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ABSTRACT

This document contains eight papers from a conference on higher education and the challenge of lifelong learning. "Lifelong Learning" (Garret Fitzgerald) explores issues related to ensuring that all adults have access to lifelong learning. "Lifelong Learning and Higher Education: The International Context" (Alan Wagner) examines how common economic and social developments in Organization for Economic Development countries are driving the main lines of the education policy debate. "Higher Education--The Challenge of Lifelong Learning: Questions and Issues for Policy" (Don Thornhill) explains the necessity of lifelong learning for all. "Participation of Mature Students in Higher Education in Ireland" (Patrick Clancy) discusses the effects of past and existing policies on participation in lifelong learning. "The Adult Learner--Developments and Research in the United Kingdom: Contextualising Access in the UK." (Barbara Merrill) reviews the findings of research on participation in lifelong learning and ways of widening access. "Higher Education and Lifelong Learning: The Experience of Adults at College" (Ted Fleming, Mark Murphy) summarizes the findings of research on factors critical to mature students' success in higher education. "Implications of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Bill 1999" (Dick Langford) considers the implications of pending legislation for lifelong learning in Ireland. Presented next are selected working group recommendations. The concluding paper, "Closure" (John Coolahan), summarizes the key issues raised at the conference. (Each paper contains tables and references.) (MN)

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ED 433 432

HIGHER EDUCATION

THE CHALLENGE OF LIFELONG LEARNING

PROCEEDINGS OF CONFERENCE

AT

CENTRE FOR EDUCATIONAL POLICY STUDIES

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND MAYNOOTH

EDITED BY

TED FLEMING, THOMAS COLLINS & JOHN COOLAHAN

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Lifelong Education

Dr. Garret Fitzgerald,
Chancellor, National University of Ireland

It gives me great pleasure to open this important Conference, which is addressing a subject which needs intensive study. In bringing together of a wide range of expertise and experience in the area, both national and international, the conference can make a significant contribution to an increasingly important area.

I am glad that the programme for the conference covers a whole range of issues; first reviewing international experience - particularly relevant in a sector where we are well behind other countries and then, in later papers this morning, exploring aspects of our experience to date and the experience of our near neighbours in the UK – thus setting the scene for the workshops this afternoon. I look forward to seeing the papers that I shall miss and to receiving copies of reports of workshops.

There are major uncertainties about almost every aspect of the subject - reflecting the fact that we are at the very early stage of the process of expanding tertiary education beyond school-leavers - who still constitute almost 95% of all higher education students.

Before even addressing any other issues, there are major problems of assessing the likely evolution of demand for, and supply of, places, both full-time and part-time in higher education.

Let me dwell for a few minutes on some of these quantification problems.

On the demand side we have, first of all, the projections made four years ago by the H.E.A. Based on figures for the year 1994/95 they foresaw an increase from 1,100 full-time mature students in State-aided institutions to just under 2,000 this year, or just over 5% of the total number of students. This seems to have been about right. And they saw this figure doubling over the following six years.

But, if John Walsh was right in his account of the draft Points Commission Report in Tuesday's *The Irish Times*, a much higher figure of about 5,500 mature students, or 15% of the total, is now seen as a possible target for six years hence - or, to put in another way, a 15% ratio is now expected to be reached five years earlier than had initially been expected.

If this Report is correct, it would be interesting to know the basis for what would be a quite radical revision of future full-time mature student numbers.

These are, however, figures for *full-time* mature students only: there are, and will continue to be tens of thousand of part-time students also. The scale and pattern of future increases in part-time students may be even more difficult to forecast. As the kind of pressures placed on the existing third-level system will be quite different in the case of full-time and part-time students, this uncertainty poses additional problems for the institutions concerned.

How will places be found for this expanding cohort of mature students?

First of all, on the positive side, it is fair to remark that, in relation to our population, we almost certainly have more third-level entry places than any other country - about 9.4 per thousand of the population as against between 5 and 7 per thousand elsewhere.

This reflects the fact that the proportion of 18 year olds in our population is just over 50% greater than in the rest of Europe - and, although some countries do have higher third-level participation rates than ours, overall we seem to be close enough to the average European participation rate. It is this combination of factors that explains the current exceptional size of the Irish third-level sector, and the relatively high share of total educational spending that it absorbs.

And, of course, it is also the high ratio of school-leavers and consequent high ratio of third-level students to our total population, and to our working population that provides much of the explanation for our recent "stunning" economic growth - to quote the remarkable adjective employed recently by OECD to describe what has been happening here.

