

The Struggle for Recognition in Hegel, Honneth and Higher Education: What non-traditional students say?¹

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I hold the position of teacher in esteem. It is a job of esteem and I still feel that. When you are working class, you look for esteem...we held teacher, priest and garda sergeant in esteem. I had the perception that these are positions of recognition. I was probably looking for that.

[Mary, graduate interviewed]

As an increasing number of non-traditional students seek entry to higher education and are encouraged to do so by public policy priorities in Ireland it is opportune to assess some of the challenges and tasks that emerge as Irish higher education moves toward a mass higher education system.

In a recently concluded EU funded longitudinal research project (RANLHE, 2010) the focus was on a narrative approach to understanding the experiences of non-traditional students across seven EU countries. The results for Ireland show that modest progress has been made in spite of significant system interventions that support non-traditional students (mature student offices, disability offices and access programmes, etc.). The rates of non-completion remain at 20 percent and this, though not high by international standards, has remained constant since the issue was first posed by researchers ten years ago (Baird, 2002; Eivers, et al., 2002; Morgan, et al., 2001; Healy, et al., 1999).

Most interventions are ‘system interventions’ and are initiated on the basis that the system understands the ‘problem;’ is best placed to understand what is needed to support a more diverse student population and is best placed to implement solutions. This ‘bottom-up’ research that interviewed and collected 250 narratives of students in three HE institutions in Ireland reconfigures the debate about access, retention and non-completion. Such data and its analysis is rarely theorised and this paper will show how the Theory of Recognition of Axel Honneth was utilised as a sensitizing concept for analysis of the narratives. It was also a bridging concept between the psychoanalytic analysis of narratives favoured by some UK colleagues, e.g. Linden West (2010) and the critical theory informed approach to narrative of the German research partner Peter Alheit (2009). In addition, Honneth’s work is deeply embedded in and builds on Hegel’s concept of recognition that is important for an understanding of *Bildung* – that education is for the self-development of the individual and of the human race.

This past decade has seen major changes in Irish higher education that impact profoundly on the task of providing a successful learning experience for students. The relationship between the state and higher education has been the most significant change, with new funding models in operation, cutbacks & underfunding; the demands to provide a closer fit between the qualifications offered by colleges and the job market; the restructuring required by the EU and Bologna; a global market search

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for students; enhanced research imperatives along with the arrival of mature, and other non-traditional learners. More recently, and in addition to all this, the challenging economic environment makes the future increasingly unknown and unimaginably challenging.

Context is everything - almost

In a world already preoccupied with statistics it is important to attend to the legitimate concerns for such 'facts'.

Mind the gap: OECD and Education at a Glance

Both EU and the OECD (2007) statistics for retention across the member countries. Having looked at the ways in which countries arrive at their statistics it is clear that it is very difficult to know if we can compare like with like (RANLHE). The UK has the most sophisticated methodology for calculating these rates and they are gathered and published by an independent agency (National Audit office, 2007). The German statistics are understandably, and in their own words, the most sophisticated as they give weight to the age of the students. Sweden has however the most sophisticated system as they do not talk about drop-out at all because of the almost open access policy in the country. When a student registers they can progress or complete at a pace decided by the student. And in Ireland if you ask about the 'drop-out' rate you may be told: 'it depends!' In addition, politics and optics complicate the amount of transparency that is tolerated. Across Europe the average rates of survival in HE are approximately 70 percent - with some countries, and some institutions and some disciplines departing significantly from those figures on either the plus or negative side.

Researcher Beware

The HEA statistics for Ireland (Mooney et al., 2010), as do all countries select a date on which they commence counting those who stay and those who go. The excellent HEA report uses a start date of March 1 the year after enrolment, in other words the start date for collecting data is six months after commencement. There is an inbuilt fairness in this March census date that anyone in management will recognise as it allows for time for students and the system to bed down so to speak. But by my own research (with others including Fergal Finnegan, IRCHSS Scholar at NUIM) we have found that the 4 percent estimated by the HEA report as not progressing in the November to March period is broadly accurate. But if we start counting from September and find that about 5 percent leave in the September to November period the challenges set for higher education persist in spite of imaginative and useful interventions by the system. Thus the total figures could be out by these 10 per cent who have already departed before the counting commences.

