability learners from a disadvantaged community in Dublin, Ireland. However, it does assist in developing these children's academic abilities and aspirations to progress to higher education, as well as increasing their belief in themselves to have the ability to carry out this educational endeavour. It is therefore apparent that even though a lot has being accomplished, there is still more to do but at least this emancipatory journey has begun.

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# 9 DUBLIN REGIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION ALLIANCE (DRHEA) WIDENING PARTICIPATION STRAND: A CASE STUDY IN COLLABORATION

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the development of the Dublin Regional Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA) Widening Participation Strand – a strategic collaborative initiative by 12 colleges. This alliance works collectively to develop strategies that provide increased opportunities for participation of under-represented groups in higher education, and to promote engagement by fostering a range of practices to share knowledge and resources in mutually beneficial partnerships.

This work takes place against the backdrop of the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2020,* and the *Report to the Minister for Education and Skills on System Reconfiguration, Inter-Institutional Collaboration and System Governance in Irish Higher Education (2013).* Themes elaborated in these reports include increased participation, equality of access, lifelong learning, and the role of regional clusters in the provision of more co-ordinated systems, which facilitate greater flexibility in student progression options.

This paper tells the story of the development of the DRHEA, and the widening participation strand in particular. It will describe the journey travelled, the successes enjoyed, and the challenges encountered in the complex world of collaboration in higher education.

## Introduction

As Ireland's so called 'celtic tiger' roared, a group of far-seeing higher education institutions on the east coast of Ireland took a bold step. A meeting of senior people was convened to discuss collaboration. These tentative steps led to the development of the Dublin Regional Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA). This paper chronicles this journey, with a particular emphasis on widening access and participation to higher education.

## Dublin Regional Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA)

The development of the DRHEA was initiated in response to the HEA's strategic innovation fund (SIF), a government measure introduced as a result of the OECD review of Irish higher education in 2004. This funding stream was intended to act as a catalyst for change and offer practical support for the development of collaboration initiatives in higher education institutions, and had particular focus on:

- the quality of teaching and learning
- improved graduate education
- broader access to higher education
- better managed higher education institutions.

In the greater Dublin region, the four universities, i.e. Dublin City University (DCU), National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM), Trinity College Dublin (TCD), University College Dublin, and the four institutes of technology, i.e. Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB), IT Tallaght (ITT Dublin), Institute of Art Design and Technology (IADT), agreed to form an alliance to advance collaborative working. Governance of the DRHEA was provided by a board comprising senior institutional representatives, a student union representative, four independent nominees, and an independent chair. The board was supported by the academic administrative office

of one of the institutions, on a yearly rotation. A management committee was established to oversee the operational issues of the strands of DRHEA activity: enhancement of learning; widening participation; graduate education; and internationalisation. Co-convenors, a university and an institute of technology, were agreed for each strand (DRHEA, 07 May 2009).

This regional alliance sought to:

> Combine the strengths of its constituent member institutions in key areas, driving economies of scale and efficiencies that will enable both forward-planning and agile responses to national and international demands for high quality, accessible higher education that underpins sustainable socio-economic development (www.drhea.ie/).

Launching the DRHEA in 2009, the then Minister for Education, Mr Batt O'Keeffe TD said:

> Bringing together the rich scholarly traditions and diverse expertise of the member institutions in the Dublin region, the DRHEA will provide a major opportunity for a wide range of collaborative innovations that will significantly enhance the capacity and potential of the regional higher education system.

The DRHEA set itself ambitious goals, and sought to encourage a culture of collaboration and partnership among the higher education institutions. Davies (2010) in his evaluation of the SIF initiative notes:

> Most progress has been made on the graduate education strand. The enhancement of learning (EOL) and widening participation strands have recorded slower progress but I was impressed by the quality of what has been achieved to date and the commitment of the partners (p.9).

The collaborative work takes place against the backdrop of the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2020*, and also the *Report to the Minister for Education and Skills on System Reconfiguration, Inter-Institutional Collaboration and System Governance in Irish Higher Education* (2013). Themes elaborated in these reports include increased participation, equality of access, lifelong learning and the role of regional clusters in the provision of more co-ordinated systems, which facilitate greater flexibility in student progression options.

**Collaboration in practice**

### Establishing and developing the widening participation strand

The 'primary collaborative project' envisioned for the widening participation (WP) strand was the formation of a higher learning network (HLN). It was thought that such a network could offer a regional impetus to assist in widening participation to adult learners who wish to complete the first cycle of higher education. The DRHEA board agreed that the steering group would be convened jointly by Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB) and Trinity College Dublin (TCD). It was later agreed however, that Tom Doyle, Director, Lifelong Learning, ITB, would operate as sole convenor. Membership of the HLN was drawn from managers with institutional responsibility for driving the lifelong learning agenda. The role of the steering group was to identify projects that addressed the needs of adults.

A further three projects were loosely aligned with the WP strand and these were led by the sponsoring institutions. *English as a Second Language* was led by Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB), while *Community Based Learning* was managed by Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). The *Separated Children Project*, proceeding without SIF funding, was led by DIT, ITT Dublin and TCD (DRHEA, 7 May 2009).

The establishment of the HLN was done in the absence of dedicated funding and was reliant on the commitment and enthusiasm of the eight institutions participating. Small amounts of funding were made available by some partner institutions to progress projects on behalf of the HLN. These focused primarily in three areas. Firstly, a study was undertaken by ITB of similar networks in the UK. A personal and professional development programme, to address the needs of redundant workers, was developed jointly by NUIM, ITT Dublin and ITB. However this programme was unsuccessful in its bid for funding and hence was not offered. The third area of activity was the progression pathways project, led by UCD, to enhance the routes to higher education, and also to make those routes more accessible and coherent to applicants. The initial phase of this project involved desk research to map progression routes and to identify barriers (Fleming, 2010). Subsequently, the verification of this desk research was undertaken through a series of focus groups held in participating higher education institutions (Kennedy, 2011).

It must be acknowledged that the HLN succeeded in 'sowing the seeds of collaboration' and in so doing, built the platform for future developments to address the needs of adults. Members shared information and experience, which proved positive and enriching. However, the continued lack of dedicated funding to support such collaboration proved frustrating. There also were serious concerns regarding the sustainability of work undertaken. Structural issues too came into focus. For example, members representing some institutions changed from meeting to meeting: this hampered the stability of the group. The weak links between the HLN and the other three WP projects (mentioned previously) limited the opportunity to consolidate effort and develop a more coherent agenda. Nevertheless, Davies (2010) in his evaluation of SIF initiatives deems DRHEA widening participation as warranting a score of 2 ('excellent work-in-progress projects') and notes that 'Progress has been slow to date but this is an important effort for all of higher education' (p.16).

## Renewal of the widening participation strand

Following Tom Doyle's retirement in May 2010, UCD's Director of Access and Lifelong Learning, Anna M. Kelly, offered to take up the role of strand convenor. In the context of her experience on participation in the HLN and also the challenges encountered and recorded above, she held a series of meetings with registrars and other senior personnel, to hear views on the work of widening participation strand and to ascertain levels of commitment and support. Meetings with senior staff in the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI), were also held.

These discussions reaffirmed the commitment of all higher education institutions, and also underscored their support for the 'renewal' of the widening participation strand. There was consensus that a strategic partnership-based approach had the potential to make progress in widening participation, among adults in particular. This in turn, was seen as having the potential to support sustainability and encourage possibilities that wouldn't exist otherwise. These meetings also emphasised that active engagement in the WP strand could provide the opportunity to strategically address issues of exclusion, enable regional coherence and greater efficiencies.

Finally, a proposal was tabled at the meeting of the DRHEA Board on 9 February 2011, to re-establish the WP steering group, comprising senior representatives from the four universities and the four institutes of technology who would develop an agreed inter-institutional programme of work. The board endorsed this proposal and welcomed the renewed initiative of this important area of DRHEA endeavour. The board also endorsed UCD as the convening institution. It further recommended that the specialist colleges be invited to participate.

## Re-establishing the widening participation steering group

15 institutions were invited to participate on the steering group. 13 college registrars nominated senior representatives, i.e. DCU, DIT, IADT, ITB, ITT, NUIM, TCD, SPD, Froebel, NCAD, NCI, MDI and UCD. On 13 April 2011, the inaugural meeting of the DRHEA widening participation steering group was held.

The agreed mission of the strand is:

- to work collectively to develop and drive strategies that provide increased opportunities for participation of under-represented groups in higher education and to promote community and civic engagement by fostering a range of practices and activities that will reciprocally share the knowledge resources of the HEIs with community in mutually beneficial partnerships.
- to become the regional voice for increasing equality in higher education in the greater Dublin region.

The steering group also agreed to develop a work programme, to share expertise, to co-ordinate collaborative activities across institutions, and communicate with relevant national and international organisations.

The steering group holds monthly meetings, the venues for which are rotated. The work begun under the auspices of the HLN has been built upon. In particular, phase 1 of the progression project (described previously) identified the availability of a wide range of access and progression routes in the region, but also noted the existence of diverse policies and practice, leading to system incoherence. Phase 2 provided evidence of a continuing absence of knowledge and information regarding the range of available study options and pathways, both among learners and staff alike. A strand symposium was held in December 2011 that showcased innovative practice and facilitated the wider constituency to propose priorities for future development. These proposals were synthesised into five key themes: community engagement; pathways to higher education; data and evidence; institutional culture; and funding.

Based on the findings of Phase 1 and 2 and the symposium priorities, the strand applied for funding and the HEA allocated €150,000:

> To support the establishment of clear progression pathways through, and access routes to, higher education from further education in the Dublin region, and more broadly, to support the development of equity of access to higher education with an embryonic regional cluster. (Source: Notification of HEA funding in DRHEA widening participation strand, April 2012.)

Following receipt of this funding allocation, Sinéad Hyland was appointed as project co-ordinator in November 2012. Working on behalf of the DRHEA widening participation strand, her role is to identify actions to simplify the admission processes, and improve access to existing adult-related information and guidance sources.

Collaborative working is ambitious and demanding, but nevertheless has been recognised by the HEA as having 'met with some success, particularly in graduate education and in widening participation' (HEA, 2013a).

The continuing commitment of the strand members to collaboration is essential. Operating in a complex and competitive higher educational environment, with ever-diminishing resources, progress is being made on the basis of continued development of agreed goals. All actions taken need to be seen to be beneficial to all institutions, as they address access and participation. The WP strand has created a solid platform on which future developments can be built.

**Conclusion**

Collaboration in higher education offers an opportunity to create new ways of working. Using our collective knowledge, expertise and experience, it is possible to forge new solutions to enhance inclusion. Arguably, each participating higher education institution has much to gain and much to contribute. Collaboration in higher education is not an easy option: it demands listening, compromise and perseverance. 'Carrying the banner' for increased access and participation is also not easy.

Collaboration, however, offers the possibility of becoming a collective force for change, thereby enhancing individual efforts and helping higher education institutions in the greater Dublin region to become more inclusive and diverse.

**DRHEA widening participation steering group members**

Ms Anna Kelly, Director, Access and Lifelong Learning, UCD, (DRHEA Strand Convenor)

Dr Julie Bernard, Director, Access and Civic Engagement, DIT

Ms Marie McLoughlin, President, Froebel (incorporated into NUIM in September 2013 and ceased strand membership)

Dr Fionnuala Waldron, Dean of Education, SPD

Ms Josephine Finn, Head, Adult and Continuing Education, NUIM

Ms Cathy McCartney, Admissions Officer, Student Administration, NCAD

Professor Maria Slowey, Director, Higher Education Research and Development DCU

Mr Pat O'Connor, Head of School of Business and Humanities, ITB

Ms Clodagh Byrne, Mature Student Officer, TCD

Ms Rosemary Cooper, Academic Administration and Student Affairs Manager, ITT Dublin

Dr Marian O' Sullivan, Registrar, IADT

Dr Elaine McDonald, Postgraduate Programme Coordinator/Lecturer in the School of Education, Mater Dei Institute

Mr John McGarrigle, Registrar, NCI

Ms Sinéad Hyland, Project Co-ordinator, DRHEA

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# 10 WIDENING PARTICIPATION: THE STUDENT TEACHER EXPERIENCE

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## Abstract

This study, guided by the theoretical and methodological approach of Bourdieu, examines widening participation in the field of initial teacher education in Ireland. In seeking to understand the habitus and field experiences of non-traditional students, in-depth interviews were conducted with nine students from two higher education institutions (HEIs). The students had entered an undergraduate post-primary initial teacher education (ITE) programme either as a mature entrant or following successful completion of an access course. The student narratives shed light on the nature and forms of capital which non-traditional students have upon entry to the programme, how capital is accumulated and exchanged as they negotiate the dual-field, and how this impacts on habitus and facilitates habitus transformation. While their experiences are heterogeneous in nature, findings suggest that positions adopted by students within the field may be categorised as either '*adjusting*' or '*belonging*', and that these positions are independent of entry-route.

## Background and context

This paper examines experiences of non-standard entry-route students on undergraduate concurrent initial teacher education (ITE) programmes in two Irish higher education institutions (HEIs). The issue of widening participation (WP) is particularly pertinent for ITE given that it has been noted that a prevailing feature of the make-up of the ITE student body is that it remains relatively homogenous, with students from minority ethnic groups and lower socio-economic groups underrepresented (Byrne, 2002; Coolahan, 2003; Conway *et al*, 2009; Drudy, 2006; Heinz, 2013). It is also pertinent because ITE programmes typically recruit from the top 30% of school-leavers (Hyland, 2012), and entry to the field is described as highly competitive (Mooney *et al*, 2010).

Given that demand for places on teacher education programmes outweighs supply (Aitken and Harford, 2011; Drudy, 2006; Harford, 2008; Hyland, 2012), there hasn't been the same need in the Irish context to provide the array of routes into ITE compared to other countries where shortage of teachers is an issue (Whitehead *et al,* 1998; Chan Lai and Grossman, 2008; Loomis *et al*, 2008). However, because increasing access and widening participation to higher education has been a policy objective in Ireland for almost two decades, WP as a policy field within higher education has impacted directly on ITE. Arising from HEA-led policy initiatives aimed at widening and increasing access to higher education (HEA, 2004a; 2004b; HEA, 2008), 'non-standard entry routes' (HEA, 2008) into all undergraduate ITE programmes now exist.

Concurrent ITE programmes require students to simultaneously negotiate two fields of practice: as a student in HE, and as a student teacher in the school setting. As it has been remarked that this 'dual-field' experience presents a challenge for students generally (Grenfell, 1996; Murray and Maguire, 2007), it is useful to examine how students entering via non-standard entry routes experience such programmes.

## Theoretical approach and methodology

The theoretical and conceptual work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1977; 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) informed the methodological approach adopted for this study. Grenfell (2008, p223) explains how, in employing a Bourdieusian approach, the conceptual framework for research is formed by 'the links

between individuals (habitus), field structures, and the positionings both within and between fields.' In practice, this implies that research is guided by Bourdieu's three-level approach to studying a field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; pp104–107). Levels one and two are concerned with a 'mapping' of the field, while level three focuses on 'analysing the habitus of agents'. It is level three that is the focus here, thus this section provides an overview of how narrative interviews were used to investigate the 'background, trajectory and positioning' (Grenfell, 2008, p223) of the students (agents).

Purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007) was employed to recruit participants enrolled in years three and four of concurrent post-primary ITE programmes in two HEIs. The study sample comprised nine students in total: three of whom were mature-entrants (one male, two female), and six of whom were access-course entrants (two male, four female). The cohort of access-course entrants was split equally between school-leaver entrants (three) and mature entrants (three). All of the students were first-generation entrants to higher education. Individual, open-ended, face to face interviews informed by Wengraf's (2001) approach to narrative interviewing took place across both sites.

Data analysis commenced with multiple listening of the recordings, followed by transcription of each interview. An analytical framework informed by Polkinghorne's (1995, p12) approach to 'narrative analysis' was developed which intertwines Bourdieu's concepts (field, capital, habitus) with narrative inquiry. Bourdieu indicates how an individual's success within a given field 'depends on the capital held' (Bourdieu *et al*, 1999, p128), and how 'different conditions of existence produce different habitus' (Bourdieu, 1984, p166). The students' narratives were indicative of different habituses and associated field positions: and these were categorised as either *belonging* or *adjusting.*

**Findings**

Four of the students are positioned as *belonging*. Two of these entered as mature-entrants, Linda and Steve, and two gained entry following completion of an access course, George and Janet. Five students were positioned as *adjusting*. Two students, Monica and Rachael, completed an access course directly after finishing second-level education, while Richard also undertook an access course some years after an apprenticeship. The two other students, Deborah and Martina, had entered ITE as mature students.

Importantly, the findings highlight that despite differences between students with regard to field position, all the students were successfully negotiating the dual-field that they had entered; in Bourdieusian terms: they were adapting to its particular 'logic of practice'.

**'Choosing' HE and ITE**

For all but one of the students, becoming a teacher was the primary motivation for applying to the HEI, and permeating all of the narratives, regardless of whether the student was positioned as *adjusting* or *belonging*, was the sense of 'wanting to be a teacher'. For the *belongers*, this process was characterised by fewer struggles and setbacks than that of the *adjusters,* three of whom had repeated a year of the programme in order to reach their goal.

Implicit in *all* of the students' narratives was an acknowledgement that obtaining a degree and with it a teaching qualification was a vehicle for upward social mobility, better earning power and a better quality of life. In this regard, it is interesting to consider the decisions taken by the mature entrants (including mature-age access entrants) upon finishing their secondary education as these provide an insight into the classed choice-making processes that has been identified elsewhere (Reay, 1998; Reay, David and Ball, 2001; 2005). Notably, two of the mature students embarked on an apprenticeship when they left school. In Steve's case, this was because he hadn't succeeded in gaining entry to ITE at that stage, not having acquired sufficient 'entry' capital in the leaving certificate:

> I had the points, but not an honour in maths, and I wasn't aware at the time that it was a requirement for the course.

