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**‘There was a panic at the beginning!’: Disadvantaged Mature Student Experiences in and out of Irish Higher Education (0134)**

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**Research Domain: Student Experiences**

This presentation is based on a study of mature students in three Irish HE institutions which was undertaken in 2007-09. Whilst much emphasis political, rhetorical and systemic has been placed on generating wider forms of access for this heterogeneous group of adults, very little consideration is given to what happens to them post-graduation. Hence our initial impetus for this study was to try and provide an empirical link between student experiences both during and after HE. Although the study used a mixed methods design, we will in this discussion, focus on the numerical data which was generated via a questionnaire; this contained 130 separate data points spread over six themes and returned by 412 ex-students. More specifically we will focus on the data and subsequent analysis of two of these themes: the students experience (specifically financial and familial support) and their post-degree destinations.

**‘There was a panic at the beginning!’: Disadvantaged Mature Student Experiences in and out of Higher Education in the Irish Context**

**[Main Content]**

**Background to the Study**

The concept of ‘Human Capital’<sup>1</sup> has gained prominence within the European and Irish contemporary education and training policy narratives. A predominant strand has been a focus on ‘access’ opportunities and routes to higher education programmes for non-standard entrants<sup>2</sup>. In effect this is an input lead approach, but what is the output of this policy drive in terms of the ‘lived experience’ (Green 2003) of students? This study explored the experiences of and post first-degree destinations (employment, postgraduate education or otherwise) of students designated as being ‘mature disadvantaged’ in three Irish higher education institutions: NUI Maynooth, Trinity College Dublin and Dublin Institute of Technology.

This research attempts to fill a noticeable gap in the ‘access story’ which firmly supports the entry of mature disadvantaged students to Higher Education (HE) and has devised a range creative, innovative and targeted measures to enable matures students to stay the course but has rarely looked at how these students view HE or what happens after graduation. This is despite the fact that there is a well elaborated, and widely diffused, discourse within access policy which claims that measurable economic benefits result from such measures both for the State and the students themselves. Through research amongst graduates this paper outlines some of the economic, social and personal

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<sup>1</sup> While there are several definitions of the concept of human capital probably the definition that is most closely aligned to contemporary policy usage in the EU and Ireland is the OECD (1998, p8) which defines human capital as, “the knowledge, skills, competences and other attributes embodied in individuals that are relevant to economic activity”.

<sup>2</sup> Non-standard entrants in an Irish context refers to applicants that apply to enter HEI by means other than the points they have accumulated through their Leaving Certificate results, this also includes mature students who must be over 23 years of age to be designated as a mature students.

benefits of participation in higher education. The paper also identifies some of the continuing obstacles to access and the barriers to further progression in their career or graduate studies.

*A Summary of the Context for the Research: Disadvantaged Mature Students in Educational and Social Policy and Social Trends*

The Irish HE system has been completely transformed over the past three decades (White, 2001) a process that has been accelerated by 15 years of rapid economic growth and social change, and now challenged by one of quite rapid contraction in certain areas. However, one of the most important changes in HE is that, to a large extent, an elite system has evolved into a diversified and flexible network of institutions of mass education. This in line with longstanding and well documented international trends (Trow, 1979); a phenomenon that is linked to broader social, technological and economic changes which has transformed the role of HE in relation to the market and society. More specifically, the overall rate of admission has risen from 20% of school leavers in 1980, to 46% in 1998 to 55% in 2004 and to over 60% in 2007 (Byrne, D., McCoy, S. & Watson, D., 2008, p. 33). Since the early nineties Irish policymakers placed an emphasis on improving access (and participation rates) for people who have traditionally been underrepresented within HE. It is argued by advocates that improving access is the key to solving a range of social issues and overcoming the disadvantage experienced by working class and other types of 'non-traditional' students (DES, 1995; 2000; 2001; NOEA, 2005; 2007; 2008; Skilbeck & O'Connell, 2000). It is also contended that access is a critical factor in maintaining economic competitiveness and flexibility (Dempsey, 2004; HEA, 2008); a view advocated by bodies such as the OECD (2004) and the EU (CEC, 2000). As part of this agenda a number of target groups have been consistently identified as being underrepresented within HE.

However, research in Ireland has shown that despite expansion in participation rates, economic (and gendered) inequality continues to influence participation rates (Clancy, 1982; 1988; 1995; Clancy & Wall, 2000; O'Connell, Clancy & McCoy, 2006) and that students of all ages from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds have faced, and continue to face, considerable obstacles to attending HE. For instance in relation to parental occupation, those from a background of unemployed or manual have a progression rate of 45% (Byrne, D. et al. 2008) in comparison with those from managerial (65%) and farming (70%) backgrounds.