Mathematics and success: Post hoc ergo propter hoc

Secondly, the HEA report is very careful to map the useful connections between Leaving Certificate points in Mathematics and English and success in higher education. In spite of multivariate analysis the view is equally convincing from other studies that the Leaving certificate results when linked with success in higher education may be an example of the logical fallacy well known to Classics scholars as *post hoc ergo propter hoc* – just because something goes before another it may not be the cause. We do know that grades in mathematics are likely to be indicators of socio-economic background, social class and of school attended. There is a topical temptation to favour allocating extra points for mathematics or supporting better mathematics teaching in schools, neither of which I want to

criticise except to say that allocating places or predicting success on the basis of points and mathematics may be a shortcut to saying that those who are advantaged will maintain their advantage in higher education. We know this already. There are two ways of stating the implications of this, one is a gentle way and the other more radical. Let me say it both ways and you can choose which you want to hear. We can either say that educational and social disadvantage is reproduced and maintained through higher education [but we know this since Bowles and Gintis (1976)]. Or we can more radically assert that there is a connection between the schools where over 60 percent of students do higher level mathematics (of these 78 per cent are fee-paying) and success at college (Lynch, 2010). The well-off do better in college. We also know from many years of policy, practice and research that interventions and encouragements of this kind are generally availed of by the middle-classes in a way that is out of proportion to their numbers in society. Disadvantage is also maintained though higher education (Fleming & Murphy, 2002)

Suggestion: Addressing retention and progression through points system must be matched by public policies that address inequalities in the social and educational system. It is not new to stress that access and retention is a task that needs to be addressed by the entire educational system.

Methodological and conceptual issues

This report is based on 125 in-depth interviews with non-traditional students in three Irish Higher Education institutions each of which has their own distinct ethos and reputation. The interviewees were engaged in a wide variety of disciplines and subjects ranging from anthropology to genetics. A disproportionate number of the interviewees were studying either applied and pure social sciences or Arts and Humanities and very few were in training for high status professions. The majority of the participants were female and a small majority of the sample were mature students in their 30s and 40s (however the cohort includes students who were as young as 18 years old and some who were in their 60s and 70s). Nearly all of the interviewees were the first in their families to attend Higher Education and just under two thirds of the interviewees, both young and old, came from working class families. Although the majority of students we spoke to were from Ireland we also interviewed migrants from Europe (mainly from both EU and non-EU countries in Eastern Europe), North America and Africa. A small number of students with disabilities and Irish citizens from a 'minority' ethnic background were also interviewed.

The initial analysis relied on grounded empirical research (Charmaz, 1990). In the first phase of research we employed two main 'sensitising concepts' - 'habitus' and 'transitional space'. Our conception of transitional space was based on a number of complementary psychosocial theories (most notably Bowlby and Winnicott). One of the most consistent findings in the initial data was the importance given by students to the university as a space in which aspects of their identity were explored, renegotiated and sometimes transformed. It also became clear that the way this transitional space is negotiated depends on both the social experience and personal resources at the disposal of students and the support structures offered by the institutions. Bourdieu's (1984; 1990) concept of habitus deployed alongside his theorisation of social, symbolic, cultural and economic capitals and the way they operate in specific fields also offered tools for understanding the enduring impact of social inequality on students lives. This helped to illuminate how learners stories, especially the narratives

about learner identity and educational expectations, were clearly shaped and informed by a lived experience of social power.

These concepts underpin the findings discussed below. However, several themes emerged in the data that were not fully addressed using these initial sensitising concepts. The emphasis on self-esteem, on recognition, on reflexivity and a modest but emphatic concern with personal agency in student narratives led us to supplement and problematise our initial sensitising concepts.

In trying to make sense of such data we turned to a range of theories dealing with self-esteem and respect. The ideas of Axel Honneth (1995a) whose philosophically rich and ambitious work on recognition proved to be particularly fruitful for teasing out some of the most prominent themes that emerged from the data. Although these ideas do not by any means explain all aspects of the students experience they were key to grasping how the desire for social recognition might be linked to student motivation and student success.

European Research: The Findings for Ireland

We found out a great deal and I present here a selection of the findings.