Richard's narrative points to higher education being 'not for the likes of us' (Bourdieu, 1984, p473) when he explained why he hadn't applied to go to higher education as a school-leaver because:

> … *for a normal, everyday lad, it wasn't the thing to do … in our school … boys didn't go to college.*

For the access course entrants who were school-leavers, classed choice making is also apparent, and through their narratives we are also afforded an insight into the role of the secondary school and 'institutional habitus' (Reay, 1998; Reay, David and Ball, 2001; Smyth and Banks, 2012) in directing students towards higher education. Coming from a school where progressing to higher education was not the norm, Monica refers to 'not knowing' of the existence of the access course (seeing a newspaper advertisement for it by chance); whereas for Janet and Rachael, knowledge of the access course was provided by their career guidance teacher.

## 'Transitioning'

In a number of the narratives, the issue of the meritocratic and 'high stakes' (Smyth, 2009, p2) nature of the CAO system of entry to HE in Ireland was highlighted: two of those positioned as *belonging* and four of those positioned as *adjusting* had previously failed to gain entry to the field via the CAO route. For the *adjusters,* the legacy of this continued to permeate their narratives. In Monica's case, the feelings of inadequacy which she experienced having gained entry into the field by an alternative route point to a perception of the WP route as being certainly less legitimate, and perhaps bordering on the deviant:

> … *you do feel it, you feel it sitting among 50 or 60 people who have all gotten there with high points – it's like you feel you cheated your way through it, that you got there, you know …*

Thus, she didn't disclose her entry route as, 'I didn't want to be known as the person who came in through an access route.'

Six of the nine students in the study had undertaken an access course, and for all of these, that course was an opportunity to acquire additional cultural capital. Their narratives highlighted that a key benefit of the course was how it equipped them with the academic 'know-how' necessary for third-level – in other words, the capital of value in the field. Being introduced to the art of 'academic writing' was mentioned as a particular advantage, a finding which is consistent with other recent studies (Keane, 2012; Lehmann, 2012). It is also important to note that the presence and support of the access officer was acknowledged by *all* access-route students as an important resource for students.

## 'Negotiating' the dual-fields

For most of the students positioned as *adjusting*, entry into the programme was not straightforward, often encompassing a longer and more challenging path to get there. Christie *et al* (2008, p579) suggest that for non-traditional students, 'learning to be' a student is 'bound up with the very particular nature of the[ir] pathways to higher education'. There is evidence of this in the narratives of the school-leaver access students positioned as *adjusting,* manifested in their non-disclosure of their entry-route. Rachael tells me how, when her entry route was finally shared with her peers towards the latter part of their programme, 'none of them knew what that [the access course] was'. This perhaps highlights the need for greater visibility and normalisation of WP entry-routes within higher education. On the other hand, a clear sense of 'fitting in' is evident in the narratives of those *belonging,* as indicated by Linda, a mature entrant:

> … *there was never any issue about being a mature student, I think I was seen to be the same as everyone else. I think I am the same as everyone else.*

A prevalent feature of the narratives of students positioned as *adjusting* is a strong determination to succeed, often in the face of failure. For three of the students who were unsuccessful in their school placements, we see evidence of the type of resilience identified as an important determinant of higher

education success among non-traditional students (Clegg, 2011; Watson *et al*, 2009). Deborah, a mature access-route student who had successfully passed her repeat school placement and was then faced with having to retake a third-year paper, tells me how despite wondering 'will I *ever* get this done?' she had a clear conviction that she would complete:

> … at the same time, at the back of my head I was thinking: I'm going to finish, I'm definitely going to finish.

Unlike those positioned as *belonging*, the preference for working alone among the *adjusters* would appear to stem from a self-reliance borne out of necessity, whereby previous educational experiences and achievements were largely self-managed. This is illustrated in Rachael's: 'I just do my own thing and get on with it.' Indeed, inherent in the accounts of all of those positioned as *adjusting* was the sense of 'getting through' the programme. Unlike those *belonging* who sought to excel, the *adjusters* were content to complete: they are 'adjusting their expectations to their chances' (Bourdieu, 1984, p473).

For those positioned as *belonging,* the generative capacity of habitus (in which agency and autonomy are important constructs) features strongly in their narratives. George, who worked in construction after leaving school, alludes to his desire to accrue cultural capital:

> Yes, I'd say every year or every second year, if I wasn't doing my own work in the evenings, I did some kind of course and I never actually realised it until I came here, but I am into lifelong learning and all that …

Social capital comes into play in George's selection of a school for his placement: 'I would have known a few of the teachers there.' The school also had minimum discipline problems, a contributing factor to his success:

> It was a really good school too, and I suppose that makes a difference. I mean there are a few inner city schools and they would be a different ball game, if you know what I mean?

Having acquired both social and cultural capital from his undergraduate studies, George's narrative offers an insight into the evolutionary and transformative potential of the habitus. He indicates how going to HE has changed his life:

> I wouldn't be afraid of trying something else, even now – and I haven't said this to anyone else – I'll definitely go teaching, but then I'd like to go on and do my Masters. And I don't really know where it's going to stop ...

## Conclusion

This study highlights the experiences of students who have entered one particular field of study, ITE, as a result of WP policy initiatives. In adding the perspectives of non-traditional students from this field of practice to the discussion, it usefully contributes to the broader policy debate regarding how WP is enacted in practice in Irish HE. Indicating that the experiences of non-standard entry route ITE students are heterogeneous in nature, the study highlights how a narrative approach incorporating Bourdieu's theoretical framework is useful in understanding these experiences.

Qualitative research which looks at the student experience of higher education is important in assessing the impact of WP initiatives in addressing equality of access to higher education in Ireland. Different fields of study, including other professional fields, may have unique features which impact on how the student negotiates that particular field. Research on non-standard entry route students' experience of various fields is important in striving to achieve equality of access for all students across the entire range of programmes in Irish higher education.

For access-route students, the findings indicate that the undergraduate experience was enhanced as a result of having completed an access course prior to embarking on an ITE degree, and supports provided by the HEI post-entry are also important. As the numbers of non-standard entry route students in higher education in Ireland increases, it is important that these supports continue to be appropriately resourced.

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# 11

# THE IMPACT OF GENDER, SCHOOL STATUS AND GEOGRAPHY ON DEGREE OUTCOMES: A STUDY ON THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF ACCESS STUDENTS IN DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY 2009/2010

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## Abstract

Using a unique data-set identifying the academic qualifications of a group of students who entered Dublin City University (DCU) through the access programme, this research looks at their final degree classification. By exploiting the detailed information held within the university records we determine the impact of gender, school status and geographic location on final degree outcome.

The research found that male students from Dublin based non-DEIS schools are underperforming compared to other male access and 'traditional' students. Female students from non-DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in School) schools are twice as likely to get a first class honours degree as their Dublin DEIS school-based counterparts.

As a follow-up to research undertaken in 2011 by the DCU access service (McLoughlin *et al*) we explored further study undertaken by the graduates of 2009 and 2010. This found that 58% of access students had undertaken studies at postgraduate level. The study highlights concern over the decrease in numbers of students entering the programme from local linked schools.

## Context

Ballymun is located beside Dublin City University (DCU) in north Dublin. It is an area that has a high level of social deprivation, with many low-income families and little or poor levels of progression to third-level education. In 1989 the governing body of DCU established an initiative to address the low numbers entering third level from the area. The Ballymun initiative for third level education (BITE) piloted in DCU from 1990–1995 (Boldt, 2000).

Following the success and learning from the pilot the north Dublin access programme (NDA) was launched in 1996. This came on the back of research highlighting the inequalities of access to higher education from Clancy (1982) and Lynch (1996) and reacting to a government white paper (1995). The NDA began to work with a network of designated disadvantaged schools (DEIS) in north Dublin at both first and second level. The university allocates up to 10% of course places each year to students from disadvantaged areas under the direct entry scheme (under which students can be admitted on lower entry points).

In 2001 the access service began collaborating with access programmes in six other third-level institutions in Ireland. A selection system to facilitate students from disadvantaged schools linked to these colleges was devised. This had a huge impact on addressing equality issues and improving equity of access. Today, access is a national scheme run under the aegis of the higher education access route (HEAR) with over 4,000 students admitted to participating third-level institutions between 2010 and 2012 (HEAR, 2013).

Research into the academic performance of access students graduating from third-level institutions in Ireland is very limited with the primary focus to-date being on retention levels of first years (Geary, 2009) and all students (HEA 2010). In the UK, Naylor and Smith (2002) found that students coming

from state-sector schools were outperforming their peers from private independent schools by 6.5 (females 5.4) percentage points. Unfortunately this study was not able to take into account the performance of socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Geary (2009, p35) found that 'New Era (Access) Programme has relatively little effect on the final degree classification the student receives. However, Merit Treatment students entering have an increased chance of attaining a higher degree.'

### Data sources and methodology
This section lays out the aims and objectives of the study. It outlines the steps taken to ensure that the performance of every student who graduated from the access programme in 2009 and 2010 in DCU was taken into account.

### Research aims and questions
The aims of the research were to:
- Collate strong statistical data on the academic performance of access students and compare this to the general student population.
- Measure and compare the academic performance of access students by gender taking into account factors that may have influenced the outcome.
- Quantify the number of DCU access graduates from 2009 and 2010 who have undertaken further education.

### Data collection method
The research uses data from the university's records system (ITS) which records the school of origin, entry code and academic awards of each student. The data on which this analysis is based was extracted from the system using a unique tagging code for each access student plus student identification number. The latter part of the study builds and adds to research undertaken by the access service in 2011, (McLoughlin *et al*). It keeps the previous study up-to-date using the same format of questionnaire and telephone interviews.

### Main findings
The DCU access programme has traditionally taken significant numbers of students in through direct entry (reduced points). This was reflected in the graduates of this study period – 89.1% entered via this route. As such large numbers are entering through direct entry, it is important to track how they are performing in comparison to students from more traditional routes. See Fig. 1.

**Fig. 1: Level of qualification obtained**

|  | Access 2009–2010 | Gen. UG DCU 2009–2010 |
| --- | --- | --- |
| First | 13.8% | 16.3% |
| Higher 2 Div. 1 | 51.8% | 49.8% |
| Higher 2 Div. 2 | 26.6% | 21.2% |
| Third | 7.8% | 6.4% |
| Pass |  | 1.5% |
| Other (Pass/Dis)* |  | 4.7% |

N=211

*Other includes Oscail and some level 8 post-graduate nursing courses which are not relevant to this study.

The study found that access students enhance and improve the academic standards of DCU. Whilst the general student body obtained more first class honours degrees, when combined with higher second

class, grade 1 (H2.1) then access students are performing on par with their peers at 65.6. to 66.1 percent. They outperform the general student cohort when second class, grade 2 (H2.2) are included. 92.2% of access students achieve a higher honours degree compared to 87.2% of the general student body. If one takes into account that almost 90% of access students entered DCU on reduced entry requirements, the academic outcome for this student cohort is even more remarkable.

**Academic performance and school status**
The DCU access programme began with a number of local linked, primarily DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in School – the government's list of officially designated disadvantaged schools) schools in the north Dublin area. As the scheme broadened into a national scheme, it expanded into non-DEIS schools. In this study the split among graduates was 46% (97) from DEIS schools and 54% (114) from non-DEIS schools. 41% of students came from DEIS schools in Dublin and 59% from non-Dublin DEIS schools. Non-DEIS students graduated in equal numbers from Dublin and rural areas.

As the DCU access programme extended its remit beyond DEIS schools to include non-DEIS students, it was important to look at how both groups were performing.

**Fig. 2: Academic performance and school status**

| Qualification | DEIS | non-DEIS |
|---|---|---|
| First | 10.3% | 14.9% |
| Higher 2 Div. 1 | 55.7% | 49.1% |
| Higher 2 Div. 2 | 22.7% | 31.6% |
| Third/pass | 11.3% | 4.4% |

The table above indicates that the performance level of students from DEIS and non-DEIS schools at upper honours levels are broadly similar at 66% and 64% respectively. However, students from DEIS schools are underperforming compared to their non-DEIS counterparts for first class honours and also at the lower honours level. They are also more than twice as likely to get a pass degree. Overall, though, they are on par with the general student body.

**Student gender analysis**
An analysis of DEIS and non-DEIS students shows females significantly outnumber males graduating from the programme: 61.1% (129) females to 38.9% (82), slightly higher than national figures. According to the HEA, females accounted for 57.6% and males 42.4% of all entrants to undergraduate programmes in 2009/10. But females accounted for 60.9% of graduates in that year (HEA, Facts and Figures 09/10, p41).

**Male academic performance**
A closer analysis of the performance of males (Fig. 3) indicates that males from DEIS schools are a cause for concern. They achieve 5.8% fewer first class honours and almost four times as many pass degrees as their non-DEIS peers.

**Fig. 3: Academic performance of males by school status (DEIS and non-DEIS)**

| Qualification | DEIS | non-DEIS |
|---|---|---|
| First | 10.9% | 16.7% |
| Higher 2 Div. 1 | 54.3% | 44.4% |
| Higher 2 Div. 2 | 23.9% | 36.1% |
| Third/Pass | 10.9% | 2.8% |

Further analysis of Dublin males by school type and location (Fig. 4) indicates that male students from Dublin based non-DEIS schools are struggling. Just 58.3% achieve a first or second class, grade 1 (H2.1) honours and 16.7% received pass degrees. This contrasts sharply to the performance of boys from outside Dublin where all bar a tiny minority achieve an honours degree.

The strong performance of males at the upper honours level from Dublin DEIS schools is very heartening, though the numbers gaining a pass degree will need to be monitored.

**Fig. 4: Academic performance of boys from DEIS and non-DEIS schools by geographic area**

| Qualification | Dublin | | Nationwide | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | DEIS | non-DEIS | DEIS | non-DEIS |
| First | 11.4% | 8.3% | 15.0% | 18.8 |
| Higher 2 Div. 1 | 54.3% | 50.0% | 60.0% | 25.0% |
| Higher 2 Div. 2 | 22.9% | 25.0% | 20.0% | 56.2% |
| Third/Pass | 11.4% | 16.7% | 5.0% | |

**Female academic performance**

Female students from DEIS schools show striking similarities to their fellow DEIS males. The girls achieved 4.3% less first class honours and are twice as likely to receive a pass grade as girls from non-DEIS schools. Similar to the boys, girls from non-DEIS schools are performing very well surpassing the general student performance with 95% of them attaining an honours degree.

**Fig. 5: Academic performance of females from DEIS and non-DEIS schools**

| Qualification | DEIS | Non-DEIS |
|---|---|---|
| First | 10.0% | 14.3% |
| Higher 2 Div. 1 | 58.0% | 50.6% |
| Higher 2 Div. 2 | 22.0% | 29.9% |
| Third/Pass | 10.0% | 5.0% |

A further analysis of female performance by geographic location and school type shows large variations. Girls from Dublin DEIS schools achieve significantly fewer first class honours than all other female categories but higher numbers of second class, grade 2 (H2.2) than girls from non-DEIS schools. Girls from DEIS schools outside Dublin are thriving.

**Fig. 6: Academic performance of girls from DEIS and non-DEIS schools by geographic area (Dublin/non Dublin)**

| Qualification | Dublin | | Nationwide | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | DEIS | Non-DEIS | DEIS | Non-DEIS |
| First | 6.9% | 14.3% | 12.8% | 15.7% |
| Higher 2 Div. 1 | 62.1% | 52.4% | 61.5% | 39.5% |
| Higher 2 Div. 2 | 20.7% | 23.8% | 23.1% | 36.8% |
| Third/Pass | 10.3% | 9.5% | 2.6% | 7.9% |

Boys entering the access programme from non-DEIS schools outside Dublin and girls from Dublin DEIS schools need a greater level of support than other access students.

**Further study**

Postgraduate or professional education/training is considered to give graduates a competitive edge (McNaboe and Condon, 2007; Pollard *et al*, 2004). Ireland has a very high level of participation in fourth-level education compared to the OECD averages (McNaboe and Condon, 2007). In DCU 58% of access graduates went on to further study. Of those who went on to further study, 9% are undertaking or have completed doctoral degrees. These doctorates are in the fields of science and engineering. This would tie in with the findings in this research of the high number of access students achieving a first class or higher second class, grade 1 degree. This also ties in with research by Trinity College Dublin in 2010 which found that 57% of its access students went onto further study (TCD, 2010).

These levels will need to be monitored due to changes in government funding of postgraduate studies announced in the 2012 budget (DES, 2012). These changes may impact disproportionately on access students who rely heavily on grants for further study. For example, in 2010/2011 there were 30 access students undertaking postgraduate studies in DCU of which seven were doing doctorates. In 2012/13 this had fallen to 25 despite increasing numbers of graduates. (It is worth noting 11 of these are undertaking doctorates which have a different funding structure.)

**Conclusion**

The strong performance of access students, and particularly those from some sub-categories, reinforces the argument that this group of students should be encouraged and supported to aim for and secure access to third level. Despite the significant number of students from DEIS schools graduating during the period of this study, a more detailed analysis shows causes for concern. Numbers entering the access programme have increased dramatically since 2006. From 2006–2012 access students from local linked schools made up 23% of all entrants. However, in 2006 they made up 39% of intake, falling to just 12% in 2012. Given the location of DCU in an area of high socioeconomic deprivation, the access service has reverted to its origins and in 2013, as part of a new pilot, has taken in six students from some of its most disadvantaged linked schools on minimum entry (300 points). These students, while meeting the matriculation and programme requirements of their chosen areas of study, would not have gained a place through HEAR such is the level of competition. A new chapter in the DCU access service begins.

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# 12

# ART MATTERS: INNOVATION AND ACCESS TO THE VISUAL ARTS IN DUBLIN 8

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## Abstract

This paper presents an overview of the National College of Art and Design's (NCAD) access and outreach programme and focuses on the effectiveness of one particular programme entitled the arts mentoring project. The arts mentoring project sets out to match art and design students at third level with senior cycle pupils in disadvantaged secondary schools who are actively engaged in the career choice-making process. The paper draws on research conducted by the NCAD's access officer in 2011. In her study Mc Ternan (2011) identifies a number of key issues to be addressed in terms of barriers to participation, she highlights the benefits of participation in an art and design access programme for both the third level and second level students and she identifies several areas for development in terms of improving access and participation in NCAD into the future.

