CULTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON ACCESS AND RETENTION IN THREE IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTES

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Introduction
This paper is the report from the Irish team detailing the findings from the research undertaken in Ireland concerning the institutional perspectives on the experiences of non-traditional students in three higher education institutions in Ireland. It should be read in conjunction with the report on student experiences in particular.

Ireland
Ireland with a population of 4.5m people has a state funded binary higher education system comprised of the university sector (seven universities and a number of teaching and art colleges) and the Institute of Technology sector (fourteen Institutes of Technology). Although there is a growing number of degree level courses being offered by private colleges the overall number of such students in these institutions remains small.

The university sector is well established. Dublin University (better known as Trinity College Dublin) was founded in 1592; Maynooth University (now called the National University of Ireland Maynooth) was formed in 1795; University College Cork was established as Queens College in 1845; University College Galway was set up in 1845 and University College Dublin, now Ireland's largest university, was founded in 1854 by John Henry Newman as the Catholic University of Ireland.

Most Institutes of Technology (apart from the Dublin Institute of Technology and three new colleges founded in 1990s) were created in the 1970s and run under the *Vocational Education Acts* from 1970 until 1992 as special subcommittees of the Vocational Education Committees – a body which provides second level and further education courses. It was placed on an independent basis thereafter under the *Regional Technical Colleges Acts* in 1993. In the late 1990s, these institutions were upgraded to Institute of Technology (IoT) status. They have been given delegated authority to confer their own awards up to Doctoral level (although a relatively small number of postgraduates 5,500 are enrolled in the IT sector compared to universities with 30,000).

Colleges in Ireland are now (2010) catering for 188,000 undergraduate and graduate students which is an increase from 170,000 in 2004/2005. Just under two thirds of these students are enrolled in universities. In 2010 a total of 77,000 applied for places in higher education, of which 15,000 were mature applicants. In autumn 2010 a total of 46,500 enrolled as first year students, an increase from 40,000 in two years. The Minister for Social Protection in reply to a Parliamentary Question in November 2010 (Ó Cúiv, 2010) stated that the number of participants on the back to education scheme (which supports low income families to gain access to HE) in the 2009-10 academic year was 20,808, which represented a 79 percent increase on the previous year. The number of participants in the 2008-09 academic year also represented an increase of 31 percent on the previous academic year. As of 22 October (2010), approximately 21,500 participants were approved for the Back To Education Allowance (BTEA). Due to the nature of the scheme a significant number of applications are processed in October and indications are that

BTEA numbers will increase noticeably again for this academic year (Ó Cúiv, 2010). These increases are due to the number of parents losing their jobs.

One of the most significant trends within HE is that the gender balance has radically changed. In recent years more women than men have enrolled in Higher Education courses. Between 2001 and 2006 in the university sector women accounted for just under two thirds of new entrants (HEA, 2006; 2007). In the IT sector a small majority of students were male. However, it should be noted while there has been a 'feminisation' of HEIs the gender balance remains discipline specific. For instance the majority of students in engineering are male and women account for three quarters of the entrants to the health sciences. In the past two years, statistics from the Irish Higher Education Authority shows that the gender gap has narrowed and the female/males ration is now 48:52 per cent of all students in higher education. At undergraduate level the full-time ratio in 2009/01 is 57:43 percent.

Overall there has been considerable progress in widening access to non-traditional students over the past decade albeit from a very low base. This is partly due to the fact that enrollment of students from professional and managerial socio-economic background has reached saturation point. There has been a steady increase of students from skilled and semi-skilled occupations backgrounds (O'Connell, Clancy & McCoy, 2006). However, there has been a decline in participation of entrants from non-manual backgrounds - a heterogenous group which includes service and administrative workers along with police.

Despite these changes, mature students, according to the OECD, do not yet account for the targeted 15 percent of intake and this institutional barrier along with financial barriers remain across the developmental path of the Irish economy and society. New entrants to university aged 23 and over account for 14.75 per cent of new entrants in 2009/10. The Government continues the unequal treatment of part-time adult students who in general must pay their own fees.

A previous research project (Fleming & Gallagher, 2003, p. 1) concluded:
> …access is a reflection of patterns of inequality that are the accumulated result of a disadvantage manifesting itself early in the educational cycle. A number of reports highlight that for third level education to be equitable other parts of the schooling system must also be equitable.

Pre-recession policy, discourses and debates: Access, funding, lifelong learning and the knowledge economy
Before the financial crisis of 2008 the profound changes in higher education had led to a wideranging debate about the future development of the sector. Fleming (2006, p. 81) framed the debate as:

> Quality assurance is required. Improvements in research and teaching are necessary. Performance appraisal is on the horizon and the reform and restructuring of governance is underway. This is undertaken in the Irish university

sector where state funding has been reduced and alternative funding is sought.

The debates crystallised around how HEIs could facilitate lifelong learning and create greater social equality within a competitive knowledge economy (See Clancy, 2001; Eivers, et al, 2002; OECD, 2004; Osbourne & Leith, 2000; Skilbeck, 2000, 2004). These reports repeatedly emphasised that higher education should make links with the economy ensuring that graduates are appropriately trained for the job market. They also reiterated the demand from the Irish State, the EU and the OECD to standardise qualification frameworks and quality assurance. The National Qualification Framework (NQF) is intended to map onto the European Qualification Framework (EQF). Furthermore, the need to enhance the research and teaching profile of the university, the need to diversify the student population and ensure access for non-traditional students and to take advantage of a global student market were also repeatedly highlighted.