They do not 'drop-out' easily

It is a huge and troubling experience that they do not take lightly. A number of factors are crucial in their progression or not. A coalition of events comes to bear on what is a determined attempt to succeed but with vulnerabilities around every corner. Finance, the ability to select a course or programme that is satisfying and engages the students aspirations, goals and interests and other less easy to address problems such as health, are all factors that are not new to anyone here. One factor is particularly striking and needs to be understood. The system has made many and important improvements over the past decade. They include changes in grading systems, open days, access courses, modular and semester structural changes and a range of Officers from Access and Mature Student to Counsellors and Tutor Support that have different titles in the various colleges. However, the system in institutionalising many good ideas into the programmes makes very little attempt to find out how the student experiences them and how college is experienced by the student. We need to listen in quite a different way to what students have to say and how they experience the learning environment of HE. This involves collecting not just their feedback questionnaires but their stories of struggle for success, retention, progression and sometimes non-completion. Do we really know how and why they walk away from what was a dream, an expectation that this would be a wonderful moment of recognition by the education system which they hold in high esteem?

What do students say?

A great deal. But let me select one item that is right at the top of their concerns and that has very little to do with mathematics, computers, the library or the lecturer. As young people in the transition to adulthood we have in our higher education system tens of thousands of emerging adults preoccupied with many of the tasks that society is happy for them to be engaged with – what will I study, how will I emerge from this as a teacher, lawyer, etc. But the central and personal concern is this: who is my friend? who am I now in this environment? And who is going to be my ally in the new learning and developmental trajectory? If the student finds it difficult to negotiate a

satisfactory answer to these questions, it will be a dominating preoccupation. I suggest that if we ignore the centrality of this concern we will miss what is central to young people's concerns and what is key to their success. A university system is not accustomed to addressing these developmental issues and they are easily sublet to Students Unions and other more social places. An enhanced and progressive policy and practice of creating, supporting and sustaining communities of learners will be a key intervention. Trinity Access Programme has been spectacularly successful in forging these supportive student networks.

I am suggesting that each college could address this issues by restructuring either the first year or first semester so that those students who may feel less sure of the subject they have chosen and/or wish to move into the transitional space of higher education more slowly and pay greater attention to their developmental needs might be given an option to undertake a more general modular semester along the lines of a 'taster menu'. This would emphasise a range of liberal arts and sciences with the experiences of collaborative and cooperative learning activities central to the provision.

What about lecturing staff?

If the system world has had some notable success in encouraging non-traditional, adult and other students to come to HE who now enjoy the benefits, this supply side of access and retention needs to pay attention not only to the demand side (student experiences) but also to those who inhabit and work in the 'fault lines between the system and the student world. Lecturing staff work with few additional resources to deal with a fast changing student cohort. Though we might assume that all are qualified in their subject of choice, being excellent medical practitioners, nurses, economists, etc. very few (if any) are qualified teachers. Though fewer staff are arrogant and careless today, stories and narratives of those who do not complete can focus on the very occasional careless or inconsiderate teacher. The impact of careless words and deeds is always out of proportion to their intention. Few in HE are qualified teachers and this needs to change by giving not only new teachers but all staff opportunities to learn about pedagogy.

Mental health concerns

It is a finding of our research that we do need to pay attention to students who identify mental health issues as part of the retention equation. Other disabilities have been resourced with supporting structures and staff but this is I believe a new finding and needs to be addressed.

Finance, careers economic and other benefits

In a world that values and prioritises the market and the economy as giving meaning to almost everything it would not be a surprise if interviewing students led to discussions about finance, careers and the economic benefits of higher education. Let me get beyond this obvious agenda by saying that funding is a major (though not the top) priority for most students; BTEA and other grants are necessary and key supports to the extent that without it most students would not make it at all. In addition, having surveyed all the mature students who graduated from Maynooth and interviewed a sample from Maynooth, TCD and DIT it is clear that a better job is a more modest benefit of higher education. A highly paid deeply satisfying job with major advances through the socio-economic ladder is not the reality. The family is the major beneficiary and adults in particular tell of having more time for their family, less

stress on children and the social and cultural capital dividend that students are well aware of as they graduate. Having done this research (Fleming, Loxley, Kenny & Finnegan, 2010) the Irish family (at least for those who are successful at university) is a fully functioning unit. It supports successful students both emotionally and financially. For those less fortunate in terms of family support they achieve success in spite of their families. If career or job prospects are now diminished in the current economic climate, the family is always the beneficiary.

Honneth Theorising

According to Honneth, for people to achieve a productive relationship with themselves, that is a full sense of identity, they require an intersubjective recognition of their abilities and achievements (1995a, p.92). Intersubjective recognition is the foundation of moral consciousness and one develops one's moral understanding of the world through the reactions, both positive and negative that one receives from other persons in both the private and public spheres. This is part of what Honneth terms 'the struggle for recognition' through which we develop our ideas of what are the necessary preconditions for a flourishing life and our conceptions of justice.