Does this exceptional level of third-level places to population mean that in the years ahead we are likely to have the leeway to cope with a big rise in the number of full-time mature students?

Not necessarily.

Undoubtedly the decline in the 18 year old age cohort of our population, which is now about to start and which will reduce these numbers by about one-third over the next fourteen years, is seen by the public authorities as enabling an increase in the numbers not only of mature students but also of deferred students (postponed post-Leaving Cert. Entrants) and students outside the State.

Thus, the H.E.A. in 1995 forecast that a drop of almost one-quarter in direct school-leaving entrants by the year 2015 would leave room for over one-third of entrants to come from these three groups in that year - without any increase in the total number of places by comparison with the estimated 1990 entry-place figure.

Globally that may prove optimistic, however. For the school-leaving demand for full-time higher education in Ireland is - and there is every reason to believe will remain - abnormally, even phenomenally, high.

This demand is so strong, indeed, that each year, only some two-thirds of third-level applicants are accommodated in our institutions. A proportion of the remainder - perhaps some 7% or so of the total numbers of school-leavers - go, by default, to institutions in the United Kingdom.

Moreover if we are successful in tackling the problem of under-representation of children of manual workers - the proportion of whom going to third-level had already doubted in the six years to 1992 and has certainly risen further since then - the overall participation rate in third-level may rise faster than the H.E.A. have hitherto assumed.

Additionally, to a not insignificant extent, this impending drop in the number of native-born children in the 18 year old cohort is being offset by the scale of immigration of children accompanying parents, whether Irish or foreign, coming to work in this country. Throughout this decade annual net immigration of children - mainly younger children -has been adding the equivalent of some 10% to our birth rate.

And even if this does not happen, and if some places are freed up by the impending demographic shift towards lower numbers of 18 year-olds, the impact of this is likely to be highly skewed, with vacancies occurring mainly in the IT sector. For, rightly or wrongly, the suppressed demand is mainly for *university* places, and in addition to those who at present fail to get places in either sector, there are large numbers who go to the IT sector but for whom a university was their first preference.

It seems entirely possible, therefore, that for years to come the drop in the 18 year old age cohort will have little or no impact upon the flow of school-leavers seeking *university* places - virtually the whole of this drop in demand being borne by the IT sector.

Some may deplore this, and will argue that such a choice pattern was being governed by social rather than educational factors. But if, for good or ill, events take this course - what is to be done?

Are the ITs to be left to handle almost the whole of the mature student demand, something that would scarcely be satisfactory to them or to the mature students?

Or is the number of school-leaving university entrants to be artificially reduced in order to leave room for mature student entrants?

Or is the number of university places to be increased at the expense of the ITs?

I have hitherto heard no discussion of this issue.

Again, and on a quite different front, how will the growth in mature student numbers mesh in with the need to broaden much further the social composition of third-level participants. Last year's Green Paper - *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning* - tells us that "the lowest socio-economic groups are only minimally represented among mature students". Against that background, how can we ensure that the development of Adult Education does not, like so many other factors, (including the recent abolition of fees carried through without any offsetting improvement in the means-tested maintenance grants system), simply reinforce the phenomenon of middle-class advantage in higher education?

How far is government prepared to meet this problem by providing offsetting assistance for poorer adults? Tax relief, seen far too often as an answer to social problems, provides no answer to the needs of people whose incomes are such that they pay little or no tax.

Another matter that you will, no doubt, be addressing is the fact that the expansion of the flow of mature students into higher education will in many cases require the provision of some kind of access courses to prepare those with an inadequate, or too-distant-in-time, secondary education, or lacking specific skills needed for particular courses.

How, where, and by whom, are such access courses provided, and financed?

More generally, how far will our institutions have to modify their existing teaching methods to make them more "user friendly" for mature students?

And, more fundamentally, may we be placing too much emphasis on full-time education for mature students, when the demand has hitherto been overwhelmingly for part-time courses? Again, could modularised courses facilitate such part-time learning?

These are only a few of the issues that have occurred to me, as I have reflected upon the issues you will be discussing today. Some of these are already on your agenda, while others may not, on reflection, be seen as important enough to warrant extensive consideration. Either way, I am nevertheless grateful for the opportunity you have offered me to participate in your work - and I look forward to hearing about the remainder of your deliberations.