International reports such as Skilbeck's *Review of International Trends with particular reference to Ireland* (2001) and the OECD's *Review of Higher Education in Ireland* (2004) ensure that the role of the university is constantly in public discourse during this period. Though Skilbeck understands how societies look to higher education to 'underpin economic growth, improve the quality of life and strengthen the social fabric' it is clear that the economy and its needs are the primary drivers for bringing about change in the university (Skilbeck, 2001, p. 9). This report underlines other agendas besides the 'utility function of developing human capital in part through technology and other applications of knowledge, in part through continuous upgrading of skills and competences' (Skilbeck, 2001, p.37). According to Skilbeck (2001, p. 36);

> The university may not be adequately performing the roles of intellectual leader and moral critic in the public domain and framework of general culture. There is a sense in the community that too often they remain preoccupied with their own needs, especially for public funds, and their specialist interests.

Skilbeck recognises that 'cultural criticism, intellectual leadership and moral leadership tend to run counter to the predominance of economic concerns' (2001, p. 37). However, despite this, the predominant emphasis in Skilbeck report is on economic imperatives.

This is in keeping with the dominant definition of lifelong learning as outlined in the EU White Paper on Lifelong Learning (European Commission, 2000) which informs higher education policy. This lifelong learning discourse is predominantly concerned with personal development, upskilling for the workplace and the support for learners as they take their place in the knowledge society (Walters & Watters, 2001, pp. 471-478). The idea that the university should serve not only the 'knowledge economy' but also the 'knowledge society' is frequently missed, for example by the OECD (2004).

Adult educators have also turned their attention to higher education. Taylor, Barr & Steele state that the university should retain its open and vigorous contestation of knowledge and values by presenting critical skeptical courses and programmes that relate to the reality of current global capitalism (Taylor, Barr & Steele, 2002, p. vii). These

adult educators point to the way the lifelong learning agenda has involved a shift towards handing responsibility for learning to the individual and this allied with the demise of the welfare state and the retraction of the neo-liberal state leads to the realisation that reduced government funding for universities is part of the same neo-liberal agenda that suggests the withdrawal of public institutions from the active pursuit of social purposes, unless that social purpose is economic (Fleming, 2006, p 82; Finnegan, 2008).

Higher Education in a time of recession
Since this research project commenced (2008), the economic and political landscape in Ireland and the EU, has changed in ways that are difficult to exaggerate. While it was the case at the beginning of the project that universities in Ireland faced challenges that many saw as of major significance all has changed making the previously challenging situations become what can only be described as scary. The agenda has changed dramatically with increased demands to introduce fees for full-time study and reduce the budget by 3 per cent each year for a number of years.

The current 'common sense' is that the Government sees education as one of the ways of overcoming the crisis, particularly by emphasizing the public policy mantra of serving the so called 'smart economy.' Business and industry falls in behind this policy. As the banking crisis is matched by a fiscal deficit the immediate impact means that funding for higher education has decreased, instead of increasing – as recommended by all policy reviews and reports of previous years. There is an inevitable, if as yet an unquantifiable impact on the number of staff in higher education and a move to part-time and contract staff to deliver teaching programmes. In addition, the freeze on hiring staff has had an impact on key support workers in the areas of access, mature students and disability. The impact on working class and other non-traditional students is as yet unclear but it is certain that the impact will be severe. If resources of all kinds are thus reduced and the number applying to access higher education is increasing steadily it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that difficult and challenging times are ahead for non-traditional applicants, students and the staff who support and encourage them.

The Hunt Report (Hunt, 2010) is the most recent major policy statement and was published during a period of profound economic crisis and political change. While much of the work for the report was undertaken before the full extent of the crisis had become clear many of the potential implications for HE must have been clear. What is most striking about the recommendations is that there is a great deal of continuity between this report and previous policy statements (e.g. Skilbeck, 2001). The prevailing emphasis is on higher education as primarily in the service of the economy and it proposes a managerial approach to governance and accountability. However, there is a recognition of the need for social engagement by higher education. The medium term recommendations include the consolidation and amalgamantion of existing higher education institutions, ensuring wider access for non-traditional students and the importance of maintaining competitiveness. Some of the clearest recommendations are on how to access sources of funding outside the state (currently the state accounts for 85 percent of funding) and there is a strong emphasis on attracting a higher portion of the global education market. It is difficult to see how the call in these reports for more

flexible progression routes into and across higher education institutions can be achieved in the context of progressive cutting back of funding for the entire sector. More recently, (March 2011), a new government has been put in place in Ireland and it is not yet clear how the new configuration of political power will impact on the higher education sector.

The access and retention debate in context
The issues of access, retention and dropout need to be understood in relation to the transition of HE from an elite to a mass system; the well established policy discourses on lifelong learning and the knowledge economy; and the potential medium term impact of the financial crisis on funding.

A review of access by the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education accepted that there may be a perception that equality and excellence may be in competition (2007, p. 16) and that equality of access is not yet part of the day to day agenda of higher education institutions. In addition, students find difficulty navigating their way through "the maze of financial support systems." Finally, there is a lack of essential data on the progress being made on reaching access targets.