In more concrete and empirical terms the struggle for recognition, based on the need for self-esteem and the experience of disrespect, explains social development. On a personal level it is tied to concepts of identity and worth. This personal struggle is linked to society wide struggles by individuals and social movements for respect and validation. Honneth believes these 'morally motivated struggles of social groups - their collective attempt to establish, institutionally and culturally, expanded forms of recognition' (1995a, p.92) can explain the dynamics of social change. The struggle for recognition is thus a complex and layered phenomenon right at the centre of life which is linked to both individual developmental needs and the social imagination.

The dynamics of recognition and disrespect featured prominently in this research project. Repeatedly interviewees indicated that student success and failure have a complex and significant relationship with the question of social recognition in terms which are in many ways identical to Honneth's model. Intersubjective recognition emerged as a key theme in our data and has been central in students' accounts of their motivation for applying to college and their determination 'to stay the course'. The students we spoke to were clearly not seeking status or prestige alone but rather recognition, which touches on both one's 'private' sense of self and one's 'public' self.

This 'struggle for recognition' helps to frame many of the empirical findings. This does not mean that the other sensitizing concepts are irrelevant. In fact we suggest that the interplay of the original sensitising concepts of transitional space and habitus with a theory of recognition offers a useful framework for making sense of the data gathered on student experience in relation to broader questions about structure, agency and identity (Field, et al., 2010; Johnston, et al., 2008).

Recognition in Hegel's early writings is the starting point for Honneth and in the story of Master and Slave;

...the Lord achieves his recognition through another consciousness; for in them, the other consciousness is expressly something unessential, both by its working on the thing, and by its dependence on a specific existence. In neither

case can it be lord over the being of the thing and achieve absolute negation of it. Here, therefore, is present this moment of recognition, viz. that the other consciousness sets aside its own being-for-self, and in so doing itself does what the first does to it...But for recognition proper the moment is lacking, that what the lord does to the other he also does to himself, and what the bondsman does to himself he should also do to the other. The outcome is a recognition that is one-sided and unequal.

(Hegel, 1998, p. 116)

Honneth argues that in modern society there are three differentiated recognition orders and;

three levels of increasingly more demanding patterns of recognition, and an intersubjective struggle mediates between each of these levels, a struggle that subjects conduct in order to have their identity claims confirmed.

(Honneth, 1997, p. 21).

Recognition, a simultaneously individual and social need, requires love in the family or interpersonal sphere in order for the child to develop self-confidence. Recognition of the autonomous person, bearing rights in law, is the basis for self-respect. And the formation of a co-operative member of society whose efforts are socially valued leads to self-esteem (Honneth, 1995a, pp. 92-130). The theory is layered, and also stripped of some of the metaphysical abstraction of German Idealist philosophy by an engagement with sociology and the psychology of Mead and the object relations theory of Winnicott.

The first form of relating is self-confidence, established and developed in the relationships of friendship and love. If one experiences love an ability to love one's self and others is developed. One is capable of forging an identity by receiving recognition from others. Without a special relationship with another it is not possible to become aware of one's own uniqueness and so develop a positive image of one's abilities. Only by being recognized can we achieve an identity. In the language of Erikson (Honneth, 1997, p. 26) these are the relationships that create trust through being accepted and recognized. They support the expression of one's needs without fear of rejection or abandonment. If this essential ingredient of development is not available, or a negative message about self-worth is given, then the outcome is a potential hiatus or missing piece in the personality that may seek and find 'expression through negative emotional reactions of shame, anger, offence or contempt' (Honneth, 1995b, p. 257).

The second type of relationship to self involves self-respect, when a person in a community of rights is recognized as a legally mature person. One is then accepted as having an ability to participate in the discussions of the institution concerned, i.e. state or organizations. Respect is shown to others by relating toward them as having rights. This form of self-relation is self-respect. Without rights there is no respect. It is not just having a good opinion of oneself but a sense of possessing the universal dignity of persons as morally responsible agents or as one capable of participating in the public deliberations we know as discursive will-formation. The price paid for the absence of this recognition is the absence of autonomy.