Lifelong Learning and Higher Education: The International Context

Alan Wagner
OECD, Paris[1]

This conference on "Higher Education: The Challenge of Lifelong Learning" takes place at a time of considerable policy development and reform in education in Ireland. The Irish case is unique, in a number of ways; however, Ireland shares with other OECD Member countries a renewed interest in lifelong learning as a policy orientation. I take as my charge today to try to provide a broad comparative picture, in which the discussion of the issues and positions advanced in the Green Paper *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning*, particularly those concerned with tertiary education, can take place. I begin with a review of the main forces at play, but then I want to offer from a broader OECD view the broad lines of a lifelong learning perspective as they apply to higher or *tertiary* education and to identify specific approaches found in other OECD countries, which reflect such a perspective.

To anticipate my main conclusion: While they would not necessarily be seen this way in the countries concerned, policies in the OECD are beginning to reflect a broader approach to learning that emphasises inclusiveness, focuses on learning rather than participation *per se* and seeks to build up linkages across levels of education (even to blur somewhat the interfaces) and partnerships outside of formal education. None of these elements are new, but they are now combining in a new context to shape both policy and provision in education, not least at the tertiary level. New and interesting questions are raised for higher education policy and for higher education institutions; those questions go beyond levels or rates of adult participation to the forms and aims of programmes, teaching and learning.

An overview of the forces at play

In different ways and to different degrees among OECD countries, common economic and social developments are driving the main lines of the education policy debate:

- *Economic restructuring* -- sometimes in anticipation and sometimes in reaction to globalisation and wider diffusion of new information technologies -- is giving greater weight to knowledge and skills. In its *Job Study*, the OECD has observed that "the countries and regions most likely to flourish [under present and likely future conditions] would be those with relatively dense knowledge-intensive networks of private firms and public institutions." Education figures prominently in such a vision.

- *Social aspirations*, as rising levels of education, income and wealth in OECD countries also foster increased demand for learning. Indeed, a main storyline revealed in the OECD's comparative statistics and indicators is growth in participation and educational attainment over the last several decades. In the 1990s, that growth is readily apparent at the tertiary level (Tables 1 and 2). For economic and social/equity reasons, further growth might be anticipated and sought as concerns

[1] Principal Administrator, Directorate for Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs. The text draws broadly on work underway within the Directorate and Organisation as well as on several published papers (Wagner 1999a, 1999b and 1999c). The views expressed are mine; they do not implicate the Organisation nor the countries concerned .

TABLE 1

CHANGE IN TOTAL ENROLMENT IN TERTIARY EDUCATION, 1990-1996
(based on headcounts)

	Change In Enrolment				
	Total enrolment (1990 = 100) In tertiary education			Attributable to:	
	1985	1990	1996	Change in the size of youth cohort	Change in enrolment rates
Australia	M	100	129	100	130
Austria	80	100	120	97	126
Czech Republic	m	100	149	115	130
Denmark	87	100	121	100	123
Finland	77	100	130	91	142
Ireland	79	100	151	107	142
Mexico	m	100	122	113	108
Netherlands	93	100	110	91	123
New Zealand	86	100	141	97	145
Portugal	m	100	244	105	234
Spain	73	100	137	101	137
Sweden	97	100	141	99	143
Switzerland	80	100	112	98	116
United Kingdom	85	100	181	93	192
United States	91	100	106	95	111
Average of above		100	140	94	140
Belgium	89	100	148	m	M
Canada	90	100	118	m	M
France	84	100	132	m	M
Germany	90	100	107	m	M
Hungary	m	100	185	m	M
Iceland	m	100	126	m	M
Italy	86	100	127	m	M
Japan	m	100	121	m	M
Korea	m	100	122	m	M
Norway	71	100	139	m	M
Poland	m	100	223	m	M
Turkey	m	100	171	m	M
Average of above		100	133		

Source: OECD (1998), *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 1998*, Paris.

TABLE 2

PERCENTAGE OF THE POPULATION COMPLETING AT LEAST UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATION IN THREE AGE COHORTS

	Population presently aged 55-64	Population presently aged 25-34	Population generation
Australia	46	62	m
Austria	53	82	86
Belgium	31	70	117
Canada	56	85	73
Denmark	50	74	81
Finland	40	83	98
France	38	74	85
Germany	71	86	86
Greece	22	66	80
Hungary	28	80	86
Ireland	30	66	79
Italy	17	52	79
Japan	m	m	99
Korea	25	88	91
Luxembourg	20	32	m
Mexico	m	m	26
Netherlands	47	72	81
New Zealand	49	65	93
Norway	62	91	117
Poland	47	88	94
Portugal	9	32	91
Spain	11	50	73
Sweden	53	87	81
Switzerland	71	87	81
Turkey	7	23	m
United Kingdom	60	87	m
United States	77	87	72
Country Mean	42	72	85

Note: Different measures are used to calculate the percentages for the different cohorts, so within cohort country data are most appropriate for comparisons across the three age groups. Data for 55-64 year old and 25-34 year old age cohorts refer to prior education attainment. The rate for the present generation is the annual number of upper secondary graduates divided by the population at the typical age of graduation. In countries where it is common to obtain more than one upper secondary qualification, there can be double-counting that exaggerates the proportion of a cohort who qualify at this level.
Source: OECD (1998), *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 1998*, Paris.