The IoTs have made concerted efforts to address low retention rates that were identified in a number of research reports (Eivers, Flanagan, Morgan, 2002; Morgan, Flanagan, & Kellaghan, 2001). These responses included retention projects in the ITs, the introduction of mentoring for all first year students, orientation programmes for new students, supplementary modules in mathematics for those at risk, and staff development programmes. The Directors of the Institutes acknowledged that staff members are often recruited on the basis of their expertise in industry or business and not all have had an opportunity to undertake training in teaching and learning. Some Institutes have established a Staff Development Unit in Teaching and Learning while others have initiated training in teaching/learning methodologies to assist lecturers develop their capabilities. The impact of these interventions is not clear.

Eivers et al (2002) placed the issue of retention and non-completion on the agenda by identifying a non-completion rate of over 40 per cent in Institutes of Technology. This figure rose to 47 per cent for males and to over 50 per cent for computer and engineering courses. The study (Eivers, et al., 2002, p. 3) stated that;

> Of the various changes suggested by students, the most frequently suggested, in the case of teaching staff, concerned greater approachability, as well as improving lecturing skills and techniques. More than a quarter of students suggested that there was a need for either more tutorials or setting up tutorials in areas where they were not presently available.

The lecturing staff understood that there were issues that allowed them predict who was at risk of non-completion;

> In particular, lack of student preparedness for college generally, and for the particular courses that they had selected was identified. It was felt that many

students undergo considerable stress in the transition from second to third-level education. Learning to study on their own and getting accustomed to a new style of teaching were also mentioned as major problems for some students. Lack of motivation, which tended to manifest itself in poor application to coursework and low attendance at classes was considered a problem among a substantial number of students. Lack of background knowledge in particular subjects in school was not considered a major drawback since courses were pitched at a basic level for the first year. A major issue for staff was students' part-time work, which was perceived to be excessive in many instances, and as having a very negative effect on both attendance at classes and study. (Eivers, et al., 2002 p. 4)

This data is particularly important as historically the IT sector has attracted a higher proportion of students from a working class background than the universities and is seen as being "on the front line in the widening participation agenda" (OECD, 2004, p.32).

Concerns about retention rates in particular institutions and certain courses resulted in a number of retention boosting initiatives and specific studies of individual institutions over the past six years (Baird 2002; Finnegan & Russell, 2000; Mathews & Mulkeen, 2002). Particular attention has been given to the transition from first to second year and pre entry preparations, A series of macro and micro strategies for improving the completion rate including the establishment of university retention network have been deemed to be successful in a preliminary assessment by Flanagan and Morgan (2004) and may go to explain the markedly different findings about retention over the past decade. However, this network has been less active in recent years.

These various reports concur that there are noticeable differences in retention rates between different disciplines, faculties and courses. The highest levels of non-completion in both the ITs and Universities are in subjects such as computer science, mathematics and engineering (for instance 26.9 percent for computer science students in Morgan et al., 2001 and up to half in Eivers at al., 2001) The fact that courses with high academic entry requirements which result in high levels of remuneration and high social status such as medicine, dentistry and veterinary science have low levels of drop out (7.3 percent in Morgan, Flanagan, & Kellaghan, 2001) and Law at 7.1 percent may also be worth considering in trying to map out the relation between non-traditional students and drop out rates. Moreover, differences in completion rates also occur between full-time and part-time students (NAO, 2007) and also depend in part on the length of a given programme (OECD, 2007).

Healy, Carpenter and Lynch (1999) found that children of professional workers, employers and managers, salaried and non-manual and skilled workers were more likely to leave college without finishing their course than students from the families of semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers and farmers. This indicates how complex and context based the relationship is between social background and retention.

In 2010 the Higher Education Authority (HEA) launched the first comprehensive study of retention and non-completion among first year students across the entire higher education

system (Mooney, Patterson, O'Connor & Chantler, 2010). The rates vary according to the type of university or college, according to the discipline being studied and also according to the previous educational achievement:

> The rates of non-presence vary strongly according to the NFQ level, ranging from 25 percent/26 percent at levels 6/7 to between 4 percent and 16 percent at level 8. They also differ according to the sector, ranging from 22 percent in an institute of technology to 9 percent in the university sector and 4 percent in teacher training colleges (Mooney, et al., 2010, p. 5).

These statistics are based on access to the student record systems of the colleges but do not include those who leave in the period between September of their first year and the following March of that same academic year. This HEA report on student progression is significant because it is the first time fully comparable data from all HEIs in Ireland has been collected. The new student records system, based on individual student data, means that multivariate analyses of student progression has been possible and the report gives a more complete and nuanced understanding of the push and pull factors in student retention.

This study confirms that there continues to be a large gap between retention rates in IoTs and universities (at degree level 9 percent non-completion between first and second year in universities and 22 percent in IoTs). When previous academic attainment, field of study and other important predictors of progression are taken into account the difference is not as great between the sectors as might be thought from these figures. This helps to clarify the anomalies between the two sets of reports cited above. It should be noted again that the IoTs have a different student intake than the universities including more non-traditional students (NTS) and a greater range of course levels (it appears that the overall dropout figures from IoTs is very often at certificate level courses).

Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB) has a 76 percent progression from 1st to second year but performs well when student characteristics are taken into accounts. NUIM has 90 percent progression from 1st to second year and TCD 92 percent from 1st to second year. This recent study of progression (Mooney, et al., 2010) emphasises previous academic attainment in school exams and in particular at mathematics is a strong predictor of student progression. This was highlighted in previous quantitative studies, where the field of study emerges as significant for progression. Art, education and medicine have the highest rates of student progression while computer science has the lowest level of retention. Men are more likely to drop than women. But when field of study and previous academic attainment are factored in the difference is negligible.

Overall, mature students seem to be fare better than younger students on pre-degree courses but slightly worse in degree level courses. Similarly, non-Irish students fare better at pre-degree course and less well in longer courses. However, the data about non-Irish students is not usefully disaggregated and the difficulties and issues encountered by certain migrant groups that emerged in the research data are not reflected in the report.

The findings on social class are mixed (with slightly higher progression rates amongst professionals and farmers). However, it backs up our qualitative findings that class and retention have a complex relationship and undermines the simplistic idea that 'working class students are more likely to drop out'. The report also states that grants have had a big impact on NTS progression in the IoTs but not in the universities - a finding at odds with our qualitative research.

It is clear that some progress has been made in the rates of retention and there continues to be serious challenges facing most higher level institutions and in particular those that work with students who have lower points in their Leaving Certificate; those who choose engineering and/or computers; male students and also those with low ability or achievement in mathematics. However, these statistics must be approached with care as they may be also be indicative of the social background of the students.

A number of recent studies by O'Grady & Guilfoyle (e.g. 2007) have prompted a public debate about whether improving trends in examination grades has happened over time without a corresponding improvement in academic achievement. There has been, since the original findings on dropouts in Ireland (2002), a concerted programme of increasing the grades awarded to students in order to achieve the same number of First Class Honours as is the international norm. O'Grady & Guilfoyle (2007, p. 1) showed that;

> In 1994, no University had a rate of Firsts that exceeded 10 percent. By 2004, the rate for every University exceeded 10 percent, with one exceeding 15 percent and another 20 percent. As for the 2.1 rates, in 1994 four of the seven Universities were below 30 percent but by 2004 all Universities exceeded 30 percent, with four above 40 percent and one exceeding 50 percent.

As long as the social class and economic resources of a student are key indicators as to whether a student will enter higher education, it is crucial that supports developed in recent years to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds are continued (Fleming & Gallagher, 2003, p. 16). Access is a reflection of patterns of inequality that are the accumulated result of a disadvantage manifesting itself very early in the educational cycle. This report emphasizes that 'for third level to be equitable other parts of the schooling system must also be equitable' (p.17). The emphasis on Honneth in the student analysis section of this Irish report highlights and connects with previous findings of the Council of Europe which states that parental influence on children's education is a more important indicator of progression throughout the system than occupational level or social class (Council of Europe, 1999, p. 3; Fleming & Gallagher, 2003, p. 17). Each disadvantaged area in the country has grant aided finance for access courses and programmes funded by central government from dormant bank accounts.

Study of Three Higher Education Institutions in Ireland
Three higher education institutions were chosen in order to reflect the tiered system of higher education in Ireland. Trinity College Dublin is an elite university with a commitment to non-traditional access on a small scale. National University of Ireland

Maynooth welcomes non-traditional applicants and has achieved the national target for mature student numbers. Finally, Blanchardstown Institute of Technology (founded in 1999) has a particular mandate to address the learning needs of the disadvantaged area in which it is located.

Each of the three institutions works predominantly with students from different segments of the total cohort of students who all apply for admission through the Central Applications Office (CAO). TCD, though not exclusively, attracts students with higher points achieved through the Leaving Certificate Examinations (typically from 450 points to many with over 500 and a number of subject options requiring more than 550 points – the maximum possible is 600). NUI Maynooth, though it has 11 per cent of students with more than 500 points the average cut off point for all subjects is 424 points. IT Blanchardstown works with many students who achieved points in the range of 200 to 350. With the exception of Sports, Child Care, Applied Social Studies and Community Development which have minimum requirements in the mid 300s all the other honours degree (level 8) courses have minimum points requirement of less than 250. The implications of this segmented or stratified higher education system were explored in interviews and have important pedagogical (teaching and learning) implications for the colleges and staff.

National University of Ireland Maynooth: A Profile
In 1795 Grattan's Parliament passed an Act which created an academy "for the better education of persons professing the popish or Roman Catholic religion". In that year, and as a direct consequence of the French Revolution and the turmoil then sweeping Europe, a college was established at Maynooth to accommodate the several hundred Irish students stranded at colleges abroad. Maynooth became not only Ireland's national seminary, but also for a time the largest seminary in the world.

In 1896 St Patrick's College Maynooth attained the status of a Pontifical University for its courses in Theology, Philosophy and Canon Law. Following the foundation of The National University of Ireland, Maynooth became a Recognised College of that federal structure in 1910. In 1997 the university became one of the four constituent universities of the federal National University of Ireland. Both pontifical university and the state run NUIM share some facilities and some courses but in all other areas are totally independent.

NUI Maynooth is a non-denominational university of 8,800 students in total. The university offers undergraduate and postgraduate courses in the Arts, Science, Engineering, Philosophy and Celtic Studies. The university has three faculties – Arts, Celtic Studies & Philosophy; Social Sciences and Science & Engineering, which offer programmes from undergraduate to doctorate levels in a range of disciplines including the traditional humanities, music, education, media studies, psychology, basic sciences, social sciences, computer and electronic engineering. The university has taken initiatives to facilitate students who live outside the immediate Maynooth area and daily bus routes bring students from the surrounding counties enabling them to live at home while commuting daily to the university.