Forms of Relating to Self (stages of identity development)	Contexts in which one Develops ways of Relating to Self (or forms of social organization)	Forms of Recognition	One can...	Forms of disrespect
Self-confidence	Relations of friendship & love. <i>Personality</i>	Parent secure attachment of love and care	Care	Neglect, abuse, emotional neglect
Self-respect	Recognized as autonomous person with rights. <i>Social Organization</i>	Legal rights	Recognize legal rights	Violation of legal, civil, human and employment rights
Self-esteem	Performance of one's freedom and autonomy through work = how the community values one's contribution. <i>Culture</i>	Community of practice, respect & solidarity	Recognize contribution of others	Bullying, ignoring, excluding, constant negative feedback

Table 1. Forms of relating to self as understood by Honneth

The experience of being honoured by the community for one's contribution through work leads to the third form of self-relation he calls self-esteem. People with high self esteem will reciprocate a mutual acknowledgement of each other's contribution to the community. From this grow loyalty and solidarity (Honneth, 2007, p. 139).

It is not surprising that corresponding to the three forms of respect there are three forms of disrespect that serve the function of explaining historical struggles for recognition.

Experiences of disrespect serve as the moral motivation for individuals to struggle for expanded relationships of recognition by highlighting the defects in extant social arrangements. (Zurn, 2000, p. 117)

If people are denied rights their self-respect may suffer and if one's way of life is not recognized or respected then damage is done to one's self-esteem. For these reasons abuse, insults, ignoring people will not only be an injustice but injuries are done to their identity. Embedded in the structural logic of the three forms of respect and disrespect are three different forms of moral claim, to be recognized as the autonomous and unique person one is (Honneth, 1995a, p, 131). It is these claims that are raised when individuals or groups struggle to overcome violations and injustices and other misrecognitions. When disrespect is experienced as a violation of universal norms the motivation is possible for collective political action for change. The possibility of realizing one's needs and the possibility of identity development depend on the development of the three modes of relating that in turn can only be achieved intersubjectively.

Key factors in promoting access and retention

Student resilience and high levels of determination to succeed in education.

Asked what explained their persistence and success in education participants almost invariably said 'I want this' and 'I am going to do what it takes'. The emphasis on personal resilience was one of the most common themes in the interviews and deserves careful consideration. Many of the students we interviewed had to overcome

serious social, personal and financial obstacles to attend college. In fact a number of students drew on their 'non-traditional' status as a resource of resilience. Some struggled right through their degree with financial and academic challenges, often with relatively little support, but stayed the course because getting a degree was seen as very meaningful and significant.

All students offered multifactorial, complex explanations for their determination. It is possible to generalise though and for the majority it was mainly, although not exclusively, rooted in the desire for social recognition in similar terms to the model outlined above. It should be noted that this is not a simple phenomenon and takes various forms and includes a desire for greater social equality and 'inclusion', the meeting of perceived personal developmental needs and greater choice in the labour market. As such this cannot be understood simply as an 'inherent' personal characteristic but the outcome of complex interplay between structural demands and reflexive agency in search of 'a good life'.

Credentialisation, Higher Education and social mobility.

This sense of agency and determination only makes sense if tertiary education is seen as an important sphere of recognition both by students and by society as a whole. One of the clearest themes found in the student data concerns the changing role of Higher Education in Irish society. Most of the interviewees believe that a primary degree is a basic and necessary requirement in the Irish labour market. Academic credentials are increasingly seen as 'normative' especially among the young students we spoke with during the research. For a number of students their decision to attend HE was based in part on encountering barriers to promotion in the workplace without a degree. Others felt that without a degree they would remain confined to routine and unrewarding work for the rest of their lives. A number of students were also enrolled in courses (for example Social Care) which have only recently been professionalised and where previously a job could be secured without a degree. Unsurprisingly, the large majority of the students on such courses were non-traditional. Nearly all the interviewees (except those who had already retired or were ill) believed that a degree would afford them a greater degree of social mobility or at the very least copper fasten their current social position.

Students who have migrated to Ireland from elsewhere see HE as a way of 'integrating' themselves into Irish society. It was remarkable how often migrants framed this as wholly *their* responsibility and as a way of proving their worth which suggests that many migrants feel undervalued in Irish society. Credentials for this cohort were important not only to ensure future social mobility but as a mark of full citizenship which they believed would be important for the future integration of their family as a whole in Irish society. While the majority felt they had much to offer most of them did not feel that this was necessarily obvious to people born in Ireland. In other words recognition in these cases was linked to a desire to be acknowledged as a valid member of society.