- rise about those who are even further behind in an era of increased demand for and acquisition of advanced educational qualifications. And, the social dimensions are conceived even more broadly: In exploring ways to advance an "active ageing policy", OECD labour and social ministers argued for reducing the constraints on ways that education, work and other activities

are spread over a person's lifetime. They discussed possibilities for new education and career options, which would, for example, more easily allow adult children to take care of ageing parents. Such options would partly respond to variety in individual preferences, but also put in place very different patterns of -- and new emphases on -- learning.

TABLE 3

AGE DISTRIBUTION OF FIRST-TIME UNIVERSITY ENTRANTS, 1996

	Age at*		
	20th percentile	50th percentile	80th percentile
Austria	20.1	20.4	23.4
Canada**	18.9	20.0	26.5
Czech Republic	21.4	23.6	29.4
Denmark	19.8	21.4	26.5
France**	18.3	18.9	20.0
Germany	20.1	12.6	25.0
Greece	18.5	19.4	20.5
Hungary	18.0	20.3	25.3
Ireland	18.0	18.6	19.4
Netherlands	18.7	20.2	24.0
New Zealand	18.4	19.2	25.6
Norway	20.2	22.7	>29
Poland	19.5	20.6	23.2
Sweden	20.2	21.3	23.4
Switzerland	20.1	21.2	23.2
Turkey	18.4	19.9	24.3
United Kingdom	18.5	19.5	24.3
United States	18.3	19.0	24.2

*20/50/80 per cent of new entrants are below this age. ** 1995
Source: *OECD (1998), Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 1998*, Paris.

- *Financial constraints*, as education faces even greater competition in public and family budgets. The evidence of the first half of the 1990s is generally encouraging for education: overall spending relative to national income has been maintained, if not increased for a large number of countries. This has been achieved through an increased share of total public expenditure devoted expenditures should not be regarded as an element in a zero-sum game, in which gains in education spending are at the expense of expenditures on other items. The OECD report *Human Capital Investment -- An International Comparison* (OECD 1998) shows that, when considered as an investment, education spending leads to increases in earnings and fiscal (tax) returns (among other benefits). Interpreted more broadly, the investment argument suggests that such spending could *increase* the levels of income and wealth available for all activities.

For our purposes, two conclusions may be drawn from this brief review of the forces at play. First, they apply in some measure to all levels of education; no sector can stand apart. Second, they are now combining in new ways to create a new context which calls for new thinking, new concepts and new approaches.

TABLE 4

CHANGES IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EXPENDITURE IN TERTIARY EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS, 1990-1995

	(1990 = 100)			
	Direct **public** Expenditure for Educational Institutions	Direct **public** Expenditure for Educational Institutions **plus** Public subsidies to private sector	Direct **Private** Expenditure for Educational Institutions	Total direct expenditure form both public and private sources for educational institutions
Australia	126	132	210	139
Austria	105	128	m	m
Belgium	112	101	m	m
Canada	102	118	157	109
Denmark	109	109	a	109
Finland	123	134	x	123
France	130	133	123	129
Hungary	85	88	245	90
Iceland	109	x	x	109
Ireland	133	140	166	142
Italy	72	76	m	m
Japan	123	123	116	119
Mexico	125	128	m	m
Netherlands	99	95	124	101
New Zealand	104	122	m	m
Norway				
Poland	146	138	m	m
Spain	m	m	m	m
Switzerland	130	128	135	131
Turkey	100	101	m	m
United	91	93	m	m
Kingdom	111	144	791	132

Source: OECD Database.