Mature students are considered an important target group in their own right [along with Travellers, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities] (HEA, 2001, 2008) and it is clear that bringing these 'type' of students into HE is of considerable importance to policymakers. The White Paper on Adult Education noted the 'low levels of educational attainment of Irish adults when compared to other industrialised countries' and is critical that access to HE continues to be dominated by a 'narrow sequential pathway following school' (DES, 2000 pp 139-147). In a more recent report from the HEA it was estimated that 'over 750,000 adults in Ireland between 25-64 years of age have little or no formal educational qualifications' (HEA, 2004, p 8). Furthermore, Ireland continues to have very low levels of participation in lifelong learning in comparison to other countries in the EU (HEA, 2008).

### **Methodological Approaches & Some Findings**

Through gathering qualitative and quantitative data the study aimed to:

1. Map the post-first degree destinations of those students who have entered HE via an access programme or equivalent in the past seven years;
2. Explore the processes and experiences of these ex-students transition from HE into (or back into) workplace or other arenas;
3. Investigate the ex-students reflections on their motivations to entering HE, expectations and experiences.

The research focused on time-stratified samples (2001-2007) of ex-students who have graduated from their first degree in each of the HEI. This paper will focus on student experience in relation to: 1) familial and financial supports and 2) post-degree destinations. From the data it emerged that '1' was a critical factor in successful completion of a programme of study.

In terms of basic demographics, 66% the respondents described themselves as female and 34% male. Their ages ranged from the youngest at 27 to the oldest who was 77; the distribution of which can be seen in Table 1 below.

**Table 1 Age of Respondents (n & %)**

| Age Band | N   | %     |
|----------|-----|-------|
| <39      | 163 | 41.9  |
| 40-49    | 112 | 28.8  |
| 50-59    | 79  | 20.3  |
| 60>      | 35  | 9.0   |
| Total    | 389 | 100.0 |

One of the core set of questions in the questionnaire (as well as in the interviews), was around the area of financing the period of study. To explore this we firstly asked about peoples' work situation prior to starting their degree: 82% said they had a job and 17% did not. Of those who were working, 61% worked full-time and 21% part-time. Excluding those who studied part-time, what this suggests is that that 211 (53%) participants gave up full-time work to take up full-time study; a commitment not to be taken lightly. The socioeconomic groups people 'belonged' to prior to studying is shown in Table 2 below<sup>3</sup>.

**Table 2 Socioeconomic Groups Prior to Studying**

|                      | n   | %  |
|----------------------|-----|----|
| Employer & Managers  | 36  | 11 |
| Higher Professionals | 25  | 8  |
| Lower Professionals  | 75  | 23 |
| Non-Manual           | 135 | 42 |
| Manual Skilled       | 14  | 4  |

<sup>3</sup> This data was generated by recoding the job titles/descriptions provided by participants in question 23 on the questionnaire. The classifications are those used by the Office for National Statistics.

|               |     |   |
|---------------|-----|---|
| Semi-skilled  | 27  | 8 |
| Self-employed | 6   | 2 |
| Farmer        | 2   | 1 |
| Others        | 2   | 1 |
| Total         | 322 |   |

In developing this particular theme, the questionnaire asked a series of questions concerning the forms of income the participants had access to. Fifty-three percent (n=210) of respondents reported that they worked during their studies, which ranged from 2 to 60 hours per week; the median was 16 hours. Table 3 below shows the distribution of working hours across the sample.

**Table 3 Hours worked whilst studying**

| Hours | n   | %     |
|-------|-----|-------|
| 0-10  | 45  | 25.0  |
| 11-20 | 77  | 42.8  |
| 21-30 | 20  | 11.1  |
| 31-40 | 25  | 13.9  |
| 41>   | 13  | 7.2   |
| Total | 180 | 100.0 |

A small number of people (n=17) indicated that they received financial support from their employers. From the written comments on the questionnaire this tended to take two main forms: sponsorship and/or having their fees paid for them. An equally small number (n=13) received a 'scholarship' whilst they were studying, and 33 people reported that they had financial support from a community group or organisation. The rest of the responses were distributed as follows: 36% (n=133) received no state related financial support, 41% (n=148) said that they received support from Social Welfare, 23% (n=84) received only a grant 12% (n=45) received and only social welfare support. However, it should be noted that 28% (n=103) of people got both social welfare *and* a grant. Also within the social welfare category, 129 people said they had the BTEI and 26 said 'other'. Although we did not ask people to indicate what their gross income was at the beginning of their studies, the receipt of BTEI is a good proxy indicator as to the financial status of the family and/or individuals. Fifty-one percent (n=187) of respondents reported that they received a grant whilst studying.