External Supports

Despite the emphasis on personal agency students consistently stressed that they relied on a network of financial, institutional, family and peer supports to get into HE in the first place and to succeed in completing their course.

Financial support- Provision by the state of grants and allowances to non-traditional students had a double significance for our interviewees. Firstly, in practical terms it made access to Higher Education possible and secondly it was seen by many as evidence that Irish society and the state recognised and *wanted* non-traditional students in Higher Education. This is important as many had previously thought of HE as being ‘not for them’ for cultural and financial reasons. The two most significant sources of financial support were county council grants and the Back to Education scheme (a widening access initiative see the institutional report for more detail). Repeatedly students stressed that without such supports they could not have enrolled in tertiary education. However, a significant minority of mature students did not rely on state funding and used personal savings and family income to pay their way through college. It was noticeable that many within this particular cohort of self-funding students found the financial burden increasingly onerous as they progressed through college.

Institutional supports The students drew on a wide range of institutional supports within and outside HE. Most mature students went through access courses or attended community education projects before coming to college. Within these courses the encouragement from adult education tutors, other students and career guidance counsellors was a key part of many students access ‘story’. Again this was often couched in ‘recognition’ terms in which capabilities or potential capabilities were acknowledged. This was, for obvious reasons, less important for young non-traditional students but a significant number of this cohort came through access courses which link colleges to designated schools in working class areas. Once in HE most non-traditional students of all ages used student support services and had contact with access offices where staff was viewed very positively. One of the most consistent findings is that ‘access’ staff are performing an invaluable work for most non-traditional students. In all institutions the majority of the teaching staff were described as being supportive and helpful. However, there were some notable exceptions to this and the negative impact of this on access and retention will be explored in greater depth later in the report.

The emotional and financial support offered by their family was fundamental to *most* students’ perseverance. Repeatedly, family member’s interventions were seen as the key to ‘success’. When this support was not available or was more rhetorical than real the extra pressure on the student was clearly discernible. The emotional and financial support offered by families and personal sacrifices and commitment of students was regularly described as a collective investment in the family’s ‘cultural capital’. Acquiring a degree was seen as useful not just in personal terms but as an investment in the entire family’s future. In particular, it was described as a good example to younger members of the family and as a contribution to the stock of ‘family know how’- i.e. a knowledge of how the system works, what the supports and obstacles are etc. Significantly, many mature students stressed that this lack of knowledge of how the system works had hampered them previously in making their way through the education system.

Academic support was less forthcoming from family members as most of those interviewed were the first in their family to attend Higher Education. However, in several cases the interviewees’ partners were in a position to offer some intellectual support. Another indication of the changing profile of students tertiary education is

that we encountered a number of families where parents along with their adult children were attending college at the same time and in some cases this led to parent and their son or daughter supporting each other with academic demands as they went through college.

Peer support both academically and emotionally emerged as a very important factor in student success. Strong peer groups are particularly important for overcoming challenges, stress and periods of disillusionment and especially for working out the how to deal with the sometimes unclear demands of 'college knowledge'. Mature students were more likely to stress the academic nature of peer support and young non-traditional students were more likely to emphasise the social role of peer support but it is clear that for all students peer groups offer invaluable emotional, social and academic support.

Personal development and a 'significant other'. Many students also highlighted and discussed one particular friend, tutor and less commonly a HE staff member that had shown interest and/or faith in them as a learner. The relationship with the significant other was seen as particularly important even if the learner was no longer in regular contact with the person. The importance stems from the recognition of an unfulfilled capacity or desire which allowed the student to imagine themselves as something 'more' than what they were.

Summary: Understanding Access and Retention in Irish HE

It is impossible to isolate one single factor or a single support that helps explain student success but student resilience comes closest to the being 'the' retention factor. As explained earlier we believe that stories of determination and resilience are stories shaped by social experience rather than being a static, inherent individual quality. In this regard it is worth noting that some of the most determined students were those who had previously dropped out of a different institution and were now returning to complete what they viewed as an 'interrupted' learning journey.

Student access and retention is shaped by labour market demands, developmental needs and external supports. Non-traditional students rely on a complex and delicate ecosystem of formal and informal supports to get through college. There is a broad pattern that financial support and institutional measures allow people to access HE in the first place while personal resilience along with the right type of peer and family support are the key factors in staying the course over the medium term. Institutional support for students facing difficulties throughout the degree is indispensable but for obvious reasons is usually accessed episodically. The notion that there is a support structure and access officers was important even for the students who did not use these services.