A large proportion of the student body (over 3,000) are full-time undergraduate BA students enrolled the in the faculty of Arts, Celtic Studies and Philosophy most of whom are taking a general Arts degree which usually entails work in three different disciplines and is typically completed in three years. The science and technology primary degree courses are completed over a four year cycle. Of the 1,240 postgraduate students at the University in 2006 - 348 were undertaking PhD research, usually over three years, and 892 students were registered for Masters or Diploma qualifications which take one to two years to complete. A total of 77 PhD students graduated in 2008/09. The university offers a wide range of diploma courses which are vocationally orientated with a particular high numbers opting for postgraduate diploma courses in education as a secondary teaching qualification. There are approximately 800 staff working in the university.

In common with all of Ireland's third level institutions the majority (90 percent) of students come through the traditional CAO route. NUIM has a high intake of mature students, just under 18 percent in 2010. There is also a well established access programme that aims to encourage and support non-traditional students and which, amongst other activities, has expanded the number of places in the university for access students.

NUI Maynooth attracts more students whose parents did not go to higher education than other colleges according to a recent study (Irish University Study, 2009). And the percentage of students with parents who did not complete secondary education is significantly higher than 'other colleges'. On average 38 percent of parents did not complete secondary school and the average for all other universities is 24 percent.

In September 2009 NUI Maynooth had 1,800 full-time first year students and by March 2010 a total of 180 had de-registered. This 10 percent non-completion before the system commences to take its official census has to be added to the HEA (2010) statistics and this indicates only a modest change from the drop out rate of the original research that called attention to non-completion as a national issues in HE (Eivers, et al., 2002). Of the mature students who enrolled in the years from 2001 to 2004 there has been a slight and progressive decline in the number being retained from 79 percent of those who entered in 2001 to 75 percent of those who first entered in 2004.

In 2009 NUI Maynooth had 220 access students in total – these are normal school leaving age but allowed access to Maynooth through an access programme for disadvantaged schools and areas. There were also 270 students in total across all categories registered as having a disability. There were 700 mature students in that year – later to rise to 800 in 2010. It is worth noting that 44 percent of the disabled students have registered as having a learning disability most typically dyslexia. More surprisingly, 30 percent of mature students are registered as having a disability, most often dyslexia. These figures are typical of the years studied in this project. It is interesting to further segment the statistics for those registered with the Disability Office as having a disability. Of those registered with a disability, 20 percent have a significant ongoing illness; 7 percent a physical disability and 12 percent a mental health issue. Those who are hard of hearing or visual impairment combined account for 7 percent of students registered with the Disability

Office in the university. Together Aspergers, ADD and ADHD account for another 6 percent of Disability Office registrations.

Retention of students has steadily improved since the late 1990s when NUIM was found to have one of the lowest retention rates amongst Irish universities (with a total of almost 28 percent of all students not completing their courses). Along with a number of other Irish universities a set of initiatives including mentoring schemes, orientation days and study skills course were introduced to improve the retention rate. The current retention rate is around eighty percent but as with all tertiary bodies retention rates differ greatly across disciplines.

The University of Dublin, Trinity College: A Profile
Trinity College Dublin builds on its four-hundred-year-old tradition of scholarship and is ranked 52nd in the top 100 world universities and 14th position in the top 200 European universities by the QS World University Rankings 2010. In the *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings for 2010 TCD is ranked 76th in the top 200 world universities and 15th in the top European universities.

TCD was the only Irish university until the 1850s. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the college became closely identified with the Established Protestant Church. Although Catholics and Dissenters were allowed to attend TCD after 1793, continued opposition from the Catholic hierarchy to members of their Church studying in Trinity and the strong ties the college enjoyed with the Protestant Ascendancy meant that for most of Trinity's four hundred year existence it was widely perceived as a bastion of Anglo-Irish and Unionist power in a country that was predominantly Catholic.

Historically, the numbers of students enrolled in the college have been small rising from 89 over its first fifteen years to a peak of 2,000 in 1824 and falling to 1,000 students in 1901 (which was, nonetheless, about a third of the total number of university students in Ireland at that time). For the first half of the twentieth century Trinity remained more or less the same size and retained the characteristics of small elite institution dominated by a section of the Irish upper middle class and students from the UK.

Traditionally, TCD has been funded through endowments and, following Irish independence in 1922, the college remained protective of its autonomy and relied on private funding until 1945. After this date TCD became dependent on the State for the vast majority of its funding. Nonetheless, like several other Universities there has been significant restructuring over the past decade aimed at making the university more competitive, securing research tenders and building links with private enterprise – the Access Programme is funded by Goldman Sachs.

For most of TCD's history, until the 1960s, the college put a strong emphasis on a broad liberal arts education for all students regardless of their area of specialisation. The college has shown itself to be relatively open to innovations in curriculum and the development of new disciplines. It was the first university in Ireland or Britain to introduce the study of modern languages. The School of Engineering, founded in 1841, is one of the oldest in

the English-speaking world. A Medical School was established in 1711 and the Law School in 1740. The School of Commerce was established in 1925, and the School of Social Studies in 1934. In more recent times, Trinity has been at the forefront in the study of Genetics and Neuroscience. Currently there are three Faculties: Arts Humanities and Social Sciences (divided into twelve Schools); Engineering, Mathematics and Science (divided into nine Schools); and Health Sciences (divided into four Schools).