**Widening participation in higher education in art and design**

The historical tracking of the gap between those who access college and those who do not has been well documented in Ireland (Mc Coy *et al* 2010; O' Connell *et al* 2006; Clancy, 1982, 1988, 1995). There is, however, a dearth of research which addresses the issue of widening participation in higher education in art and design, particularly from an Irish perspective.

The access and outreach programme at NCAD was initiated in 2005 and forms part of the art college's overall commitment and social responsibility in promoting equity of access and opportunity to students of art and design. NCAD is located within an inner city, urban environment that is both culturally rich and socially diverse. The access and outreach programme has developed a stuctured and coherent framework of engagement with 18 primary schools located in Dublin 8 and Dublin 12, and with 27 post-primary schools throughout the greater Dublin area (Appendix 1).

More recently the NCAD access office has progressed links with local community groups through a formal partnership with Fatima Groups United which is located in the F2 Centre in Rialto in Dublin 8 and the Digital Hub's learning programme, specifically through the *Future Creators* Project (2011, 2012, 2013). The NCAD access office recently collaborated with the fine art media department in NCAD, the south Dublin county council's youth arts office and Tallaght community arts on the *Creative Campus* (2013) project.

However, this snapshot of the work of the access and outreach office is a small part of the wide range of informal mentoring and visual arts related activity that takes place with local networks of home-work clubs, after schools initiatives and community groups that are supported by staff and students of the art college.



**Fig. 1 Pupils from Synge Street CBS, Dublin 8, Print Workshop, NCAD Access Day**

## Access, participation and cultural capital

The French philosopher and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) developed the concepts (1984) of '*habitus*', 'cultural capital' and 'field', within which to construct an understanding of class inequality. Bourdieu's concepts have provided the theoretical framework within which research has been undertaken by the National Arts Learning Network (NALN), which is a network of 19 specialist colleges of art, design and performing arts in the United Kingdom with a specific remit of widening participation in higher education in the creative fields (Mc Ternan, 2011, p15).

The research entitled *Art For A Few* (2009), *Art From the Heart: the perceptions of students from widening participation backgrounds of progression to and through HE Art and Design* (Hudson 2009) and *Don't put us in your boxes* (NALN 2009) gave McTernan (2011) a contemporary UK perspective with which to compare the Irish experience. The specific barriers and challenges that face prospective and current students of art and design were identified in a number of key issues that emerged, one of which finds that:

> Potential is a complex concept that is largely taken for granted but works to favour those attributes acquired through access to what are seen as valid and legitimate forms of social and cultural capital, for example knowledge of contemporary artists and designers and familiarity with certain galleries and exhibitions, thus exacerbating patterns of under-representation and exclusion (NALN, 2009, p7).

## The arts mentoring project

The arts mentoring project was piloted in 2008 in order to provide an opportunity for senior cycle pupils who attend schools that are linked with the access and outreach office to engage directly with art and design students from NCAD. The project aims to provide positive mentoring role models for second level pupils who are engaging in the choice making process for further or higher education in art and design. Third year students who volunteer to get involved in the peer mentoring programme for incoming first year students to the college generally tend to get involved in this initiative. Students prepare for the project through participating in initial mentoring training that is provided by the college counsellor along with preparatory workshops from staff from the faculty of education. These workshops focus on classroom methodologies, facilitation techniques and discussions that engage the art and design students in reflecting on their own practice and how best to bring this into a classroom context. The arts mentoring project takes place in schools for two hours per week over six weeks during November and December concluding with an exhibition in the faculty of education. The exhibitions are attended by secondary school pupils and their families, art teachers and school principals along with NCAD student facilitators and senior academic staff from the NCAD including the director and head of the faculty of art and design education. The engagement of senior staff of the college with the arts mentoring project demonstrates the value that is placed on the principle of access within the college community.

## Research methodology

The research methodology used in measuring the impact of the arts mentoring project was both qualitative and quantitative. Using a mixed-methods approach, it combined a survey of the second level student participants and third level art students responses to the intervention, including interviews with their second level art teachers. These interventions were examined in the context of the



**Fig. 2 Pupils from Presentation Secondary School, Warrenmount, Dublin 8 with their NCAD student mentors, arts mentoring exhibition, NCAD 2012.**

perceived barriers to participation in higher education in art and design through the lens of the art teachers, art and design students and the secondary school pupils who participated in the NCAD access programme.

**Findings**

One art teacher who agreed to be interviewed for this study outlined how important it was for her pupils to see how NCAD works as a third level college. She described how working with NCAD students had encouraged her pupils to see other ways of doing art, other ways of expressing themselves and how to develop their ideas. Her pupils 'felt more on a level with NCAD students, closer in age and may have very similar backgrounds and tastes ... a different influence that is fundamental.'

Several NCAD students who participated in the study agreed that they got involved in the arts mentoring project in order to build links with secondary schools as this helps pupils to construct an understanding of what art college is like:

> I feel there is inadequate preparation in school for art at third level. Leaving school I had no idea what art college would be like, I wasn't prepared and didn't get the best out of my first three years. I wanted to participate in the mentor programme to help people in a similar situation. (NCAD mentoring student)

This student's comment has highlighted one of the central aims of the arts mentoring programme. In their research, Smyth and Banks (2012) found that disadvantaged students and their families tend to be more dependent on their schools for access to the resources relevant to post-secondary educational attainment (2012, p272) or, as Bourdieu (1984) would say, for cultural capital.

Accessing the campus and working closely with art and design students allows pupils to explore their creative options and enables them to have a real, hands-on experience of what life is really like in higher education art and design.

As part of her evaluation of the NCAD access programme, McTernan surveyed over 100 secondary school participants who attended access day. During access day senior cycle pupils have the opportunity to engage in two experiential art and design studio-based workshops which are led by students from the college. The results of this survey echo the findings of research undertaken by the NALN with only 7% of the secondary school pupils indicating that they regularly visited galleries or museums, thereby demonstrating a lack of cultural capital. Furthermore, this survey also identified that the majority of respondents, 91%, did not have an opportunity to take extra classes or tuition in art.

Other issues that emerged in the wider evaluation of the NCAD access programme related to financial concerns about the cost of art materials and other costs associated with higher education. Additional tuition for portfolio preparation emerged as a deterring factor for some secondary school pupils. Issues of commitment and lack of confidence and poor self esteem were also signalled by art teachers who participated in the study.

A recent graduate of NCAD, who has commenced a professional diploma in art and design education at NCAD, completed a thesis that examined the impact of the NCAD access programme on his educational pathway to higher education in art and design. In his thesis, entitled *Education Beyond the Enlightenment: The NCAD Access Programme and its Role in Non-Traditional Education*, Fox (2013) describes the impact of the arts mentoring programme on him as a secondary school participant:

> They came out and worked with us as artists and not educators. The style was very different to what we were used to and at the start it was hard to adjust, but when we did, the possibilities were endless. (Fox, 2013)

Fox also describes the impact of the programme on his secondary school friend who also progressed to study art at the Institute of Art Design and Technology (IADT):

> When they came in and worked with us, my decision to go to art college was pretty much cemented. The exhibition we got to put on in NCAD afterwards was so educational. (Fox, 2013).

This highlights the impact of targeted and sustained outreach work, specifically for specialist subjects such as art and design. The arts mentoring project forms part of a programme of activity that takes place over the academic year, offering progressive opportunities of engagement for pupils who wish to explore or pursue their interest in higher education in art and design.

**Fig. 3 Pupils from Trinity Comprehensive School in Ballymun explored their community through sculpture, arts mentoring (2011)**



The arts mentoring project commences early in November, identifying students who are committed to engaging in an after-schools programme. The student shadowing programme takes place over two days in November, thereby affording those interested pupils the opportunity to come into the college and spend two days shadowing students in their preferred area of interest. This is then followed up with access day in March whereby pupils spend a full day on campus experiencing two practical art and design workshops, further engaging with the college, with new materials and technologies. Finally the portfolio preparation scholarships awards fund 12 pupils from linked schools to participate in the summer portfolio preparation course providing support and guidance in preparing to submit a portfolio for admission to the college.

**Fig. 4 Pupils from Mercy College, Coolock explored ceramics, arts mentoring (2012)**



The result of the findings were that the arts mentoring project has had a significant impact on the participating secondary school pupils and art and design students of the college. This project has since been developed as an accredited module within the design or fine art and education BA (Hons) degree commencing in October 2013, ensuring that this particular access intervention will continue to impact on those pupils and art students who engage with it. This is particularly important as the project raises awareness of issues of access and disadvantage with participating art and design students which has resonance for our future artists, designers and teachers.

This paper represents initial research into the specific field of widening participation in higher education in art and design in Ireland and it is intended to progress this research in a national context.

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# 13 AN EXPLORATION OF THE IMPACT OF WIDENING PARTICIPATION INITIATIVES FOR LEAVING CERTIFICATE STUDENTS ENTERING FULL TIME UNDERGRADUATE (LEVEL 8) PROGRAMMES IN 2007 IN FIVE IRISH UNIVERSITIES

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## Abstract

This research paper compares our findings with the findings reported in the Higher Education Authority's (HEA) *A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education* (Mooney, Patterson *et al* 2010). The HEA research provided a new methodological framework for tracking student progression at third level and recommended further research on progression and attainment within higher education, with particular focus on non-traditional groups. This research paper seeks to make an important contribution to knowledge on the progression of access students in third level. It also highlights the importance of evidence based practice in the delivery of high quality access supports. This paper outlines the impact of third level access programmes as widening participation initiatives for leaving certificate students entering full time undergraduate (level 8) programmes in 2007 in five Irish universities.

## Introduction

We sought to contribute to the body of published research that examines the experience, performance and outcomes of access students after they enter third level education. This collaborative paper will present empirical evidence relating to the progression through higher education of access students registered to DCU, UCD, NUIM, UCC and UL in September 2007. We follow this cohort of students through to their graduation and present data on their status up to March 2012, analysing the importance (if any) of points such as a student's attendance at a DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) school and whether a student received a supported entry (entry of lower points) place on their university degree programme.

The research will compare our findings with the findings reported in the Higher Education Authority's (HEA) *A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education* (Mooney, Patterson *et al* 2010).

### Rationale for the research
The aims of this study were to:
- contribute to the generation of high quality, statistically reliable, published data on progression of access students
- share good practice with colleagues
- ensure the work of practitioners is based on solid evidence
- document the findings to contribute to the national debate on the future of access initiatives
- enhance collaboration between post-entry support professionals and the HEA.

This study is strongly informed and guided by the HEA (2010). With permission from the HEA research team, we adapted their methodological framework for our use. Our study did not set out to compare

the HEA data set directly with the access data set, as our data is a subset of the HEA data, but we are informed and guided by their results in order to draw conclusions about the performance of the access cohort. In presenting their work, the HEA highlighted that there would be value in knowing how the access students, as a distinct group, had performed against the measures that were used in their study. There is particular interest in the progression of access students at third level within the higher education community due to their continued under representation at third level and there remains a clear focus on policy and strategic planning along with considerable financial investment on this agenda.

This article is based on a descriptive study using quantitative empirical data, and sets out to investigate a number of assumptions that impinge on decision making around the investment of supports for access students, primarily in their first year.

The following questions underpinned the research:
1. Do access students entering full time undergraduate degree programmes in participating universities in this study have lower non-presence rates than the total population of students entering full time undergraduate degree programmes in universities?
2. Are non-presence rates higher for access students who enter a full-time undergraduate degree programme in university with scores below the published CAO points?
3. Are non-presence rates higher for access students who previously attended a DEIS secondary school before entering a full time undergraduate degree programme in university?
4. Is the level of prior educational attainment (i.e. leaving certificate points) and non-presence rates similar for access students and the total population of students entering full time undergraduate degree programmes?

From this rationale we draw the following hypothesis: based on theoretical and empirical readings, and our experiential knowledge as access practitioners, we hypothesise that access students, with specialised access supports, fare equally well in their progression chances as the total student population at undergraduate degree level 8.

### Ethical considerations
Permission was given from gatekeepers in participating universities to generate the research data required from existing student record systems and local access office database records. Each practitioner had responsibility to gather their own student data. All student identifiers were removed and each student record was coded to protect individual student identities.

### Methodology
The access student database consists of all students who entered undergraduate degree programmes in any of five higher education institutions (UCD, DCU, NUIM, UL or UCC) for the first time in academic year 2007/2008 with the support of an access scheme. On 1 March 2008, the database contained 511 student records.

Student characteristics contained in the database include gender, educational attainment, type of course offer, school-type and degree attainment. Information pertaining to the total population of students in full time undergraduate degree programmes in universities was taken from the report *A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education* published by the HEA. New entrants are classified as 'not' present if they do not appear in the statistical returns of that institution in the following academic year. An extension of the report provides estimates of non-presence for years two, three and four and beyond four.

The methodology used for this study replicated that used by the HEA as closely as possible. The census dates used for the analysis were 1 March 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012. At each date, students who progressed, were registered to repeat or transferred within the institution, were deemed to be 'present', while those with no student record (withdrawn, cancelled pre-enrolment or inactive) in the institution were deemed 'not present'. Similar to the HEA study, students who withdrew from the institution prior to the first census date of 1 March 2008 were not included in the database.

**Limitations of the study**

- Exclusion of students who withdrew from the institution prior to the first census date of 1 March 2008. In their study, the HEA estimate that just 4% of new entrants dropped out of their original course of study before 1 March of the academic year their course progressed. It was possible as part of this research to gather information for those access students who withdrew prior to 1 March 2008 and we can confirm that 4% of this cohort was non-present on that date.

- For the purposes of this study, our research consists of a series of bivariate comparisons which offers a descriptive rather a multivariate analysis. A useful next stop in this research would be to examine the impact of all the variables simultaneously using a multivariate analysis.

- The study includes five of the seven higher education institutions who accepted Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) applications in 2007. The study could be improved to a full database with the inclusion of the two other institutions accepting HEAR applications at that time, and indeed future studies would benefit from the inclusion of all 16 institutions that now accept HEAR applications. This is a particularly important limitation as the total population of students in full-time undergraduate degree study at university to which we refer is made up of all universities, and not just the five universities who participated in our study.

- The definition of 'presence' may be a limitation. We have defined 'non-presence' as having no student registration status in the institution at that time, therefore being present means a student does have a student registration status. There is a tension however between 'presence' and 'progression'. A student being 'present' could indicate they are repeating, transferring or progressing to the next stage of study. In our study repeating students and progressing students are treated equally.

**Research findings**

This section presents the results of the comparative analysis of the non-presence rates of access students in five universities against the total population of students in full time undergraduate degree study at university as reported by *A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education* (HEA, 2010). Our study provides an outline of the non-presence rates, and proceeds to analyse these results in more depth by examining the factors of school type, supported entry method, and leaving certificate points attainment. In examining the non-presence rates of both groups there is a distinct difference. We found a larger proportion of our access new entrant group (12%) were non-present by March of year 2, while.9.5% of the total new entrant population of the five universities were non-present by the same stage.

This provides us with evidence that access students are more at risk of withdrawing in the earlier years of their studies than the total university population. Further research into the reasons for this is very important in order that access supports can be targeted most efficiently. Our evidence also suggests that access students who persist with their studies beyond year 3 have similar retention rates and successfully progress through their degree at similar rates to the total population. Therefore the timing of access support delivery is important, with a clear need for most support to be available in earlier years of study.

## Does DEIS matter?

In examining the differences in outcomes for access students who attended a DEIS secondary school and access students who did not, we find there are notable differences in the presence rates between the two groups. 9% of access students who attended a DEIS secondary school were recorded to be non-present in March of year 2, compared to 14% of access students who did not attend a DEIS secondary school. In fact, the trend of cumulative non-presence rates for access students from DEIS schools is similar to the non-presence rates for the total population of university students. This suggests that access supports are most effective for students who come to university having attended a DEIS school.

## Supported entry method

In addition to looking at school type, we examined the differences in outcomes for access students who received a supported entry offer to their degree programme and those access students who were awarded their place on merit. We would expect to find that access students entering on merit would have lower non-presence rates than those who received a supported entry offer, and our research does indeed support this. We find that while 14.5% of access students who receive supported entry are non-present in March of year 2, only 9.5% of access merit students will be non-present. It is important to remember that access merit students can face the same non-academic barriers to their study as those who have supported entry, and our research suggests that access merit students are benefiting from access supports, enabling them to achieve equal completion rates. We also find that access supported students have the higher non-present rates with almost a quarter of them being non-present by year 5. This is a very important finding and it should be explored further how access supports can be refined and targeted more effectively at this group.

We have therefore some important results pertaining to school type and entry type. We analysed these results further and compared the non-presence rates for both variables together. Reviewing the analysis of school type and entry method discussed in the previous sections, it is not surprising to note that access students who attended DEIS schools and entered university with merit offers are most likely to be present at each year of their studies, having the lowest cumulative non-presence rates. In looking more closely at access students from DEIS schools who were made supported offers to study, there are notable large rises in non-presence each year raising to 14.5% by year 3, 18% by year 4 and 23% by year 5, which is almost as high as the year 5 non-presence rates for non-DEIS supported students. This strongly suggests a need for support throughout the student's university experience and not just during their first year.

## Prior educational attainment and DEIS

The final factor our research examined was leaving certificate attainment. Our study examined the non-presence rates of the access group by their leaving certificate points and school type. Students from DEIS schools generally entered university with higher points than those from non-DEIS schools. Similar to the total population of university students, as reported by the HEA study, access students with high leaving certificate points are more likely to be present in their second year of study. Only 3% of those access students who achieved over 500 points are reported as non-present after year 1. It is interesting to note that 15% of access students who achieved 205–300 points are reported as non-present, as were 15% of access students who achieved 305–400 points. The HEA study reported that at similar leaving certificate point levels, 19% of the general population of university students were non-present at 205–300 points and between 14 and 19% were not present at 305–400. Our research found that there are clear differences emerging between those access students that entered university having attended a DEIS school, and those who did not. This again supports the finding that access supports are making a difference to those who have previously attended a DEIS school.