Retention needs to be thought through in terms of the increasingly credentialisation of Irish life and the availability of other viable life choices. For many non-traditional students a wide range of 'other' options often do not exist. Higher Education is seen as a vital part of a move away from limited options. Consequently, withdrawal is often not even entertained as an idea. The level of stress entailed in such a firm commitment to Higher Education is difficult to overstate and in a number of cases people have put themselves under considerable pressure (especially in terms of time, curtailing family activities, severing ties with the extended family and friends) to get through courses. It also appears that in a sizeable number of cases people have not been adequately prepared for the course upon which they have embarked upon. For these students

staying the course involves very punishing routines in which they try to balance their various responsibilities.

It should also be noted that the disciplines and subjects 'chosen' by students do not on the whole include high income and high status professional degrees such as medicine. The students in the sample are far more likely to choose Arts, Social Sciences and Applied and vocational degrees than other disciplines. This differentiation within HE has public policy implications in a State where professionals are particularly well paid. Moreover, it is noticeable that non-traditional students are choosing routes through education quite different from the public policy priorities that emphasise science and engineering as drivers of economic development and the education of skilled workers for a high-tech knowledge economy. Currently non-traditional students are choosing and being steered towards work and careers in areas that are open to Humanities and Social Science graduates (e.g. teaching) rather than managerial, higher professional or highly specialised technical jobs.

Constraining factors

Finance For those who did not qualify for financial assistance and did not have financial support from family or spouse getting through the degree was difficult. Financial problems was one of the three most commonly cited causes for non-completion (it should be noted however most students explanations of their decisions to leave college were multifactorial-this will be discussed in greater detail below).

Caring duties place a considerable burden on students. In particular looking after ill family members and young children is very difficult to combine with third level study as it is currently structured. Family care is still very gendered and although most students saw their family as supportive a number of female students found combining study with family care work extremely onerous. These students schedules were incredibly busy with college work often completed while travelling home or at quiet moments at work. In some cases women were actively discouraged or faced with deteriorating family relations as a consequence of attending college. This was rarely the case for male students.

Significant life events. When asked what might lead them to leave college before completion the interviewees invariably replied sickness, bereavement or a very marked change in their financial circumstances. A significant number of students, mainly in their twenties, who left college without completing their course, did so after a break up with their partner. It should be noted that these transformative life events are not *always* negative and in a small number of cases people left college because of new and previously unforeseen opportunities in their lives.

Mental health (and in particular depression) emerged a highly significant factor in student non-completion. Most students faced with mental health problems did avail of institutional supports and felt that counsellors, access officers and teaching staff had been helpful. In most cases the mental health issue pre-existed college but in some cases it was exacerbated because of the demands and stresses of study and life at college. Moreover, not completing college left some students feeling more isolated than before beginning a degree.

Some students had very *limited information before embarking upon their studies*. This manifested itself in four ways. Firstly, unrealistic expectations about the workload and/or benefits of a course. Secondly, struggling with academic demands for which they were not prepared and thirdly, though this was not common, finding themselves on a course that was not sufficiently challenging in academic terms. Fourthly, a small number of non-traditional students were unaware of institutional and state supports.

The three case study colleges have very different *institutional habituses* which has had a clear impact on student experience but, interestingly, no clear relation to the likelihood of retention. There is no doubt that a large numbers of students from a similar background on a given campus and the orientation of the institution to non-traditional students affect students' sense of ownership over the institution. This sense of ownership creates a more positive and less stressful college experience. As might be expected a noticeable gap between student's social habitus and the institutional habitus leading to a sense of cultural isolation and creates problems and difficulties for students. However, an elite habitus either across a whole institution or within a specific discipline, while usually alienating, was not a key factor in non-completion amongst the students we spoke to during the research. Nonetheless, there is some evidence that an elite habitus appear to militate against the development of effective peer support networks either because the atmosphere is very competitive or non-traditional students remain in very small numbers. Being seen as an anomaly or being invisible can be frustrating and discouraging but it does not seem to be a key factor affecting non-completion. However, it does seem to affect students subject choice in institutions in which, as you progress, you narrow your main focus of study. A small majority of students faced with these choices moved away from the department or discipline that was 'elite'.

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