Like all tertiary education bodies in Ireland TCD has seen a large increase in numbers since the 1960s. A significant increase in participation rates in post-compulsory education has resulted in a fourfold increase in full-time enrolments in higher education in Ireland, rising from 21,000 in 1965 to nearly 97,000 in 1997 (at which point TCD had 13,700 students). Primary degrees in Arts and Sciences in TCD are usually completed over four years. Diplomas are awarded after a year of study while Masters usually take two years and PhD completed over a minimum of three years. A total of 272 PhD graduated in 2008/09. In 2009/10 there were 6,805 full time female undergraduates and 4,170 full time male undergraduates and 2,315 full-time postgraduate students (of which 1,936 were women) enrolled in TCD. There were 181 part-time undergraduates and 1,602 part-time postgraduates registered.

Most students entered through the traditional national CAO system and the vast majority of their applicants have excelled in the Leaving Certificate (the final state school exam). Despite the fact that TCD continues to draw the bulk of it students from the most powerful socio-economic groups in Irish society a Trinity Access Programme (TAP) was established in 1993 to encourage non-traditional students to enroll. In 2005 TCD fulfilled its commitment to reserving 15 percent of it places for non-traditional students. TAP's target groups include students from poorer socio-economic background and those with disabilities but the majority of these non-traditional students have been mature students. In fact, mature students accounted for 71 percent of the non-traditional students registered in 2005.

Retention rates are generally high in TCD (estimated at slightly above the Irish university average at 84.8 percent in one study) but the percentage varies widely according to course and academic discipline (for instance high retention rates in Law but comparatively high drop out rates in Computer Science). The University has 2,676 employees in total (2,146 full-time, 530 part-time), of whom 828 are Academic staff, 536 are Academic Research staff and 1312 are Administrative, Service and Technical staff.

The Institute of Technology Blanchardstown: A Profile
The Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB) opened in 1999. This is the newest of the thirteen IoTs in Ireland. It is situated in one of the most rapidly growing areas in Dublin, approximately 10 kilometers north-west of the city centre, adjacent to a large commuter belt stretching across the surrounding counties of Meath and Kildare. The college has a purpose built campus located in a business and technology park.

The founding of this new institute is directly connected to two important trends in third level education in Ireland. The first trend involves the phenomenal growth and success of

the Institute of Technology Sector. The institutes evolved out of a rather piecemeal policy process in the 1960s and 1970s aimed at developing a binary system in Irish tertiary education to provide apprenticeship and technical qualifications. In 1980 there were 10,910 students within this part of tertiary education and today there are just under 60,000. ITB had 1,500 full time (of which 664 were female) and 1,312 part-time students (of which 259 were female) in 2009/10. The high proportion of men on apprenticeship programmes accounts for most of the high gender imbalance.

Secondly, the foundation of ITB and its stated aims reflects many of the current government policy objectives for third level education. The institute is situated in a rapidly growing and largely working class area with historically low levels of participation in higher education. At the same time a number of hi-technology industries have been established in Blanchardstown. Ministers and policy makers have argued that the development of an IT in the area offers a strategy for overcoming social disadvantage through education. The policies and long term strategy of the institute clearly reflect this and there is a marked emphasis on active links with industry and a strong advocacy of lifelong learning policies that encourage non-traditional students into third level education in order to obtain the skills necessary for a competitive 'knowledge economy'.

The function of the Institute is to provide vocational and technical education and training for the economic, technological, scientific, commercial, industrial, social and cultural development of the State

The Institute has provided a flexible third-level programme designed to meet regional and national requirements with an emphasis on specialist higher education for leading-edge industries in the region, upgrading of specialist technical and technological skills, continuing education to meet the needs of mature students, in-service courses, retraining, and updating of skills and special-needs education for those with educational disadvantage or disability.

ITB's initial target at setup was to achieve 30 percent non-traditional enrolment in five years and maintain this figure. ITB has maintained a high percentage of mature students with over 40 percent over 25 years of age. Its access initiatives include school visits by staff, reserved places for mature students (12 percent), disadvantaged (4.5 percent) and for those who progress from their level 7 programmes. The campus has many migrants in the student body. With a young staff cohort and a history of active staff development, retention is a priority at all levels in the academic community. There is a focus on teaching a diverse student population, the use of problem based learning, mentoring and a considerable interest and attention to the needs of disadvantaged and mature students. The areas in which the Institute has made particular resources available include Dyslexia workshops for staff as well as screening of first year students with learning difficulties, training for working with students with hearing difficulties and alternative teaching methodologies for apprenticeship training. As with all the colleges in this study significant progress has been made with assistive technologies available to students in the library.

ITB has the advantage of being new with young dynamic staff and the potential of establishing its identity as it develops. With small staff and student numbers it has the unique opportunity to develop a high level of community and business involvement in a shared project. However, it has its own disadvantage (shared with other colleges and universities) of not having created social spaces that could support and encourage collaborative learning. It has the particular challenge of forging a community of learners (of all ages) on a campus that does not have easily identifiable spaces for social interaction outside the classroom and canteen. As this research identified the importance of such collaborative learning spaces as a requirement to support student-based learning it is important to state here that these spaces are not easily identified or created in many HE institutions.