## Conclusion

Overall, it emerged from the study that access students benefit from targeted supports in first and second year and that once these students make that transition, they perform equally as well as other students. As found by the HEA report, *A Study of Progression in Higher Education*, 91% of the national population progress to 2nd year in comparison to access students at 88%. This gap still exists as students move from second to third year, however as access students progress beyond second year, a reduction in this gap does appear. Access students are generally entering university with lower educational and financial support and face greater challenges as they make the initial transition from second level to third level. However, once they go beyond second year, progression appears to stabilise, students begin to settle in and performance is increased. This indicates that the first year transition is the hardest and students will benefit from targeted supports at this stage.

Our study also finds some important implications for the work of access professionals. In recent years, the numbers of students entering universities under access schemes has more than doubled. Structural constraints, such as these increases in student numbers requiring supports alongside a reduction in staff numbers across the sector, are impacting on the capacity to deliver targeted and appropriate first year supports to access students, such as individual meetings with students to review their expectations and knowledge of university. This is very concerning for access professionals, and there is a clear need to analyse current groups of access students in terms of their particular needs. Our research points to to cohorts within access groups that should be a focus of further access work, and further research, analysis and discussion would be very beneficial.

### Note on post-entry supports

Students who entered the institutions through the schemes could do so on a supported-entry basis or be offered their place through competitive points. Such students were termed access students and as members of the access programme were offered specialised post-entry supports. The primary objective of post-entry supports is to help in the transition to the culture of higher education and to support the students throughout their programme of study so that they can achieve their academic potential. In this regard, post-entry supports fall into three main areas: financial, personal and social, and academic. The purpose of these supports is to bridge the gap between the family's circumstances and what will be required for the student to succeed in their studies. Post-entry supports include a wide range of activities including social events, orientation programmes to introduce students to university, additional tuition if needed, drop in services, bursaries, advice about grants and scholarships, one-to-one meetings with access staff and mentoring. These activities vary from institution to institution. Currently, nine institutions are members of the network and five of these institutions took part in the current research. When the HEA study was published in 2010, the network identified an opportunity to contribute to the national discussion through undertaking research to compile data which would allow a comparison between the progression of access students and the whole higher education student body. Other benefits to undertaking this piece of work included enhancing collaboration between post-entry professionals and the HEA and to support post-entry professionals in ensuring their practice is based on solid evidence.

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# 14 EQUALITY OF ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION: DISCUSSION OF EMERGING ISSUES REGARDING THE PERFORMANCE OF MIGRANTS AT THE INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, BLANCHARDSTOWN

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## Abstract

The impact of Ireland's increased diversity as a result of migration is evident across all sectors of society, including higher education. The HEA recognises increased diversity as an 'immediate challenge at school level' and sure to become a 'key higher education issue in the near future' (2008, p37). Language constitutes one of the complex barriers to providing higher educational opportunities to immigrants (Linehan and Hogan, 2008; Coghlan *et al*, 2005). Far more research and resources have been dedicated to the English language issue at primary and post primary level in Ireland, as opposed to third level.

This paper presents the findings of a small-scale study of the impact of English language competency on the performance of migrants in higher education in Ireland. It is based on a case study of a group of first year social studies students at the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB). ITB is located in Dublin 15, an area with one of the highest proportions of non-Irish nationals, who represent 23.5% of its residents (Ryan 2010, p8). A mixed methods approach was used for the small-scale study. Data from a quantitative analysis of students' end of year academic results triangulated with a qualitative analysis of questionnaires completed by lecturers and interviews with non-native speakers (NNS) of English on the impact of language competency on their performance. The emerging issues that will be discussed, in the context of equality of access to higher education, include access to higher education, identification of NNS and factors impacting their performance such as written production and mastery of academic English.

## Introduction

This paper presents the findings of a small scale study of the impact of English language competency on the performance of migrants in higher education in Ireland. It is based on a case study of a group of first year social studies students at the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB). First, relevant terminology will be outlined before focusing on the promotion of equality in higher education by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) – the framework within which the data will subsequently be critiqued. Next, the presence of migrants in the Institutes of Technology (IOTs) will be discussed, before presenting the findings of the quantitative analysis of the ITB students' end of year results, in addition to the qualitative analysis of data from the lecturers' surveys and interviews with students. The emerging issues will be discussed before finally drawing conclusions in the context of equality of access to higher education.

## Terminology

This case study considers the performance of migrants, a catch-all term that encompasses internal diversity. Migrants are hugely diverse in linguistic terms: they are not all non-native speakers of English, and amongst those who are, their proficiency varies considerably. The HEA uses the terms 'Irish' and 'non-Irish' students in referring to students at third level. This terminology does not allow for distinguishing between native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) of English, or between 'international' fee-paying or Erasmus students and students from migrant backgrounds. Since ITB's number of 'international students', namely students usually resident outside of Ireland who come here on a student visa to study on a fee paying basis (Warner 2006, p8), remains very low, 'migrants', who constitute the vast majority of ITB's non-Irish student population, are the focus of this study.

**The promotion of equality of access in higher education**

Education systems tend to reproduce existing inequalities in the wider society and these inequalities are most evident in higher education (Linehan and Hogan, 2008). Despite the promotion of equality of opportunity constituting one of the core functions of the Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2008, p14), inequality pervades in higher education in Ireland. While recognising immigration as a 'key emerging challenge in the context of equality of education' (HEA 2008, p37), the current *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008–2013* does not include specific action points relating to ethnicity, given the dearth of official educational data in this respect at the time of its development. This is since being addressed through the equal access data collection, while the study of progression in higher education considers the impact of nationality (Irish/non-Irish) as one of the student characteristics on student progression (Mooney *et al*, 2010). However, as will be discussed subsequently, the data that is being collected does not enable the identification of non-native speakers of English. The National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education's understanding of the concept 'access' includes retention and successful completion, as well as entry to higher education (HEA 2008, p14), more akin to 'equality of outcomes' than 'equality of opportunities' (Baker *et al*, 2004, p21).

**Language a barrier to education**

Language has been identified as a barrier to the provision of higher education opportunities to immigrants (Warner 2006, Dunbar 2008, HEA 2008). In their study on *Migrants and Higher Education*, Linehan and Hogan (2008, p106) note 'the majority of those interviewed identified the lack of spoken and written English language skills as a major barrier to entering higher education and a fundamental barrier against fuller integration'. A lack of any systematic or integrated approach to language support at third level has been identified (Ní Chonaill, forthcoming).

**Migrants in the IOTs?**

According to the HEA equal access survey of 2011/2012, the proportion of new entrants, at undergraduate level, from non-Irish ethnic backgrounds tends to be higher in the IOTs than universities. A considerable proportion of non-Irish nationals studying in Ireland do so in the fields of social science, business and law (census 2011). Social science programmes and business programmes are particularly well represented in the IOT sector.

The IOTs may also attract migrant students precisely because of the fact that they are different to the universities. Keogh and Whyte (2003, p9) report on research in the UK which found that:

> Former polytechnic institutions in large urban areas and subjects with a more vocational focus have a greater concentration of ethnic minority students … this may be because such students positively decide to attend institutions which they perceive to be more 'friendly' as well as being nearer family and other support networks.

**Access to institutes of technology**

There are also more educational reasons why institutes of IOTs may take in more migrants than the university sector. It is more difficult for students from non-English speaking backgrounds to attain the points required for university programmes. An OECD policy review group noted the 'privilege of fee-paying schools in feeding universities' (2009, p4) in Ireland and the low level of immigrant students attending these.

The disadvantage of engaging with the examinations process through a second language is also seen to impact on points, with many educationalists agreeing that students whose first language is not English may be under-achieving at leaving certificate level. Keogh and Whyte (2003) interviewed teachers at second level and reported a number of issues. Initially, they established a link between language and achievement: 'due to language difficulties, some immigrant students were not able to show their ability

or achieve their potential' (p.48). This took on even greater importance in the area of formal assessment: 'teachers mentioned how examinations seem to test students' language skills rather than their ability or their knowledge of subject areas' (p.49). In a study by Lyons and Little (2009, p62), teachers identified issues for NNS both in terms of the readability of the examination papers, and issues of structure and format which prevented NNS students performing to the best of their ability.

## Entry requirements

While international students may need to provide evidence of a score of 6.0 or more on IELTS – which is equivalent to B2 on the Council of Europe Framework – to enter higher education, students from migrant backgrounds only need ordinary leaving certificate English, which one language support teacher estimated to be achievable at a much lower level of A2 (Thompson 2010).

Keogh and Whyte (2003, p9) note that another reason that the former polytechnic universities attracted more migrant students was that 'these universities accept greater numbers of students with non-standard entry qualifications, and ethnic minority groups are more likely to fall into this category'. This may also be true for the IOT sector. Access agreements with FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council) allow students to gain entry to undergraduate courses on the basis of points attained on level 5 awards. Entry on to FETAC courses can be secured with minimum leaving certificate results or even the leaving certificate applied (CAO 2013). A considerable proportion of students in social sciences in IOTs come through the FETAC route.

## The ITB context

ITB is located in Dublin 15, home to one of the highest proportions of migrants nationwide. 23.8% of the area's population were recorded as non-Irish nationals in the 2011 census (Ryan 2012), almost double the national average of 12% (CSO 2012). ITB's student population reflects the diversity of its immediate catchment area: in 2012/2013 non-Irish nationals, coming from 89 different countries, comprised 19.73% of the student body (ITB 2013).

## Methodology

A mixed methods approach was used for this case study. A group of first year students on a social studies programme were purposively chosen as the sample. The students' end of year academic results were analysed quantitatively using a two-sample t-test and triangulated with a qualitative analysis of data from lecturers who taught the students (questionnaires) and the students themselves (interviews). Lecturers for this cohort of students were asked to complete a questionnaire which focused on general issues relating to the group, on how NNS engaged with the programme compared to NS and finally on issues with written production for these students. Eight lecturers returned completed questionnaires. The NNS students were subsequently interviewed as regards their experience of the impact of English language competency on their performance.

## Findings – access

Of the eight NNS participants chosen for this small-scale study out of a class of 77 students, one accessed the course following the completion of a leaving certificate, two entered as mature students and, the largest number, namely five, entered the course through the FETAC route. In addition to highlighting the various entry routes onto such a programme, this cohort is reflective of the considerable proportion of students in social sciences in the IOTs coming through non-standard entry routes, such as FETAC, as alluded to above.

## Identification

Lecturers were uncertain about the numbers of NNS in class with estimates from 5% to 10%. A key issue that emerged was how to pinpoint these students who are not currently identifiable through the data

collected by the HEA or ITB. Most lecturers reported identifying these NNS students initially during tutorials and when correcting written work. Lecturers found this cohort of students quite diverse, both in terms of general ability and language competence, which is reflected in their end of year results. They also noted a mix of younger and mature students.

**Performance: end of year results**

At the end of the first year of the programme, taking into consideration both summer and autumn examination results, four of the eight NNS (50%) and 53 of the 69 NS (76.8%) successfully completed first year of the programme. (Only new entrants for 2012/13 who were considered in the summer and autumn examination boards were included in the study. A GPA of 2.0 is required to successfully progress from year 1 to year 2, in addition to 60 credits). The results of a two-sample t-test of students' grade point average (GPA) shows a difference between the means, but insufficient evidence of a statistical significance between the two results ($p=0.267$). However, removing the highest scoring of the NNS from the sample yielded a statistically significant difference in GPA between groups ($p=0.049$) which suggests this as a high influence data point, and additionally suggests that the issue deserves further investigation with a bigger sample.

**Issues impacting performance**

As highlighted earlier, migrants are hugely diverse in terms of English language competency. In comparing NNS to NS, some lecturers commented that it was difficult to generalise as there was quite a range of abilities among the cohort. One lecturer noted: 'In spite of English not being their first language, many are mature students with better overall language skills than their NS classmates.' While all lecturers agreed that there was a significant issue with NNS students' understanding materials presented in lectures, written production was the area which caused most concern and was felt would impact most on results.

With regard to written language production, lecturers noted few issues around general and specific vocabulary, but reported problems with grammatical endings, and sentence and paragraph construction. One student, aware of such problems, spoke of the impact of answering examination questions in English: 'There wouldn't be enough time for me to make some changes. You just let it be as you don't have time to make such corrections.' The higher order skills such as comparing and contrasting information, and building arguments proved far more challenging for NNS. Another student spoke of 'lack of practice' to master skills such as comparing and contrasting.

While NNS of English may have acquired adequate levels of conversational English, they may find academic work very challenging. Linehan and Hogan (2008, p75) note evidence that: 'Even where students present with the necessary qualifications and standards, as demonstrated through tests such as IELTS, the demands of academic English were seen to be very challenging for any student for whom English was not his/her mother tongue.' One student spoke of her friends from non-English speaking countries' experience of academic writing: 'They struggle a lot, they find it very hard.' While students were seen to perform well in oral presentations, in written assignments NNS students were seen to have some issues with paraphrasing, commenting on and referencing sources, and avoiding plagiarism.

Increasingly, we are encountering students who have completed their second level education in Ireland who may sound fluent but have considerable underlying deficits in English. Educational psychologist Jim Cummins (1984) would contend that while basic interpersonal communications skills (BICS) will be acquired by a migrant child immersed in a school setting with language support in approximately two years, it may take between five and seven years for a child to acquire cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). Thus, for migrant students to successfully transfer to upper second level and higher education, they require 'longer support to achieve mastery of academic English' (Taguma *et al*, 2009,

p9) than the two years traditionally provided at second level in Ireland. This subsequently has implications for third level. The agreement among educationalists regarding the possibility of NNS underachieving at leaving certificate level, highlighted earlier, is also applicable to higher education. One of the students interviewed spoke of the impact of a language deficit: 'They (NNS) don't fail because they don't know but because they are not expressing themselves in the right way.' Similar to Lyons and Little's (2009) findings, students' results were not always an accurate reflection of their effort or the knowledge they had gained. As one lecturer remarked: 'A number of the non-native speakers had put in a lot of work but problems with structuring their essay and an over-emphasis on direct quotations impacted negatively on their marks in their essays.'

## Conclusion

While the sample of NNS for this study was very small, a number of issues have emerged from the analysis. The HEA has identified immigrants as a group whose needs merit consideration. While access to higher education does not appear to be an issue, with seven of the eight NNS coming through a non-standard entry route, the inequalities do not emerge until the end of the academic year. While the results of the quantitative analysis were not statistically significant, there was a difference between the means and 50% of the NNS did not successfully progress to second year. In terms of performance, problems regarding written production and mastery of academic English were discussed, factors which impact on examination performance. Migrant students underachieving in higher education due to language issues is a shortfall which can follow them throughout the course of their studies. Hence equality of opportunity is not being realized in terms of certain students progressing to postgraduate studies or indeed accessing the labour market. Indeed, an ESRI study found that language skills are positively linked to earnings: migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds are subjected to an occupational gap, whereas this is not the case for those from English-speaking backgrounds (O'Connell and McGinnity, 2008). While NNS have a diverse range of abilities, there is no current means of identifying those for whom English language competency is seriously impacting performance. With an increase of 'generation 1.5' (Roberge *et al,* 2009) coming through the system this is an issue that is set to have an increased impact on the IOT sector. One NNS, referring to her four colleagues who did not progress, spoke of the need for 'early intervention' as when the results come out it is too late. Considering equality of access as including successful completion this is an area that deserves further investigation in the Irish context.

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# 15 EQUALITY OF ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND: WHAT IS THE REALITY FOR REFUGEES, ASYLUM-SEEKERS AND OTHER VULNERABLE MIGRANTS IN WATERFORD AND THE SOUTH-EAST REGION?

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## Abstract

The following paper examines the barriers that migrants face while trying to access higher education in Ireland. Education is a fundamental indicator of immigrant integration as outlined by EU legislation and Irish policy. From the perspective of a migrant-focused non-government agency (NGO) operating in the south-east, three key barriers facing migrants in their journey to access higher education are outlined.

## Introduction

Education plays a vital role in the integration of refugees and asylum-seekers into society (Kraszewska *et al*, 2007). Enshrined by the universal declaration of human rights, the right to education is guaranteed in Ireland. However, refugees, asylum-seekers and undocumented migrants in Ireland face great difficulty in accessing higher, primarily third level, education. Barriers faced by migrants include language, culture, finance, non-recognition of prior learning (sometimes exacerbated by lack of transcripts relating to qualifications gained in their home country), qualifications not translating to equivalent in host country, gender access, lack of knowledge about available courses and criteria of eligibility, and difficulties in completing the multitude of forms during the application process. In the experience of the Integration and Support Unit (ISU) as a non-governmental organisation operating in the south-east region, fees, information and inconsistent recognition of prior learning are the most common obstacles for our clients seeking to access higher education, and therefore these issues will be the primary focus of this paper.

Young people make up a growing number of this diverse population, with one in seven children in Ireland now coming from a migrant background and an estimated 24,312 children born outside of Ireland registered in Irish secondary schools (Department of Education and Science, 2012). The ISU consulted with 541 international second level students for the 2011–2013 minority youth strategy in the south-east region. Participants reported that barriers such as language, culture, finance and lack of information affect the way in which they integrate into education and mainstream youth opportunities (Nolan, 2010).

As expected, the majority were in the 12 to 17 years range; and a significant number of 18 to 20 year olds were still at second level for of the following reasons:
- Difficulties with English language and literacy (which can lead to difficulties with the Irish state exam system).
- Struggles in adjusting to a new environment.
- Literacy difficulties in first language.
- Cultural challenges which may prohibit their learning/progression.
- Little to no experience in formal education in country of origin.
- Born outside of Ireland and joining parent(s) through family reunification process (Nolan, 2010).

Younger generations living in direct provision accommodation, for example unaccompanied minors and 'aged-out' minors, are at a particular disadvantage within this broader cohort,and do not have the supports to enable them attend school on a regular basis. For example, there is often no one to ensure

students are up on time; space and privacy constraints impede students' ability to complete homework; and a range of other factors. Generally, education has been interrupted both at home and in host country, and tracking of students who are moved within Ireland (and recording non-attendance) is inadequate, as is target setting in terms of education or training opportunities. There is a definite challenge for education providers to accommodate and provide supports for growing current and future generations of migrants.

The Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI) refers to young migrants as the '1.5 generation'. They are the children of the first generation of migrants who have made Ireland their home, their distinguishing feature being that they were born outside of Ireland but have grown up here. The fact that there were not born here means they do not enjoy the same rights as Irish-born siblings or classmates. Refugees often experience profound physical and psychological effects due to the circumstances which prompted their migration, for example persecution, rape, intimidation, trafficking, torture. The wider impact on families is huge. Education is the main integration tool which reintroduces a sense of cohesion and routine in the lives of refugees (UNHCR, 2009) and is crucial for social and emotional healing (Eisenbruch, 1998). This is particularly relevant for those of our clients currently living in direct provision accommodation who may be forced to move a number of times even within Ireland. Their education is constantly interrupted which fosters insecurity and hinders full participation in education.

These unique circumstances should inform the development and implementation of policies and programmes dealing specifically with educational interventions for refugees to complement mainstream support services.

**Information**
UNHCR education consultant Robyn Fysh reports that collaborative and consultative processes where all stakeholders (education providers and users) are encouraged to share best practice and recommendations on ways of overcoming challenges will provide the best outcomes. This includes decision making around entry criteria, tuition fees, language competency, prior knowledge recognition and regularisation of information to potential students. The quagmire of different, and sometimes contradictory, information from a myriad of education providers and criteria can be prohibitively confusing to some migrants (Fysh, 2009).

**Case Study 1**
An example of the inconsistencies between providers include the story of a separated child who was placed in adult direct provision accommodation on reaching her 18th birthday. She was denied access to a course in Waterford Institute of Technology but gained access to exactly the same course in Carlow Institute of Technology. This meant that she needed additional supports to enable her travel to another facility in another area (Nolan, 2012).

**Fees**
In 2013, the Minister for Education and Skills Ruairí Quinn TD introduced a policy change to allow students who have secured Irish citizenship during third level education to reverse their fee status (MRCI, 2013). This means that migrants will benefit from lower fee structures in line with Irish students. The move addresses a key recommendation from the MRCI's migrant education access campaign which has been calling for equality for children of non-EU migrants accessing third level education in Ireland. However, loopholes in Irish law regarding the citizenship status of children who are not Irish-born but who have lived and been educated here at first and second level still urgently need to be addressed if they are to benefit from the citizenship principle. There is a continuing issue for young migrants who are only allowed to begin the process of acquiring citizenship after they turn 16. This and other issues are also highlighted in the migrant education access campaign; other recommendations presented as part the campaign are yet to be addressed.

While the regularisation of Irish higher education fees is a significant step towards achieving full equity of access to higher education in Ireland for all residents (with citizenship), and (partially) resolves a major obstacle identified by much of the literature on the subject, a number of serious barriers remain preventing migrants from fully availing of their right to education. Commentators have warned that disparity of access to higher education threatens social cohesion in Ireland and fundamentally disrupts the integration process, as well as having significant economic implications (Coughlan *et al*, 2005).

### Case study 2
We have examples of families where more than one child has been educated through primary and secondary level but do not have the same rights to accessing education as Irish counterparts. Older siblings were born outside of the European Economic Area (EEA) and considered a Third Country National (TCN) and therefore only eligible if fees can be paid privately and at the higher international students' cost. This has created inequalities' of access even within family units (Nolan, 2012).

### Recognition of prior learning and qualifications
Interviewees have asserted that employers often refuse to recognise qualifications obtained in immigrants' home countries, and some have observed that employers tend to make uncharitable assumptions about the standard of qualifications from certain countries and generally treat them with 'suspicion' (Coughlan *et al*, 2005). Students have reported that some universities adopt a 'patronising' and 'uninformed' attitude with regard to foreign students' prior learning (Coughlan *et al*, 2005). This perceived lack of recognition on the part of employers often leads to underemployment – highly skilled/qualified individuals working in unskilled manual labour. Lack of recognition by third level institutions has led to immigrants needlessly repeating large chunks of their education. In cases where qualifications have been recognised, the process is often lengthy, expensive and replete with delays (Coughlan *et al*, 2005).

Ni Mhurchu, (2007) believes:

> ... *existing consultation mechanisms between government departments, employers and professional bodies are inadequate for the purposes of coordinating their various approaches when dealing with the issue of overseas qualifications and work experience.*

Formal guidance regarding academic qualifications in a standardised methodology is missing.

Refugees often have difficulty providing documentation of qualifications because of forced displacement, emergency, war or poor record keeping. In cases where degree certificates can be produced; additional documentation such as full transcripts is often required. However, as a signatory to the Council of Europe/UNESCO convention on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education in the European region (Lisbon Convention, 1997), Ireland is obliged to assess qualifications obtained in another country and to develop procedures to assess whether they meet requirements for access to higher education, 'even in cases in which qualifications cannot be proven through documentary evidence' (Ni Mhurchu, 2007).

Students have also expressed their concerns about an inconsistency of approach when assessing prior learning. Outcomes often are left 'to the discretion of individual third-level institutional departments' with the result that students are receiving different responses from different institutions. Case study 1, above, is an example of this.

Many interviewees reported that they were not aware of the recognition of prior learning policy as set out by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), which can grant exemptions from some course requirements. Our experience in the ISU is that a lot of oral evidence at initial registration/interview stage exists to confirm this despite having access to other educational information and services.

Equality of access to education in central Europe focuses on eight main areas of intervention:

1. Legislation on access to education
2. Data management
3. Language learning
4. Grade placement
5. Teacher training
6. Support in school
7. Funding
8. Early childhood education

## Challenges

- Lack of up to date statistics regarding the enrolment (including entry criteria) and retention rates of migrant groups.
- Dependency on legal status to access education.
- Identification of a strategy to aid the enrolment of migrant groups.
- Financial barriers associated with acquiring English language proficiency at a level satisfying third level entry criteria.
- Difficulties in placing students in appropriate levels based on language proficiency rather than age, with the result that many are still in second level education aged 18 years or more which is not the ideal.
- Identifying appropriate funding streams to assist students, limitations and inconsistencies with funding criteria, funding restrictions, lack of information and advocacy supports to access available grants.

## Recommendations

- Service providers and educators must recognise that refugees have specific needs which require holistic processes to put the learner first.
- Review of relevant legislation on access to education to encompass more equal participation.
- Improve the recording of enrolment and retention rates of refugee/vulnerable migrant students. This information should be disaggregated from the enrolment and retention rates of the entire school population to avoid hidden pockets of inequality and render discriminatory patterns of access invisible.

## Conclusion

The ISU recommends, in line with UNHCR policy, the development and design of a comprehensive report of local/regional key challenges encountered by refugees and asylum seekers when accessing higher education opportunities, to provide specific regional recommendations with the goal of improving access while strengthening the development and implementation of current relevant policy.

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# 16

# ANALYSIS OF BLIND AND VISION IMPAIRED APPLICANTS THROUGH THE DISABILITY ACCESS ROUTE TO EDUCATION PROGRAMME (DARE) 2010, 2011 AND 2012

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## Abstract

There is a dearth of information available on the educational experience of students who are blind and vision impaired in second level education and therefore it is difficult to measure attainment and progression to higher education. It has been established that blind and vision impaired applicants are far less likely to progress to higher education than their peers. In order to increase the participation of students with vision-impairments, further analysis is required to determine what strategies need to be taken across the educational sector to address the low levels of progression. It is hoped that this research will provide some insight into the experiences of blind and vision impaired students at second level and their subsequent progression to higher education. The paper will focus on the analysis of Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) applications by 127 vision impaired students between 2010–2012. The paper will look at the demographic profile of blind and vision impaired students, examination of the academic and personal challenges experienced by this cohort and the grades attained in the leaving cert examination process and the degree programmes students went on to study in higher education institutions across Ireland.

## Introduction

Students with disabilities experience many challenges in successfully accessing and participating in higher education in comparison to their peers. In order to address such challenges, the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) process has been in place at a national level since 2009 and many places have been offered in higher education institutions to students with disabilities via this entry route. It is crucial to research the trends and figures available on the process thus far, in order to effectively target students with disabilities, raise awareness of the DARE process and clarify the criteria for a successful DARE application.

The Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD, 2008), found that blind and vision impaired students are 50% less likely to progress to higher level than their non-disabled peers. The HEA *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008–2013* acknowledged that despite obvious increases in overall numbers of students with disabilities, particularly low participation rates persist within the categories of sensory and physical disabilities.

Specific challenges that blind or vision impaired students face at second level are as follows:
- The need for a broader curriculum where crucial skills are taught. These skills include: braille, literacy, technical skills, mathematics and personal effectiveness.
- Creative teaching and learning approaches are required.
- Guidance for teachers on how to be more inclusive is essential.
- It is vital that there is easy access to supports and alternative learning materials (AHEAD, 2008).
- Traditional learning approaches, will not support students who are blind/visually Impaired and the report from AHEAD highlights this issue.

The area of mathematics is one particular subject area which is of concern when looking at the number of students that progress to higher education. For a person who has little or no sight, mathematics is problematic and achievement in this subject is extremely low. Subsequently, poor achievement in mathematics has the knock-on effect of lower numbers of students progressing to higher education. As mathematics is one of the matriculation requirements for the majority of higher education institutions in Ireland, this poses a very real difficulty in increasing the numbers of blind and vision impaired students entering higher education.

AHEAD, 2008, provides many recommendations on how students need to be supported at second level, some of which include:
- The teaching of braille to improve literacy and cognitive development.
- The availability of textbooks in alternative formats from publishers.
- Additional careers advice at an earlier stage.
- Funding for post secondary school summer courses to develop essential skills and start mobility training.
- Research into the teaching pedagogy of mathematics and so on.

The Higher Education Authority's (HEA) access plan for 2008–2013 states that the number of students with disabilities participating in higher education has been increasing steadily. The fund for students with disabilities is mentioned as one of the essential supports which is required in order to participate in higher education. However, the HEA, 2008, acknowledges that despite the obvious increase in overall numbers of students with disabilities, particularly low participation rates persist within the categories of sensory and physical disabilities.

In the current action plan, the HEA states that the participation rates for people with sensory disabilities at higher level stood at 15–17% at the time of publication. These figures include both blind and vision impaired and deaf/hard of hearing students. The HEA has set a target to double the participation rate of students with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities between 2008 and 2013. In relation to the blind and vision impaired category, the figures are duly increasing. The current number of students attending higher education has exceeded targets set out in the 2010 mid-term review. The numbers of blind and vision impaired students enrolled in higher education and the target for 2013 are presented in the table below. These targets are quantified in terms of the number of students who are in receipt of supports from the fund for students with disabilities and therefore relate to those in full-time education.

**Table 1: HEA disability targets – number of students enrolled in higher education**

| Category of disability | 2003/04 | 2006/07 interim target | 2013/14 | 2010/11 target |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Blind/visual impairment | 76 | 65 | 98 | 130 |

According to the Disability Advisors Working Network (DAWN, 2012) the 2010 mid-term review of the targets set by the HEA found that the 2010 interim target was exceeded in relation to the blind/vision impaired participation in higher education (see table below).

**Table 2: Mid-term review of disability targets for blind/vision impaired students**

| Category of disability | 2010 target | Students, FSD 2009/10 | Actual as % of target |
|---|---|---|---|
| Blind/visual impairment | 98 | 116 | 118% |

## Methodology

The information in this research was kindly provided by the CAO office for the 2010, 2011 and 2012 DARE applicants. All data was provided anonymously and no applicants were identifiable. This data is pending publication.

## Results

The number of blind/vision impaired applicants who have applied to DARE has increased from 36 in 2010, to 43 in 2011, to 48 in 2012.

## Geographical spread of blind/vision impaired applicants (based on home address)

Dublin, Cork and Kildare had the highest application rates across all three years. Only small numbers of applications (between one and three) have been received from Kerry, Kilkenny, Laois, Leitrim, Louth, Sligo, Tipperary, Waterford, Westmeath and Wexford.

There were no applications from blind and vision impaired students from Carlow, Longford, Mayo or Monaghan between 2010 and 2012. The reasons for the dearth in applications from these counties needs further analysis. Further investigation needs to be undertaken also to identify the reasons why only 21% of overall applications by vision impaired students came from those attending DEIS schools.

## Leaving certificate subject choices and levels of study

There are patterns evident in the subject choices taken by blind and vision impaired students in leaving certificate examinations. All students take the core modules of English and maths but some do not take Irish. Other subjects that feature prominently include: LCVP (Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme), biology, French, business organisation, history, geography, social and scientific (home economics), chemistry, art and music.

## Analysis of core subjects: levels of study and final results

A significant finding of this study is the number of students who study for ordinary level mathematics in the leaving certificate. Over the three years, 79% of blind and vision impaired applicants studied ordinary level maths (31 in 2010, 32 in 2011 and 35 in 2012). Irish is also frequently taken at ordinary level by blind and vision impaired students. Over 2010, 2011 and 2012, 64% of blind and vision impaired applicants studied Irish at ordinary level (19 in 2010, 21 in 2011 and 24 in 2012). In 2012, three students studied Irish at foundation level also, bringing the total to 27 students studying Irish in this year. Foundation level candidates were not recorded in the other years for this subject.

## Supports: second level

Students identified that assistive technology, examination supports and alternative print formats were important supports for them at second level. These supports were instrumental in enabling students to maximise their performance but the research showed that there was a huge variance in the level of competence of teachers in delivering training to students to ensure optimum use of technologies. The research also confirmed that braille was rarely used amongst blind and vision impaired students and this subsequently affected students' ability to study mathematics at higher level in leaving certificate.

## Academic and personal challenges

The most common challenges that students experience are summarised overleaf:

**Table 3: Academic challenges recorded (from personal statements in the DARE application process)**

| | |
|---|---|
| Comprehension and concentration difficulties | Difficulty note-taking/have to re-copy notes at night |
| Difficulty reading small print | Difficulty with spelling and grammar |
| Joined writing, numbers and diagrams difficult to read | Extra work required to maintain grades at a good standard |
| | Books take months to convert to accessible format |
| Slow reading, takes longer to complete work | Absence from school due to hospital appointments |
| Difficulty in seeing whiteboard/blackboard in class | Extra time not adequate in examinations |
| | Difficulty participating in class discussions |

**Table 4: Personal challenges recorded (from personal statements in the DARE application process)**

| | |
|---|---|
| Headaches/eye-strain and eye-tiredness/dizzyness/fatigue | Poor mobility/cannot participate in sports |
| Sense of vulnerability | Stress and anxiety related to appearance |
| Poor self-esteem, lack of confidence | Deteriorating condition/vision impairment |
| School does not understand | Lack of independence in comparison to peers |
| Bullying | Grades do not reflect effort/do not achieve their potential |
| Panic attacks/depression | Surgery and medical treatment, delays with medical treatment, infections |

**Eligibility, points attained and analysis of acceptances**

Over the three years, DARE eligibility reached a peak of 67% in 2011. The main reason that students are deemed ineligible is because they do not meet the DARE criteria. Although they may be deemed ineligible these students can still access supports in higher level.

Over a three year period, 62 out of 127 students achieved between 300–450 points. The number achieving between 451–500 points has been increasing year-on-year. 88 out of 127 blind and vision impaired DARE applicants accepted a place in level 6/7/8 courses; this accounts for almost 70% of blind and vision impaired applicants. The University of Limerick, University College Cork and Trinity College Dublin record the highest number of acceptances among the universities. Dublin Institute of Technology recorded the highest number of acceptances among the institutes of technology with six acceptances over the three years. Limerick Institute of Technology is the second most popular, with three acceptances.

Business, law, arts and social studies are most popular programmes. Engineering and medicine and health are least popular.

**Recommendations from the research**

The aim of this research was to discover trends and patterns arising from the DARE application process with a view to understanding how numbers of blind and vision impaired students can be increased in higher education in Ireland. On consideration of the findings of this research, there are a number of possible actions that could be taken with the aim of increasing the participation of the blind and vision impaired applicants through DARE. The key recommendations from the research analysis are as follows:

- Target counties where DARE application rate for blind and vision impaired students is nil to very low.

- Target DEIS schools to increase the number of applications coming from these areas.

- Broaden the teacher training curriculum to indicate a greater focus on use of assistive technology to enhance the learning of a diverse classroom.

- Provide greater levels of training in assistive technology so there is optimum use of of specialised software and hardware provided to blind and vision impaired students.

- Poor attainment in mathematics at primary and second level must be addressed in order for students to take the next step to higher education. Success in mathematics would also lay foundations for the pursuit of math-based IT programmes in higher education where there is currently more employment on graduation.

- Increased access to books and materials in alternative print formats before the start of the school year is critical to the success of students.

- Early intervention with initiatives aimed at increasing 'access for blind and vision impaired students should be evident at primary and lower second levels. All HEIs need to host summer school programmes and encourage integration of blind/vision impaired with peers and other students from an early age. This approach would assist in enhancing communication skills, confidence and self esteem.

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# 17 ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR ASYLUM-SEEKERS IN IRELAND AS A HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE

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## Abstract

This paper is aimed at raising awareness among government authorities, civil society organisations and the general public, on the challenges of human rights performance of Ireland in the matter of access to higher education for young asylum seekers. At its outset, the paper will establish the implications of national legal and policy measures leading to excluding this vulnerable group from access to higher education. Next, it will ascertain whether this practice is compatible with the international obligations of the Irish state in relation to the basic human right to education, applying legal analysis as a method. Finally, the paper advocates changes in the structure of the asylum seekers' rights, with a view to facilitate the right to access higher education for people seeking asylum in line with the requirements of international human rights law.