ITB offers Higher Certificate, Ordinary Bachelor Degree and Honours Bachelor Degrees as well as a limited number of postgraduate courses in engineering, computing, business studies, languages, applied social studies and horticulture. The courses range in length from two to five years with a degree level course typically taking four years. ITB offers a wider range of levels in its courses than the other case study institutions and the courses are structured in a way that offers students a measure of flexibility in how they progress and move between courses. Generally speaking the courses on offer are more vocationally orientated than university programmes and there is a particularly strong emphasis on developing computer and language skills for business and industry.

The available data shows that the majority of students at ITB are from Dublin and a significant proportion, around 30 per cent, are mature students. This is, in Irish HE, an unusually high percentage of mature students. Course design and institute polices are specifically designed to attract other groups of non-traditional learners also, particularly from disadvantaged socio-economic groups. In terms of attracting such students it is perhaps noteworthy that a proportion of the students come through the ITB's own admissions procedures rather than through the national CAO. The college aims to bring in two thirds of its students through this process in the future. There are currently 250 staff members at the Institute.

Historically, retention rates in the Institutes of Technology (ITs) have been much lower than in the universities (one study in 2001 found that 42 percent of entrants to ITs did not complete their courses) yet some subject options such as social studies have high retention rates in line with the university sector (80 percent and above) while other courses, such as business, have much higher drop out rates.

Staff Interviews and Profiles
Interviews were undertaken with managers, access staff, administrators, student support services (ranging from career guidance officers to counsellors) and teaching staff (both tenured and contract staff) from a wide range of disciplines. Interviews, meetings, formal and informal discussions including focus groups provided rich data for this study. Given the relatively small number of HEIs in Ireland a number of staff to whom we spoke had worked in more than one institution and these interviewees drew on their experiences in various institutions.

What was abundantly clear is that there are high levels of loyalty and committment among staff to their institutions. Most staff are very supportive of non-traditional students (NTS) and are for a number of professional reasons anxious to see students progress through courses. This is undoubtedly having some impact on retention (and was also noted in student interviews). In fact support for non-traditional students and widening access surfaced in many staff interviews regardless of their role in the HEI or the nature of the institution in which they worked. In fact, one of the most striking aspects of the interviews was how widely diffused the 'access agenda' was amongst staff. However, despite this genuine committment, awareness of the issues that can and do affect such students was uneven and, as might be expected, a very different perspective on the nature and role of tertiary education emerged from the interviews compared to that offered by non-traditional student . The exception to this was the interviews with support and access staff who generally foregrounded many of the same issues highlighted by students.

As in any complex institution, staff find themselves using varying sets of criteria to assess their work. This was particularly clear amongst teaching staff. The overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, demands of loyalty to their institution, their own department in which they work and most emphatically to the discipline in which they research and teach repeatedly surfaced in interviews. Staff often find themselves managing tensions created while juggling the demands of research and teaching. This was especially true for a number of early career academics, usually on short-term contracts, who were faced with a heavy teaching load but were concerned to find adequate time and space to build their research profile (which is seen as more 'valuable' in career terms than pedagogical development). Managing medium term career goals on flexible contracts and a marked concern about security came up in all the interviews with teaching staff who did not have tenure. It is clear that this was perceived as an important trend by staff who believed that it had implications for the quality of teaching and of research in Irish HEIs. It is also clear that many lecturing staff, with and without tenure, are involved in a range of administrative changes, restructuring, working with new programmes, modularization of programmes and implementing a new national framework of qualifications (NFQ) and marking schemes over a short number of years.

In this sometimes pressed atmosphere it is perhaps unsurprisng that many interviewees viewed non-traditional as more 'time consuming' 'more work' or 'difficult'. In fact many of the teaching staff described non-traditional students in deficit terms and an almost therapeutic approach to NTS could be discerned in some staff accounts. The exceptions to this were mainly amongst staff who taught in applied or soft sciences or who had a developed interest in pedagogy, access or inequality as an academic interest.

Howerer, it is clear from meetings with staff at all levels in all these institutions that there is a strong belief that significant changes have been made to address the problem of student retention and make the university a more inclusive place for an increasingly diverse student population. There are high levels of awareness that the views of students must be taken into account in all matters dealing with classroom practices but, with some exceptions, there is a matching low level of awareness as to how to maximize student

participation. In fact it is striking how traditional pedagogy, time pressures and an attachment to a given 'discipline' have the effect of making student experience relatively marginal to day to day decisions.

Apart from the access and support staff the disciplinary and institutional demands outlined means that retention and access are largely understood as a system demand rather than a response to clear and valid needs of students. The changes that are made (e.g. less strict the marking of papers, use of group projects etc.) are viewed as responses to the changing nature of HE. This is seen by some staff as the lowering of academic standards rathering then stretching the academy. According to one staff member the aim it seems is *to just churn out* the students to meet external targets which he sees as part of a managerial and instrumental culture that is beginning to dominate in HE. With more students achieving high grades the implication is that more pass the subject and so retention is enhanced. More importantly, staff in the various institutions are clearly saying that it is now more difficult to fail a student and they come under a range of pressures that try *pass as many students as possible*. It is difficult to fail a student and this pressure is brought to bear in a number of ways. It is difficult for a student to fail one particular module if the mark for that module is out of sync with the marks for other modules (a kind of homogenizations of grades). There is a change in the funding models for higher education that counts graduations rather than registrations and this also makes an impact.