### Context

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in article 26(1) states that everyone has the right to education. Yet this right remains an empty vessel for some groups in our society, including young asylum seekers who are denied the opportunity to continue education after completing secondary school. According to the latest statistics there are 500 people aged 18 to 25 in the direct provision out of a total of 4,624 residents (RIA). The system of direct provision, under which asylum seekers and their families reside for several years pending their status being decided, appears as a primary barrier to higher education. It hosts its residents under conditions of poverty, dependence and disempowerment (Thornton; O'Reilly). Uncertainty in the future and deprivation of educational opportunities aggravates the mental health of young individuals at an age critical for the development of personality and when every year matters. While the issue has received criticism from the civil society movement, the academic enquiry in this matter is yet to be developed. A number of relevant research studies have been conducted in the UK, which can be useful to a certain extent in gaining an understanding of the problem and developing policy change in Ireland (Hopkins and Hill; Gladwell). However, comparing the two systems needs to be done with caution since the conditions of stay and the status of asylum seekers vary considerably across countries.

### Legal lacuna or policy failure?

Currently national law is silent on the issue of access to higher education for asylum seekers in Ireland. The Refugee Act 1996 does not forbid people seeking asylum to enter higher education as it does in relation to the right to work for the group. Neither does Irish law deny the entitlement of these individuals to pursue third level education. The gap in legal regulation on the matter creates ambiguity in the status of the right to education of adult asylum seekers, leaving it open for determination and interpretation by policy and decision makers in education and immigration sectors. Paragraph 8.13 of the White Paper on Adult Education 2000 outlines state policy in relation to education and training for adults and suggests providing free access to adult literacy and English language supports as the only educational opportunities for adult asylum seekers. Likewise the Reception Integration Agency of the Department of Justice and Equality indicates on its official website:

> Adult asylum seekers may avail of free access to adult literacy and English language tuition, ... [and] ... cannot access any State supports in order to access courses in the higher and further education sector.

Since the law or policy measures do not contain explicit prohibition to enter into higher education, adult asylum seekers in principle can apply for a place in a college or a university and be accepted at the discretion of the educational institution. Several challenges may arise here. According to Chinyere, an asylum seeker, anyone entering college may have to change immigration status to become a student. This may result in withdrawal of their asylum claim and applying for a student visa may cause the individual to have to return to his or her country of origin to make a visa application. However, to the knowledge of the author, this does not happen in practice.

The cost of education appears as the gate-keeping mechanism disallowing participation of asylum seekers in higher education. The non-EU rate of fees apply to asylum seekers on the basis of their nationality, while no rights to state support are allowed in relation to their access to higher education. Currently the non-EU rate of fees in an Irish educational institution is in the area of €11,000, which is an astronomical figure for a person receiving €19 per week as a living allowance. In most fortunate, but extremely rare scenarios, university may waive fees for the asylum seeker and offer a place at affordable terms.

In 1996 Nozinic suggested that, in the absence of legal clarity over the status of the right to higher education in form of entitlement or prohibition, asylum seekers have no clear guidance as to how to act in this situation, and would likely avail of the opportunity at their own risk. 17 years later this situation has not changed, but rather additional barriers have emerged such as an institutionalised system of living for asylum seekers referred to as direct provision, set up in 2000. Residents living in hostel accommodation in rural areas would have no physical access to a college or university in Galway or Dublin if offered a place in the college. Lack of mobility and autonomy in direct provision further affects the resident's access to higher education, since transfer from one centre to another is not easily facilitated within the system.

**International human rights perspective**
Asylum seekers' right to access to higher education is contained in the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in article 22.2, committing states to treat refugees:

> ... as favourable as possible, and, in any event, not less favourable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances, with respect to education other than elementary education and, in particular, as regards access to studies, the remission of fees and charges.

As the state practice suggests, this norm is not complied with insofar as asylum seekers' access to higher education studies is not facilitated, but rather *de facto* denied. The scope of the right to education for asylum seekers has to be seen in connection with the international human rights law, which applies to all individuals irrespective of their status (Breen, 2008).

The Universal Declaration on Human Rights in article 26 states that higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit and that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality. Ireland fails to guarantee equal opportunity for asylum seekers to access higher education in its law and policy. Young adults living within the direct provision system are being effectively deprived of the opportunity to continue their development after completing secondary school. This paper argues that this treatment is not compatible with the international human rights commitments of the Irish state.

Ireland ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 1998. Article 13.3(c) of the Covenant states: 'Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity.' This requirement embedded in the text of the ICESCR supports equal access for

asylum seekers. General comment 13 issued by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UNCESCR) as an authoritative interpretation of the meaning and application of the Covenant provisions on right to education, repeatedly stresses the imperative of non-discriminatory access to higher education, stating at its outset that: 'education must be accessible to all, especially the most vulnerable groups, in law and fact, without discrimination on any of the prohibited grounds' (para 6(b)). The UNCESCR general comment 20 on non-discrimination in economic, social and cultural rights in paragraph 30 clarified that the Covenant rights equally apply to non-nationals, such as refugees or asylum-seekers, regardless of legal status and documentation.

The International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), which Ireland is a party to, allows for the possibility of differentiating between non-citizens and citizens in article 1 paragraph 2, stating that: '[...] This Convention shall not apply to distinctions, exclusions, restrictions or preferences made by a State Party to this Convention between citizens and non-citizens.' The general recommendation No 30 of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (UNCERD) dedicated to non-citizens, clarified that the above provision should not be interpreted in such a way as to detract from the rights and freedoms recognised in ICESCR, and that 'differential treatment based on citizenship or immigration status will constitute discrimination if the criteria for such differentiation ... are not applied pursuant to a legitimate aim, and are not proportional to the achievement of this aim.'

In respect of the right to education, General Recommendation No 30 clarified that states are under the obligation to remove obstacles that prevent the enjoyment of socioeconomic rights including education, and to ensure that public educational institutions are open to non-citizens (paragraphs 29, 30). These interpretations are pertinent to the reading of article 5 of the CERD which guarantees the right of everyone, without distinction as to race, colour, or national or ethnic origin, to equality in the enjoyment of the economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to education and training. Ireland has recognised the competence of the UNCERD to receive and consider communications from individuals or groups of individuals within the state claiming to be victims of a violation by Ireland of any of the Convention rights. This option is open for the group as a potential avenue to restore injustice and to request the review of the situation by the committee.

### Way forward

The educational needs of the young adults in the direct provision system in Ireland remain unmet. Access to higher education, which has been recognised by Ireland as a human right, is denied in domestic practice. International human rights norms have not been given full effect in Ireland given that the exclusion of asylum seekers from higher education continues. While the laws do not explicitly outlaw the group the right to enter higher education, the policy and practice that has developed in this area cause the *de facto* denial of access for asylum seekers.

In the absence of legal regulation, state policy *de facto* excludes this group from access to higher education. This particularly affects young adults, who are deprived the equal opportunity to decide on and pursue further professional development. The practical implications of this study emerge as an identified need for policy change and steps to be taken to recognise and implement the right to education for the group. The treatment of asylum seekers shall not be different from other aliens, as the refugee convention requires, which implies access to studies and the fee status to be subject to the same conditions as for other non-Irish individuals residing in the state. If Ireland seeks to be a society based on the principles of equality and human rights, the opportunity to access third level education has to be equally guaranteed to everyone on the basis of capacity, and not impeded due to immigration status. Ultimate changes in the structure of the asylum seekers' rights and removing barriers in access to higher education are required. Further assessment of needs and the impact of denial on the individual development of asylum seekers would assist informed policy change. Currently, in a time of recession,

the decline in support for the disadvantaged communities is felt as never before. The economic situation though cannot be seen a legitimate justification to continue denial of the right to education to one of the most vulnerable and isolated groups in our country.

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# 18

# DISABILITY AND DISADVANTAGE: A NATIONAL STUDY ON THE SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES PROGRESSING TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND

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## Abstract

This study focuses on the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme which was established to increase the numbers of students with disabilities progressing from second to third level education in Ireland. Students who are eligible for DARE can access third level courses in the participating higher education institutions on reduced entry points.

This study examines the characteristics of all applicants with disabilities who applied to the DARE scheme in 2010 and 2011 to identify the pattern of progression to third level by students with disabilities, with an emphasis on the socioeconomic background of applicants. The analysis particularly focuses on patterns of applications from schools designated as disadvantaged under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme.

This research paper seeks to identify whether DARE, as a policy of 'affirmative action', has contributed to equality of opportunity in the context of progression to higher education. This study suggests that while students with disabilities are a key target group in the context of improving access to higher education; students with disabilities who are also socioeconomically disadvantaged, particularly if they are attending a DEIS school, need to be considered as a separate and specific target group.

## Introduction

The focus of widening participation over the last number of years has largely been on the impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on access to education and the measures required to address this issue (Kellaghan *et al*, 1995; Skilbeck and Connell, 2000; Osborne and Leith, 2000; HEA, 2004; Archer and Weir, 2004; HEA, 2008; Smyth and McCoy, 2009; McCoy *et al*, 2009; McCoy *et al*, 2010). There has been an acknowledgement also, nationally, of the low participation of students with disabilities in higher education which has been linked to a variety of identified factors. The HEA (2008) found that although there has been much progress in increasing the numbers of students with disabilities progressing to third level, a combination of inadequate educational supports and low expectations had historically hindered their progression.

Watson and Nolan (2011, p53) suggested that it would be useful to examine the link between disability and disadvantage in terms of education, work and living standards. It would be instructive to explore further the extent to which disability is a cause or consequence of disadvantage, or both.' A similar suggestion was made by Banks and McCoy (2011) when examining the prevalence of special educational needs in Ireland. They identified that 'a key area to emerge during stakeholder interviews was the pressing need for further research in outcomes (academic/social) for children with [special educational needs] SEN. This need stems from the growing debate about the best way in which these children in mainstream schools should be resourced or supported. The question of which students with SEN do well in mainstream schools, which do not, and what preconditions are relevant to this remains under-studied' (Banks and McCoy 2011, p123). Banks and McCoy suggested that little work has been completed into tracking the educational outcomes for these students as 'in the Irish context little

attention has been given to the attainment and experiences of young people with SEN as they leave school' (Banks and McCoy 2011, p124).

Research has previously shown that groups targeted as underrepresented in higher education can hide sub groups whose disadvantage is considerably more significant (McCoy *et al*, 2010). Previous research had indicated that there are more students with disabilities concentrated in DEIS schools with Banks and McCoy (2011) reporting that children with disabilities are not dispersed proportionately among all school sectors, were more likely to be identified in DEIS schools, and were less likely to be found in fee paying schools. While students with disabilities have been identified as underrepresented in higher education, and a key target group in the context of increasing that participation, there exists a sub group within this overall cohort, who have both a disability and are also socioeconomically disadvantaged. This study suggests that it is this specific cohort of students that are considerably more disadvantaged in the context of access and progression to higher education.

## Background

The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) and the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) schemes are examples of 'affirmative action' or 'quota systems' in higher education in Ireland. These schemes address the impact of educational disadvantage at leaving certificate level by offering a concession on third level entry points to students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and students with disabilities.

Thirteen higher education institutions, including the seven Irish universities, currently participate in the DARE scheme. Students can apply through DARE for a 'reduced points' place in any of these colleges.

In the case of HEAR, applicants must meet a combination of financial, social and cultural indicators. In the case of DARE there are ten disability categories eligible for consideration under the scheme.

The DARE and HEAR schemes have secured very positive outcomes including greater awareness of the opportunities to progress to higher education, the integration of the schemes into the application process for third level places, and a large increase in the number of students that have been supported to progress to third level.

## Methodology

Quantitative data was drawn from national data for 2010 and 2011 on the numbers and characteristics of students with disabilities applying to the DARE and HEAR schemes (www.accesscollege.ie). Individual level data was provided by the DARE/HEAR schemes and merged with data provided by the CAO (Central Applications Office, www.cao.ie). The merging of both sources of data facilitated a comprehensive analysis of individual applicant characteristics and outcomes.

## Findings

The study reports on 2,161 applicants to DARE in 2010 and 2,531 applicants to DARE in 2011. The preliminary findings are summarised below.

## Applications by county

The report by the HEA, *Who Went to College in 2004? A National Survey of New Entrants to Higher Education* (HEA 2006), confirmed a strong geographical/regional variation in participation in higher education with low admission rates identified in specific areas (Dublin 1, 10, 17, 20 and 22) and high admission rates identified, particularly in relation to south county Dublin (HEA 2006, p107). The analysis of DARE applications confirms strong geographic variations, both regionally and within Dublin postal districts, which are consistent with the HEA (2006) study.

In 2010 and 2011 six counties accounted for 41.9% of all DARE applications – Cork (the highest overall number of applications in both years), county Dublin, Galway, Kildare, Meath and Wicklow. For all six counties the overall number of applications from each county increased in 2011 in comparison to 2010.

In relation to Dublin, applications were further analysed by postal district. The lowest number of applications in 2010 came from the Dublin postal districts of Dublin 11, Dublin 22, Dublin 7, Dublin 20, Dublin 8, and Dublin 10. Dublin 1, Dublin 2 and Dublin 17 were the lowest, accounting for just one DARE application each. These nine postal districts accounted for only 46 applications or 2% of total DARE applications in 2010. In 2011 the pattern is repeated with these nine postal districts accounting for only 60 applications in total or 2.4% of total applications.

In 2010, the postal districts of Dublin 15, 14, 18, 16, 4, 5, 9, 13, 24, 6, 3, 6W and 12 accounted for 14.9% of all applications to DARE and 14.3% in 2011.

## Applications by school sector

The schools that DARE applicants attended were individually identified for this study. There were 722 second level schools listed on the website of the Department of Education and Skills as at 27 March 2013 at www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Data-on-Individual-Schools/. 55 of these schools are identified as private or fee paying schools. 195 schools are identified as disadvantaged under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme. 140 schools are identified by the department as special schools. Eight schools were identified for the study as revision/grind fee-paying schools.

## Applications from fee-paying schools

Applicants from fee-paying schools accounted for 22.1% of all DARE applications in 2010 and 21.4% in 2011. This is despite the fact that such applications came from only 63 schools in total – 55 fee-paying private and eight fee-paying 'grind' schools. The 195 DEIS schools accounted for 12% of applications to the DARE scheme in 2010 and 12.4% in 2011.

Applicants from fee paying schools accounted for 23.1% and 22.8% of all *eligible* applications in 2010 and 2011 in comparison to applicants from DEIS schools who accounted for just 10.9% of all *eligible* applications in 2010 and 10.7% in 2011.

In both 2010 and 2011, with only one exception, the top six schools, in the context of volume of applications, were all fee-paying schools.

Applicants from fee-paying schools are consistently applying to the DARE scheme and these schools make large numbers of DARE applications. Applicants from 51 of the 55 private schools made DARE applications in 2011. In 2011 one single private school accounted for 38 applications, one single school accounted for 34 applications, one school accounted for 20 applications and one accounted for 19 individual applications.

In relation to revision/grind schools, applicants from 13 of these schools submitted DARE applications. One single private school accounted for 55 applications to DARE in 2011. The same school had accounted for 62 applications in 2010. In 2011 one single school from the same sector accounted for 13 applications, one for 12 and another for 11 applications.

## Applications from DEIS schools

195 DEIS schools accounted for 12% of applications to the DARE scheme in 2010 and 12.4% in 2011. There is considerable variation in the numbers of applicants from different DEIS schools. 122 DEIS schools in total accounted for 315 applications to DARE in 2011. 76 DEIS schools submitted no DARE applications at all. 52 of the 122 DEIS schools accounted for one application only – a rate of 42.6%. 27

schools accounted for two applications per school – a rate of 22.1%. Despite having seven DEIS schools, Tipperary had only four DARE applicants from them in 2011. Waterford had only three applicants from DEIS schools in 2011 despite having five in the county. In county Dublin in 2011 there were only 22 applicants from DEIS schools. Dublin 11 had no DARE applications despite having seven DEIS schools. Dublin 10 had no DARE applications in 2011 despite having four DEIS schools. Dublin 15 had just one application to DARE in 2011 despite having two DEIS schools. Later analysis showed that that applicant actually attended a DEIS school outside of Dublin 15.

## Applications from special schools

In relation to special schools, only four schools categorised as special schools made applications to DARE in 2010, accounting for only nine applications in total. One of these was subsequently ineligible. In 2011, only two special schools made applications to DARE accounting for only 12 applications in total. Two of these applications were deemed ineligible.

Special schools are notable for their lack of applications, with only four schools represented in total. Surprisingly, applications from special schools are also not always eligible, which warrants further investigation.

## Applications by home address and by the deprivation index

All applicant home addresses were categorised according to the deprivation index, which provides more information on the socioeconomic background of DARE applicants. Of the 2,161 DARE applicants in 2010, 36.1% of all applicants came from affluent, very affluent or extremely affluent areas. The corresponding figure for 2011 was 36.4%. 165 DARE applicants, 7.6% of the total nationally, came from areas classified as disadvantaged, very disadvantaged or extremely disadvantaged. The corresponding figure for 2011 was 179 applicants, or 7.1% of total applications. In 2010, applicants from areas classified as affluent, very affluent or extremely affluent made up 39.4% of all eligible applications. The corresponding figure for 2011 was 40.0% all eligible applications. In 2010 applicants from areas classified as disadvantaged, very disadvantaged or extremely disadvantaged made up 7.1% of all eligible applications. The corresponding figure for 2011 is 5.5%.

## Applicants eligible for DARE and HEAR

There is a very low rate of students eligible for both DARE and HEAR. This is surprising, given the fact that DEIS schools in particular have been shown to have high rates of students with disabilities (Banks and McCoy, 2011). Out of 2,161 applications to DARE in 2010, just 35 students were eligible for DARE and HEAR. In 2011 there were more students eligible for both HEAR and DARE, the number increasing to 73. The majority of students in both years were eligible under the specific learning difficulty category of disability.

## Conclusion

The DARE scheme was established on the premise that applicants with disabilities are a homogenous group and are equally disadvantaged in the context of progression to higher education. This study suggests that while students with disabilities are a key target group in the context of improving access to higher education; students with disabilities who are also socioeconomically disadvantaged, particularly if they are attending a DEIS school, need to be considered as a separate and specific target group. Students from special schools are also striking in the context of how few are accessing this scheme.

The research study findings raise questions in terms of the variation in application numbers by county and school sector, as well as the factors that influence the decision making of students with disabilities. These are further explored later in this study which analyses the retention of students eligible for DARE in higher education and explores with students their own experiences of the education system as a

student with a disability. There is an opportunity to use the research findings to identify gaps in our current knowledge which could inform national and institutional policy and support more equitable access to education.

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# 19

# SUPPORTING NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS: THE STUDENT JOURNEY, A NEW MODEL OF ENGAGEMENT. THE MOVE FROM A TRANSACTIONAL SERVICE DELIVERY MODEL TO A TRANSFORMATIONAL RESOURCE.

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## Abstract

The Trinity College Disability Service strategic plan 2011–2014 aims to develop clear and effective support systems at all stages in the student journey, using a proactive strategy as opposed to traditionally reactive models. This model engages students across three phases of their higher education journey:

- Pre-entry, admission and the first year experience.
- Building and maintaining a college career.
- Progressing through college to employment.

This is a strategic approach to enhancing the student experience by engaging prospective students, current students and staff, with the intention of improving practice and implementing change across the whole institution. It is an example of evidence-based practice using ongoing data collection and evaluation to improve the student journey. Each phase is aligned to i) the strategic objectives of Trinity College Dublin (TCD), ii) national targets for students with disabilities set by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland, and iii) recommendations from the OECD (2011) report on students with disabilities in higher education.

Each stage is supported using a model that facilitates the acquisition of skills such as self-awareness, self-determination and self-advocacy, which are transferable across the entire student lifecycle. The strategy can easily be adapted for use by student services in any further and higher education institution, and the model is included in the *Compendium of Effective Practice* (HEA, 2012), which presents a wide range of contributions all focused on improving the student experience. The Disability Service (DS) launched its strategic plan in September 2011 and this paper reviews the work that DS has undertaken during the second year of the strategic plan (2012/2013).

## Introduction

The Disability Service (DS) in Trinity College Dublin aims to move from a transactional service delivery model, to a transformational resource that can support a dialogue with the disabled individual in the acquisition of transferable skills that can be developed across all three phases of the student journey. It also aims to encourage the student to work as independently as possible from the beginning of their college career, while providing guidance in the achievement of such independence. This model places the student at the centre of the decision making process, with constant feedback mechanisms central to the development of the individual. The focus is not on rehabilitating the disabled individual (medical model) but in making the college environment accessible to disabled students as consumers (social model). This paper reviews the work that DS has undertaken during the first two years of its strategic plan, and discusses the development of effective support systems by using a proactive, evidence-based strategy, as opposed to traditionally reactive and inefficient models.

### Phase 1 – Pre-entry, admissions and the first year experience
Phase 1 objectives are concerned with monitoring and developing college application and admissions

processes, and providing opportunities for the development of skills required in third level, in a way that enhances the first year experience of disabled students. It also focuses on identifying promoters and barriers to transition and supporting successful progression to higher education.

**Development of skills required in third level**
The Pathways transition website, transition planning tool, and transition outreach activities for those considering third level education, are examples of DS evidence-based practice. A longitudinal research study is embedded in the transition website, providing quantitative (surveys, n=180 participants) and qualitative (interviews, n=10 participants) data. Interim data will be presented in 2014. An analysis of website traffic indicates a global interest in site content; since April 2011, the site has received 28,880 visits from 19,007 people in 61 countries. Of these visits, 32% accessed pages containing study skills resources for leaving certificate students, 23% are related to the process of applying to college, including the DARE programme, and 1,138 viewed pages outlining DS supports.

The transition planning tool was launched in 2011, and in 2012 DS was awarded TCD equality funding to redesign the tool in digital format with video introductions to each unit. Since its inception, 907 visitors have viewed this resource. Completion of a registration form is required for access to the units, and demographic data from registration requests indicates strong interest from students and stakeholders working within the area of Asperger's syndrome, ADHD and mental health. Only two enquiries were received for sensory disabilities, and none with regard to students with physical disabilities. The majority of enquiries were related to sixth year and post-leaving certificate cohorts.

Between October 2011 and April 2013, senior cycle students (n=28) and parents (n=17) attended the transition workshops. Parents expressed improved student confidence and engagement with the transition process, and students felt that they had benefited from content, and enjoyed the opportunity to experience a third level environment and to interact with third level students. No feedback was received from any of the practitioners (care workers, support assistants, guidance counsellors and special education needs organisers (SENOs), from either cycle of the workshops. Only a small number of students intended to apply to TCD, and this greatly affected the level of engagement in the programme and the degree of interest in TCD-specific course and student information.

**Monitoring and developing college application and admissions processes**
Students with sensory and physical disabilities continue to be under-represented in higher education and this trend continued in 2012/2013

| | 2008 | % | 2009 | % | 2010 | % | 2011 | % | 2012 | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AS/ASD | 36 | 2.20% | 76 | 3.40% | 68 | 3.70% | 94 | 4.30% | 129 | 5.30% |
| ADHD | 40 | 2.50% | 107 | 4.80% | 70 | 3.80% | 114 | 5.20% | 156 | 6.50% |
| Blind/VI | 24 | 1.50% | 54 | 2.40% | 36 | 1.90% | 36 | 1.60% | 1 | 0.04% |
| Deaf/HoH | 67 | 4.20% | 110 | 4.90% | 70 | 3.80% | 77 | 3.50% | 70 | 2.92% |
| DCD | 32 | 2.00% | 74 | 3.30% | 88 | 4.70% | 143 | 6.60% | 153 | 6.30% |
| MHC | 49 | 3.00% | 115 | 5.10% | 89 | 4.80% | 129 | 5.90% | 226 | 9.40% |
| Neuro | 0 | 0% | 43 | 1.90% | 39 | 2.10% | 36 | 1.60% | 36 | 1.50% |
| PD | 17 | 1.00% | 94 | 4.20% | 62 | 3.30% | 94 | 4.30% | 92 | 3.83% |
| SOI | 178 | 11.10 | 72 | 3.20% | 189 | 10.20 | 226 | 10.40 | 269 | 11.20 |
| SLC | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 17 | 0.90% | 14 | 0.60% | 26 | 1.08% |
| SpLD | 1152 | 72% | 1560 | 69.90 | 1108 | 60.30 | 1197 | 55.40 | 1199 | 50.02 |
| Total | 1595 | | 2229 | | 1836 | | 2160 | | 2397 | |

Table 1: Applications to DARE 2008–2012. Source: TCD Disability Service/DARE season reports

Consequently, in recognition of the need to increase admissions from these target groups, two amendments have been made to the TCD admissions process. Firstly, from 2014, offers will be made first to DARE eligible applicants with sensory and physical disabilities, and remaining places offered to all other DARE eligible students. Secondly, the waiver of the mathematics/modern language requirement has been extended to students with sensory or communication disabilities, provided that the study of mathematics/modern languages do not form part of their chosen course of study. It is hoped that these amendments will provide additional admissions opportunities for these groups.

Examining TCD data, of the 191 students who accepted a DARE offer between 2008 and 2012, 89% subsequently registered with DS; 24% are students with a significant ongoing illness, 23% specific learning difficulties, and 14% have a mental health condition. However, there is a significant discrepancy between points reduction and engagement with DS. For example, students with a significant ongoing illness account for 24% of DARE offers, and yet the majority are identified as 'non-active', having engaged with DS for less than 10 hours during the period of their course. Although 31% of DARE students availed of exam supports, and 27% exam and Unilink supports, 11% did not request any support at all, despite being awarded a reduced points place due to the disadvantage of their disability. In addition, students with significant ongoing illness, specific learning difficulties and mental health difficulties are less likely to use support systems provided by the disability service, but are more likely to withdraw, defer their course or go 'off books'.

**The first-year experience**
In 2012/2013, DS completed the second year of a mixed methods study investigating the first year experience of DARE students with 122 participants. Quantitative data examined ease of transition from school to college, the registration and orientation process, quality of human support provided pre- and post-transition, access to disability supports, and experience of the DARE process. Qualitative data explored knowledge of college structure and organisation, pre-registration/pre-entry initiatives, registration and orientation, connecting with other students, provision of advice and support, campus ethos and environment, level of academic 'readiness' and skills, diversity and inclusiveness of college population, and the overall first-year experience.

Key findings indicate that 75.8% of students found transition to college unproblematic, with 82% stating that they had a clear understanding of college structures and organisation, 24% of students finding registration problematic/confusing, and 68% of students indicating that they needed help with gaining or improving academic skills. Most students stated that ease of transition was related to support from DS (72.4%), appropriate course choices (60%), and positive encouragement. Overall, students indicated that the transition process was a positive experience, with 100% of students stating that TCD is an open, inclusive and welcoming place that they would recommend to other students. An overall improvement on 2011/2012 results is noted in every aspect of the transition process, suggesting that the student journey approach has been effective.

**Phase 2 – Building and maintaining a college career**
The focus of phase 2 of the student journey is on continuing to provide supports that are appropriate to the student, their disability and their course, while seeking to create opportunities to facilitate independence and the retention and progression of students through college. From the range of initiatives undertaken during the year, highlights are summarised below:

**Monitoring retention, withdrawal and progression rates to identify at risk groups**
Withdrawal rates for incoming students with disabilities in TCD are monitored by year of intake as follows: 2009 intake: 15.3% withdrawn after four years; 2010 intake: 13.8% withdrawn after three years; and 2011 intake: 3.5% withdrawn after two years. The vast majority of students with disabilities make the transition into and through college successfully. However, a minority struggle and withdraw at some

point after registration. Outcome measures indicate that students registered with DS have a higher rate of retention and course completion compared to non-disabled peers, when entry cohort is used as a method of tracking progression.

Students with mental health difficulties or who are deaf or hard-of-hearing have shown much higher rates of withdrawal compared to students with other disabilities. Students who have a specific learning difficulty (SpLd) or Asperger's syndrome have withdrawn at a rate proportionate to their numbers in college. Finally, students with a physical disability, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), significant ongoing illness (SOI), developmental co-ordination disorder (DCD) or who are blind or visually impaired are least likely to withdraw.

**Developing a model of support for disabled students on professional courses in Trinity College**
To ensure that students with a disability and academic and placement staff are in compliance with the college fitness to practice policy, DS launched this project to develop effective support systems for students participating in professional courses. The project had three main elements:

- An evidence-based research strand gathered information from all stakeholders to determine what were the main issues and concerns regarding the placement process for students with disabilities.

- During 2012/2013 pre-placement planning meetings for all stakeholders were piloted for incoming first year students on professional courses. A needs assessment template was developed and agreed supports were implemented on placement.

- In June 2013, a symposium for all stakeholders was held presenting findings from the research and providing an opportunity to discuss recent research and support models for students on placement. A guide for students on placement was launched, describing routes to disclosure and the pre-placement support structure.

In 2013/14, we will continue to work with incoming and continuing students to promote and encourage independence, self-determination and self-advocacy in their communications with academic staff, and through completion of course requirements. We will establish separate tracking systems for students with disabilities registering at entry and post-entry, so that a more complex picture of the student journey can be captured. We will continue to work with academic and placement staff to encourage relevant students to register with DS and engage in the placement planning process.

**Phase 3 – Progression from college to employment**
The focus of this phase is the examination of personal, occupational and environmental issues that disabled students deal with as they prepare for participation in work. Ultimately, the aim is to articulate the employability factor into the disabled student's journey through college. It allows students to acquire employment-focused skills in college that can be transferred to the workplace. Finally, it will identify issues from the perspective of employers and employees that arise in the employment of disabled students.

The number of disabled students participating in third level education has grown significantly, and consequently the number of disabled graduates entering the labour market is at unprecedented levels. Historically, disability services have primarily supported students through college to the point of graduation. With the development of the three-phased approach within DS, and development of synergies with other stakeholders internally and externally, a refocus of resources has allowed mainstream services such as careers and specialist supports such as Unilink, to integrate employment transitioning issues into the student journey.

There are few studies relating to the status of graduates with disabilities in the Irish labour market, and there is no national data through the HEA First Destination Survey (HEA, 2010) that provides an indication of the employment levels of disabled graduates. This lack of information continues to be a concern, as it is impossible to plan effectively without awareness of emerging issues.

**Leonardo Project – Univers' Emploi**
Trinity became a partner in the EU Leonardo project 'Univers' Emploi' in 2010, the purpose of which was to develop an employment tool to assist universities to embed employment into their needs assessment process. A review of the current needs assessment process and reasonable accommodations was also undertaken. Moving from a transactional service to a transformational resource ensures that supports are not a 'fix', but are a more feasible accommodation in the workplace. Improved information on issues that emerged through this project, such as disclosure, managing disability in the workplace and how to assert needs, was further enhanced with the development of an information booklet called *Supporting Trinity College students with disabilities into employment*. This publication prompts students to start thinking about the above issues, as well as employment and volunteering opportunities.

Year 2 of the strategy continued to explore the needs of students with disabilities when transitioning from college to work, the key research question being: *How should the university enable students with disabilities to prepare for transitioning to employment?* Preliminary themes emerging include: i) enabling work environments, ii) personal strategies, iii) enabling college experiences, iv) college supports and accommodations, v) advice for students, vi) personal views on disability and disclosure, and vii) personal development and confidence.

Key objectives and actions relating to the progression into employment for students with disabilities have been progressed with a significant Genio Trust grant awarded over two years to develop a model of support for students with mental health difficulties in their transition to employment. This project aims to move the ownership of the transition to employment process to the individual, within a supported framework, by developing a clearly delineated approach which combines work-orientated and self-management elements. The specific strands of this project are:

**Strand 1:** An undergraduate student strand providing access to a specialist work-orientated occupational therapist and a specialist careers advisor, during the college journey. The aim is to enable students to focus on managing their disability as they seek, apply and transition to employment.
**Strand 2:** A recent graduate strand in which students are supported in their first year of work through a 'long arm' method approach via the use of on-line resources and, if required, access to individualised support from an occupational therapist and a specialist careers advisor.
**Strand 3:** A student/graduate-led on-line peer support service involving current students and recent graduates.

**Conclusions**
Significant changes have taken place in DS work practices and how we articulate our strategies across the student journey pre- and post-entry, and into employment. The focus has allowed for a constructive dialogue with all partners, and most importantly the disabled student. Being mindful that we are working with individuals with unique experiences and who are at different stages of their transition to independence, we are building a confidence in an evidence-based strategy.

At phase one, the transition into higher education and the first year experience, there is a need to actively engage those students who transcend the HEAR and DARE criteria, in particular students with sensory and physical disabilities, as it is evident they are not progressing to higher education.

Progression through higher education outcome measures indicate that students registered with DS have a higher rate of retention and course completion, compared to their non-disabled peers, when entry cohort is used as a method of tracking progression. The vast majority of students with disabilities make the transition into and through higher education successfully. However, specific cohorts – students who are deaf or who have a mental health condition – are more likely to withdraw. Retention data needs to capture these issues and influence changes in how we engage and support these students. The development of transition to employment strategies are beginning to produce clear pathways to employment. This allows for the disabled student/graduate to develop self-awareness of their disability story that can be managed into employment, thus allowing for reduced anxiety associated with non-disclosure or fear of being seen as invalid in employment. The Genio project and the appointment of specialist careers advisers and a work-focused occupational therapist, will provide a model that can be shared across the higher education sector.

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# FROM ACCESS TO SUCCESS: EXAMINING SOCIAL INCLUSION IN IRELAND'S NATIONAL PLAN FOR EQUITY OF ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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## Abstract

The concept of 'access' is often seen as overlapping with the concept of social inclusion—featuring strongly in discourses of equality, equal opportunities, rights, fairness and justice. Social inclusion is a key objective of the national plan for equity of access to higher education (hereafter referred to as 'the plan'), echoing the Higher Education Authority's (HEA) commitment to placing Ireland's higher education sector on the international stage for its 'contribution to social inclusion by providing the opportunity for all to participate to their full potential' (2008, p16). Indeed, social inclusion appears set to replace terms such as 'access' and 'equity', which reflect earlier policy iterations in relation to increasing access to higher education. This paper aims to examine the extent to which the plan aspires to the objective of social inclusion for under-represented socioeconomic groups, with a particular focus on people with disabilities. This relationship will be examined through a lens of ideologies underlying social inclusion theory.