The experience of students is hardly visible in such accounts. Students are 'consulted' particularly through their representatives who sit on most university and college bodies (Faculties, Academic Council, etc.). When staff at all levels are asked about consultation of students the majority respond that *questionnaires have been filled in* and so they have been consulted. What emerges, again with some exceptions, is a view of teaching and learning that is rhetorically *student-centred* and undoubtedly well-intentioned alongside a vague support for widening access but measures and approaches which are in many cases wholly disconnected from student experience.

In discussions with staff there is clearly a very high level of academic expertise in each one's own discipline with many individuals in all institutions having a high level of scholarship and consultancy that confirms this. Though the staff are educated to high levels, it is also the case that very few are qualified in the discipline of education. It is different to be a biologist or a historian to being a teacher of biology or of history. It is yet another level of understanding to have a well worked out pedagogical position and practice about teaching young students, women, non-traditional students, disabled adults or members of various ethnic communities (e.g. Travellers).

A small number of disciplines and a number of staff take an instrumental approach to teaching and learning. Many staff have a communicative rather than an instrumental approach to the study of their own discipline but this does not always get carried over into the understanding of learning or the practice of teaching. Some changes have been made with regard to staff development and one of the colleges studied has had a number of staff development meeting at which all members of staff at all levels have taken part.

This has helped to forge a common understanding and set of guidelines for working with non-traditional students. Others have commenced staff programmes for new staff and in-service for existing staff. But for many the art of teaching continues to involve techniques for working with very large student groups, problem based learning methodologies, use of technologies (powerpoint and web-based learning supports) and other such approaches. The teaching of large numbers of students contributes to the difficulty of getting to know more than a small number of students and militates against paying attention to the individual needs of any student. Staff were, if anything, more able to discuss (as a result of staff development programmes) the activities of teaching and far less able to be insightful about the processes of learning. Nonetheless, with some increases in the numbers of staff from 'non-traditional backgrounds' themselves, there are more staff now with life and learning experiences that are nearer those of their students and their struggle to achieve success.

Implications for policy, practice and pedagogy
Retention has become a 'system' measure of success in Irish HE and as a consequence there is a marked institutional sensitivity to this issue. However, while institutions are rhetorically and organisationally orientated towards retaining students this is not always reflected in systems of evaluation, flexible progress routes or most significantly in pedagogy. Furthermore, the data on access and retention (particularly data which looks at the relationship between access and retention) has been piecemeal. More recently the HEA report on student progress marks an important improvement in Irish HE data collection (Mooney, et al., 2010).

The research also points to the increasing differentiation of HE. The way access and student retention are viewed is largely dependent on the position a given institution occupies within the stratified field of HE as a whole. For instance access means very different things in TCD and ITB. So in ITB and to a large extent in NUIM access staff have clear influence in the managerial discourses but this is more localised and subject specific in TCD.

Work pressures and contract issues have a bearing on pedagogy and retention but this is not seen very clearly by teaching staff we interviewed. Similarly, the biographical dimension of educational practice is largely ignored by HE teaching staff. Disciplinary knowledge affects how teaching staff view non-traditional students. There is a strong tendency to foreground disciplinary criteria and career interests in describing work as teachers. Belief in the self-evident value of a discipline is often combined with a deficit model of non-traditional students. Staff with a background in applied soft sciences with a broader political interest in equality were less likely to approch NTS in this way.

A small number of staff actively resist ease of access by students to them but only rarely did staff have attitudes to students that were explicitly dismissive or completely thoughtless. One obvious conclusion is that staff are undountedly well intentioned but the structuring of the teaching and learning spaces, the various demands of work and thee reduction of 'access' to accountable measures, and the lack of pedagogial awareness means that high handed treatment of students continues to be a regular phenomenon.

Nearly all of the longitudinal student cohort discussed helpful staff but nonetheless most of them had a couple of quite negative stories to tell as well yet no staff member in discussing teaching spoke about mishandling students. The significance given by students to negative experiences with staff is enormous yet it remains an almost completely invisible issue to staff.

In the conversations with the staff for this research project, it is clear that the institutional and disciplinary habitus is crucial in setting the environment of learning. It not only influences the experience of students but it also impacts on those who teach. It is taken for granted that the rituals and entitlements of staff are an important part of that habitus and in one of the colleges studied the staff and students on scholarship (Scholars) continue to have the privilege of a commons. Such elements contribute to the habitus and this is the most significant factor as it acts in its rigidities as a bulwark against change. However, in more informal and open institutions (open that is to the changing needs of increasingly diverse populations) the habitus includes the possibility of changing in response to new challenges).

In so far as staff inhabit the boundaries between the institution and the students they do experience the challenges of being in that place without having a sense of being 'boundary workers'. Each of the higher education institutions has in place a range of similar supports for disadvantaged, disabled, non-traditional students and these are less fettered by the institutional habitus and more able to be agentic on behalf of their students and take a campaigning role on their behalf in the institutions. In suggesting changes to academic staff one is struck by the 'vested interested' they represent in an institution.

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