## Social inclusion

Social inclusion is defined as 'being in a position to participate fully in the life of the society one lives in' (Gannon and Nolan, 2005, p12). The educational dimension of disadvantage is acknowledged as a complex relationship between the individual, family and the community, resulting in some groups receiving less benefit than others from the formal system (O'Brien and O'Fathaigh, 2007, pp598-599). Acknowledging this relationship, the plan states that it will be necessary for educational institutions, families and the wider community to work in partnership to remove educational disadvantage. Although inclusion has a significant impact on policy, research and practice, it has many meanings in the context of education for people with disabilities—ranging from 'mere placement in general education classrooms to the transformation of the philosophy, values and practices of entire educational systems' (Artiles, Harris-Murri, and Rostenberg, 2006, p260). Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler and Bereded-Samuel put forward a framework of conceptualisations of social inclusion which they describe as 'a nested schema regarding degrees of inclusion' (2010, p131). The schema (figure 1) provides a useful framework for examining the plan through the lens of ideologies underpinning social inclusion.
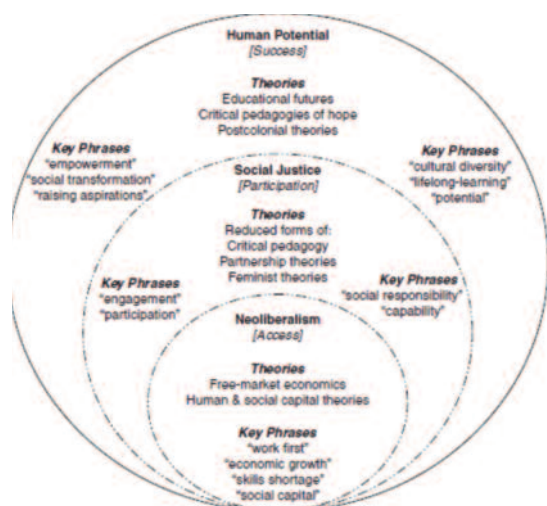


**Fig. 1 Spectrum of ideologies underlying social inclusion theory and policy.**
*Source*: Gidley *et al* 2010, p131

## Access: Neo-liberal ideology

At its narrowest interpretation, Gidley *et al* explain that social inclusion, framed within neo-liberal ideology is related to increasing *access* to higher education 'for the primary purpose of increasing the national skills base and improving the economy' (2010, p132). From a neo-liberalist ideology, social inclusion is linked to a desire for increases in human capital and economic growth, driven by the agenda of building international competiveness. Clancy and Goastellec note

that a heightened interest in comparative data on participation in higher education can be explained in part from the perspective that a knowledge society's competitiveness will be increasingly measured by the quality of skill base and education of the labour force. Similarly, Riddell  acknowledges that there is a growing emphasis on social inclusion as a key ingredient in the creation of the modern knowledge economy.

In Ireland, the expansion and diversification of higher education in recent decades is closely linked to the social and economic transformation of Irish society. Government's strategy of aiming for a more educated labour force, while at the same time aiming to achieve social justice goals, could be described as 'Third Way' politics (Riddell, Tinklin, and Wilson, 2006, p628); 'Third Way' politics being an attempt to forge a new path between social democratic approaches and free market ideals in education (O'Brien and O'Fathaigh, 2007, p594). However, Clancy and Goastellec caution that social justice, social responsibility or equality for all 'may nonetheless mask economistic intent regarding skills shortages and/or economic growth' (2007, p135).

## Participation: Social justice ideology

Gidley *et al*'s nested schema point to a more inclusive interpretation of social inclusion as identified through social justice ideology (2010, p133). Because students with disabilities have historically been excluded from educational opportunities, inclusive education is seen as a means to achieve social justice. Shepherd and Brody Hasazi define social justice as 'a commitment ... to ensure that all students have access to equal opportunities and outcomes that will in turn lead to full citizenship and actualization of their full potential' (2007, p476). Through the lens of social justice ideology, social inclusion foregrounds notions of *participation* and *engagement* where it is grounded in the concepts of equal opportunity, human rights, human dignity, and fairness for all (Gidley *et al*, 2010 134-136).

Inclusive education is concerned with successful participation which creates greater opportunities for all people in education and beyond. While the plan's focus is on widening access for under-represented groups, Tonks and Farr (2003) caution that closer attention needs to be directed to participation—what people do in and when they get there, arguing that 'what university they go to and what subjects they chose may be secondary but far from being irrelevant' (p27). The International Association of Universities makes a clear connection between access, participation and success stating that 'the goal of access policies should be successful participation in higher education, as access without a reasonable chance of success is an empty phrase' (2008, p1).

## Empowerment: Human potential ideology

Potentially the most inclusive and integrative interpretation of social inclusion is what Gidley *et al* (2010, p135) identify as human potential ideology, where social inclusion is interpreted as *empowerment*. From this perspective, they argue that social inclusion goes beyond issues of equity of access and participative ideology, to instead focusing on *maximising the potential* of each human being, 'thus supporting broader cultural transformation—employing models of possibility rather than deficiency' (p135). In this context, an educational institution committed to inclusivity welcomes diversity in its student population, accepting that it brings with it a greater range of experience, prior learning and cultural values, 'which when used within educational settings, can enrich learning outcomes for all concerned' (Nunan, Rigmor, and McCausland, 2010, p72). The celebration of culturally diverse voices in education curricula and processes is, according to Gidley *et al*, 'surely a way forward to increase, not just equitable access, but engaged participation and empowered success' (p137). Ideally, in this context policy and provision for disabled students should be entrenched into all institutional procedures in all areas of institutional operations (Tinklin, Riddell, and Wilson, 2007, p649).

**Discussion**

Against the backdrop of the above discussion, it is clear that there are continued tensions between human capital and social democratic ideals within the stated objectives of the plan. Neo-liberal tones can be found in the plan's emphasis on the importance of the knowledge society for Ireland's competiveness; placing social inclusion alongside competitive advantage for a knowledge economy (Higher Education Authority, 2008, pp14, 15, 19). However, O'Brien and O'Fathaigh, (2007, pp598–599) caution that common notions of disadvantage and social exclusion cannot be taken as fixed and that the ideological confusion of both terms brings with it a danger of them being used as 'catch all' phrases both conceptually and practically, while Gidley *et al*, (2010) question the extent to which the term 'social inclusion' reflects a shift in policy or 'merely old policies repackaged?' (p. 129). For these reasons there is an urgent need for a public debate on social exclusion and disadvantage in the interests of a more critical examination of inclusive education policy provision.

The 'carrot and stick' levers employed by the national access plan in terms of funding and targets raise issues around the motivation of institutes to comply with policy. Taylor (2004) maintains that with the increased interest in increasing access, it has become advantageous to record high numbers of disabled students, particularly if additional funding is available. Thus, there is a need to examine to what extent equity of access policy translates into *meaningful participation* of people with disabilities within the higher education institutions. Ainscrow and Miles believe that the starting point for identifying what evidence to collect should be with an agreed definition of inclusion. In other words, 'we must 'measure what we value' rather than, as is often the case, 'valuing what we can measure'. Evidence of inclusion in higher education must relate to the presence, participation, and achievement of all students, particularly those groups of learners who are identified as "at risk' of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement' (Ainscrow and Miles, 2009, p4). There is therefore a need to monitor and evaluate outcomes for students with disabilities in higher education as students with disabilities are still significantly under-represented and disadvantaged at the level of 'participation'.

The plan makes provision for individual supports to students with disabilities to overcome barriers to access and participation, rather than focusing on measures that call for more fundamental institutional change. As argued by O'Brien and O'Fathaigh, 'such a system-wide change is now ('officially') being highlighted over and above attempts to change the individual' (2007, p597). Rights-based individualistic approaches to equal opportunity policies for disabled students in higher education, place the onus on the individual, 'focusing on access rather than outcome, favouring individual over structural explanations and identifying attitudinal change as a way forward' (Riddell, 1998, p203). The problem with this approach is that it places the responsibility on the individual to make changes for his/herself which can 'lead to victim blaming' (Taylor, 2004, p41), and reflects a medical model of disability where the disability is viewed as a condition located within the individual that requires specialised services by professionals (Artiles *et al*, 2006). The quasi-medical categories that students with disabilities are required to disclose in order to secure supports is increasingly at odds with the social model of disability and students' 'perception of self' (Riddell, Tinklin, and Wilson, 2006, p625).

The plan is concerned with increasing access and success in higher education by traditionally excluded groups, including people with disabilities, through the broadening of the recruitment and selection base, affirmative action, the provision of supports and the setting of targets: 'the number of students with physical sensory and multiple disabilities will be doubled by 2013' . However, the focus on access leads to the emphasis on numbers and percentages and 'does not necessarily reflect student participation or success, nor does it reveal anything about the quality of the education that is accessed' (Gidley *et al*, p132). Nunan, Rigmor and McCausland caution that while such measures can result in impressive statistics on improved access rates, they merely manipulate the inputs and processes; increasing access does not address the deeply rooted conditions and structures that lead to the inequalities in the first place.

However, Nunan *et al* argue that it is possible to aspire to an education system that aims to bring about greater participation, democracy and emancipation for all (2010, p64). This requires transformative models of education (Nunan *et al*, 2010, Dillard, 1995). Models that examine and challenge ideological and historical assumptions about difference, critique marginalisation and representation of groups, debunk meritocratic school culture, distribute resources and nurture meaningful engagement, are critically required 'if inclusion is to live up to its promise of social justice' (Artiles *et al*, p266). Thrupp and Tomlinson (2006, p550) contend that the social justice challenge for education policy is one of 'complex hope' which recognises the historical and structural difficulties which need to be overcome. While acknowledging that the plan goes some way towards increasing access and participation for people with disabilities in higher education, it is clear that future policies must draw on transformative models of inclusive education that call for 'educational reconstruction consistent with new forms of thinking about education and social issues' (Slee and Weiner, 2001, p94).

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## Abstract

The lack of participation in higher education by persons with a disability has been attributed to a number of factors: lack of supports throughout the education system; low educational expectations, under-diagnosis of specific learning disabilities and a variety of accessibility issues. However, it is only in recent years that considered analysis has been given to the presence of students with a disability in higher education and the barriers that they encounter. This paper seeks to examine some of the barriers experienced by students with disabilities and explores implications for policy making in this regard.

**Barriers to access**

The complexities of gaining access to higher education in Ireland, through both the formal Central Applications Office (CAO) process, and the informal local arrangements of individual higher education institutes, is well documented by Shevlin, Kenny and McNeela , who report that access routes often lack transparency and, as there are no agreed procedures, practice can fluctuate widely within and between colleges (p40). At a formal level, the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme requires students to identify with and provide evidence of a pre-defined deficient categorisation of disability in applying for a place at college in order to determine the supports required by the student. At the point of application, young adults with a disability are faced with the dilemma of disclosing their disability at the risk of being seen as a 'problem' that requires 'special' treatment or concession; or not disclosing, and facing the risk of not being selected through the standard CAO point's competition. This raises the contentious issue of disclosure.

A great deal of literature in both disability studies and queer theory addresses the complexities of passing, disclosure and 'coming out'. Although, far from the process of self- acceptance associated with coming-out, disclosure involves revealing or explaining one's disability *to* others. People with hidden disabilities often try to avoid the perceived stigma associated a disabled identity because 'like racial, gender, and queer passing, the option of passing as nondisabled provides [...] a certain level of privilege' (Samuels, 2003, p239). Disclosure fixes the gaze firmly on the applicant's impairment or disability, and serves as a constant reminder of the 'specialness' of their application. The decision not to disclose may be understandable, given prevailing attitudes towards people with impairments that often present them as 'pitiable or unable to help themselves' (Matthews, 2009, p232), as well as suspicions of fraud which 'often greet declarations of nonvisible identity' (Samuels, 2003, p242).

The use by universities of medical labels to identify the learning needs of students with disabilities has come under criticism because it is increasingly at odds with the social model of disability (Matthews, 2009; Riddell, Tinklin and Wilson, 2006). The college application system with its 'diagnosis-focused, tick box questions', requiring students to identify with specific impairments, draws upon a deficit-based medical model of disability implying the requirement for 'therapies or special help' (Matthews, 2009, p231). Such practices force students with a disability into a medical framework which they may wish to avoid. The focus on the disability puts the condition or impairment into the spotlight where the medical diagnosis takes centre stage and the 'person' gets lost in translation. Current policy is based on a medical model of disability focusing on the deficit within the individual, rather than on the institutional barriers and its failings to accommodate diversity. Slee argues that 'embracing psycho-medical discourses [...]

education workers assume a bureaucratic discourse that fixes the 'special student' as a policy problem requiring a technical solution' (2001, p170).

Outside of the DARE scheme, within the Irish higher education sector, regulations, requirements, policies and processes can often vary significantly from one institution to another. Colleges operating outside of the DARE scheme very often have their own policy, procedures and criteria for assessing suitability of applicants with disabilities. Some applicants may be granted admission on the basis of reduced points and meeting the entry requirements depending on the course of study, while others may not be approved for admission at all because of the complexity of their disability (anonymous, 2012). Hanafin, Shevlin, Kenny and McNeela (2007, p436) contend that facilitating access 'is complex and multi-layered' and that a focus on the point of entry can be misleading and counter-productive. Instead, there is a need for higher education to urgently address the critical issues of curriculum access and assessment procedures in order to bring about real transformation in 'established mind-sets' (p446). This transformation is a considerable but unavoidable challenge; as the social model 'pushes us in the direction of modifying teaching environments to be as inclusive as possible' (Matthews, 2009, p234).

### Attitudinal barriers

The attitudes and acceptance of peers and teachers play a critical role in determining the degree to which inclusion is experienced by students with disabilities in mainstream learning environments (Pitt and Curtin, 2004; Hanafin, Shevlin, Kenny and McNeela, 2007). For most young adults, entering a new world of college life is a daunting, although exciting prospect, as they struggle with the challenge of finding a new circle of friends and adapting to changing circumstances. For a student with a disability, and even more so a hidden disability, this is particularly so, as they struggle with the choice of when, and if, to disclose their disability to peers and teaching staff alike, and the looming fear of what that disclosure might bring. The issue of disclosure not only manifests itself at the point of *entry* to third level education, but also *within* the system, as students with a disability struggle with the challenge of 'fitting in'.

This mirrors a wider issue of how disability is viewed by society in general. The tragedy discourse which views disability as 'abnormal, and something to be avoided at all costs' (Oliver and Barnes, 1996, p66), can be found in all aspects of society including within the education institution, as schools and classrooms are but 'microcosms of the society in which they exist' (Couture Gerrard, 1994, p62). Couture Gerard (1994) writes about the social power relations that exist in society between what she refers to as the 'dominant' and 'subdominant'; the former, referring to regular students, and the latter to special needs students, recognising that the interactions are a manifestation of social power: 'who will be in charge and whose needs will be fulfilled' (p62).

### Student support

Student support has become a key feature of most higher education institutions in Ireland and elsewhere. Jacklin and Le Riche (2009, p737) observe that even though ways of conceptualising 'support' have begun to move away from using deficit notions of the student, to instead focusing on the social barriers that may exist in higher education, there is still, however, a tendency to see the student as having a 'problem' and 'needing' support. This is similar to what Bartram (2009, p312) identifies as the 'therapeutic approach' to student support, where students are seen as vulnerable victims in need of help. Essentially, a young person's disability, which is one of his or her many attributes, becomes escalated to a 'defining and omnipresent problem' (Shevlin, Kenny, and McNeela, 2002, p167). By singling out students with disabilities for special attention, the system effectively focuses almost exclusively on supporting those individuals who are seen to be a poor 'fit' for what the system has to offer.

The educational system is constructed in a way that is at odds with the 'quirkiness' of the learner with disability (Goodley, 2007, p319). The onus is on the individual to 'fit in', rather than on the system to accommodate difference. Jacklin and Le Riche (2009) argue that one of the challenges in understanding support lies in recognising the 'potential value of diverse student populations', rather than positioning this as problem focused (p744). They argue that there is a need for a conceptual shift from 'additional support to supportive cultures' (p746) aimed at enhancing student experience and achievement, as well as supporting lecturers by avoiding the burden associated with the 'additional support' focused approach.

Responsibility for the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education rests with either an access officer or a dedicated disability support officer within the institution. This creates a barrier to achieving an inclusive higher education system, in that it does not promote inclusive practices beyond the boundaries of the role of the access or disability officer or student support services. Delegating the responsibility to one person or one department takes away the responsibility from others, such as management, academics, administrators or course co-ordinators, to ensure that all teaching and learning activities are fully inclusive, not just for students with disabilities, but for all students. Where responsibility for inclusion lies with one person or department, and where inclusion is only associated with the concept of 'supports', teaching and learning staff see no role for themselves in creating an inclusive learning environment. As a result, the impact of academic teaching and learning practices on the participation and success of students with disabilities in higher education tends to be ignored and rendered invisible. An inclusive environment cannot be created through the provision of supports alone, but instead requires a radical shift in attitudes, beliefs and practices of all staff involved in teaching and learning activities.

Institutions in the UK are starting to recognise that the participation of students with disabilities cannot remain closed within the student services department, but must become part of the mainstream learning and teaching debate (Fuller, Bradley and Healy, 2004; Adams, 2002). Successful inclusion of students with disabilities requires a major reform of institutional practices and the 'creation of conditions conducive to the learning of all students' (Avramidis and Skidmore, 2004, p66). In this regard, Madriaga, Hanson, Kay and Walker (2011), argue for 'a socially just pedagogy' that creates a culture of inclusivity, where disabled students do not have to 'disclose and seek special allowances to engage in higher learning' (p917).

**Conclusion**

Many fundamental exclusionary practices and attitudes still prevail within the Irish higher education system. A study by Kinsella and Senior  suggests that there is no consistent model of integration or inclusive practices across the majority of schools in Ireland. Their findings conclude that provisions for the needs of students with additional needs are drawn more from the integrationist rather from the inclusionist model. The shifts in attitude, ethos, culture and practice that are necessary for effective inclusion, at what McDonnell refers to as the 'deep structural level' (2003, p261) are not evident in the vast majority of Irish higher education institutions. By critically examining a number of issues, namely access routes, supports and attitudes towards students with disabilities, attention is drawn to exclusionary practices that exist within the Irish higher education system. There, provisions for students with disabilities are based on a model of compensatory-type supports and services due to the 'the 'entrenched character of the psycho-medical model of disability [...] on policy making and planning' (McDonnell, 2003, p262). Dillard (1995) calls for transformative political work that moves beyond an individualistic view of students with disabilities needing to assimilate to the dominant culture, to the questioning of the school to ensure 'that they are in fact vehicles of social change' (p.558). Basing policy provision on the individual deficit model of disability leads to 'little concomitant impact on institutional practices' (Hanafin, Shevlin, Kenny, and McNeela, 2007, p437). If Ireland wants to gain international

recognition for higher education's 'contribution to social inclusion' (Higher Education Authority, 2008, p12), we need to move towards a conceptualisation of inclusive education as a form of 'cultural politics which calls for educational reconstruction consistent with new forms of thinking about education and social issues' (Slee and Weiner, 2001, p94). Freire (1972, p56) reminds us that interventions which do not lead to change within the education system itself serve to reinforce and uphold what already exists:

> There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the [learner] into the logic of the system and bring about conformity to it or it becomes the practice of freedom.

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