TABLE 5

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EXPENDITURE ON TERTIARY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS, 1995

	Expenditure as % of GDP	Private expenditure as % of total
Australia	1.8	27
Austria	1.0	n
Canada	2.5	18
Czech Republic	1.0	30
Denmark		
Finland	1.3	n
France	1.7	n
Germany	1.1	15
Greece	1.1	6
Hungary	0.8	m
Iceland	1.0	20
Ireland	0.7	7
Italy	1.3	22
Japan	0.8	8
Korea	1.0	59
Luxembourg	1.9	84
Mexico	0.1	m
Netherlands	1.1	23
Portugal	1.3	2
Spain	1.0	m
Sweden	1.1	24
United Kingdom	1.7	6
United States	1.0	11
	2.4	53

Note: Data refer to expenditures on educational institutions, including public subsidies provided to households and other private entities attributable to private payments to educational institutions. Private expenditure on tertiary education institutions includes payments for tuition fees, private grants and contracts including those negotiated with employers for customised teaching, endowing income and alumni giving. Borrowing from private banks, even if guaranteed and partly subsidised by governments, are reported by some countries in the OECD Education Database as private expenditures. Private expenditure is net of public financial aid to students and public subsidies to other private entities destined to tertiary educational institutions, the value of tax breaks provided for education expenses is not taken into account.
Source: *OECD (1998), Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 1998*, Paris.

Why lifelong learning?

Lifelong learning, as advanced by OECD education ministers, offers one approach which responds to the challenges of this new context. As adopted by the ministers, lifelong learning emphasises a "cradle-to-grave" perspective, and stresses continuity and transition, learning and learners of all ages -- not sectors or boundaries, whether with respect to contents, methods and contexts of teaching and learning. Lifelong learning is, thus, broader than recurrent adult and non-formal education, because it embraces all learning.

How does higher education figure in this orientation and vision? From one perspective, no real change should be necessary: preparing for learning for life, within the professions, has long been accepted as a fundamental aim in higher education studies. Further, in the context of the OECD education

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minister's view of lifelong learning, higher education is just one part of a continuum, beginning in the early years and extending to the *troisieme age*. Seemingly, there is much more interest in other parts of this continuum, early childhood and adults in general. For example, the UK's University for Industry -- launched in the framework of the Labour government's Lifelong Learning initiative -- aims more broadly at adult learning. It is neither a university in the traditional sense nor particularly concerned with higher education.

Yet, the titles of two recent commission reports situate a vision for higher education in a wide lifelong learning perspective: The UK's National Committee of Inquiry, chaired by Lord Dearing, issued its 1997 report under the title *Higher Education in the Learning Society*; the 1998 report of an Australian Committee, chaired by Roderick West, carried the title *Learning for Life*. Broadly, these reports are suggesting that the most promising directions for higher education are best seen and situated in a broader lifelong perspective and that there is great value in bringing new thinking from this perspective to the organisation, contents, methods and timing for learning at this level.

There is a similar view advanced in the OECD report *Redefining Tertiary Education* (OECD 1998). The OECD now uses *tertiary education*, in preference to "higher education" or "postsecondary" education, when referring to studies and learning at this level. "Higher education" is interpreted in many countries to refer to institutions, and particularly universities, at a time when the interest is on demand and learning. "Postsecondary education" as a term implies that secondary education is the level or stage of reference, at a time when half or more of each generation are participating in studies at the tertiary level. Thus, key transitions into work and between work and learning over a lifetime are now taking place at a level or stage beyond secondary education. Elements of this vision are, in fact, a reality: many more countries now can be considered to have large-volume, diverse and high-output tertiary education "systems". Put another way, the transition from elite to at least a "first stage" of mass participation in tertiary education has already taken place in most countries, and will soon be the reality in others: in the Czech Republic, participation rates moved from 12 to 25 per cent in the 1990s alone; in Mexico, participation rates are now anticipated to increase from 18 per cent to 40 per cent by 2015.

As growth continues, the challenge is how to further adapt to the needs of learners and to the new context in which learning is taking place and in which adults will work and live. In this respect, lifelong learning represents both a "mission" and an "influence", the latter derived from the new demands and expectations on the part of learners, employers and the public at large.

New policy directions, new approaches

It is possible to identify in a number of OECD countries promising approaches which reflect needed policy directions for introducing a broader lifelong learning orientation in higher or tertiary education. The policy experience is uneven and has not always led to the intended results, but examples of the approaches adopted illustrate the broad directions being pursued.

A relationship between higher education and learners which extends over a lifetime

If a lifelong learning orientation calls for inclusiveness, policies and approaches need to be conceived in ways which welcome, rather than deflect demand. Who is to be responsible for those who do not (yet) undertake tertiary education? While policies supporting enrolment growth in a number of OECD countries have been advanced partly on the argument that representation will increase from those who are less well represented, the evidence is mixed. For countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom -- but also to some extent in France, the U.S. and Japan -- participation has increased from *all* groups, leaving the distribution of enrolment about the same as prior to expansion. Clearly, more pro-active, targeted policies are needed, engaging tertiary education institutions and systems in initiatives, which go beyond conventional education boundaries and levels, traditional criteria and the usual age groups. Academic and career counselling for young people in secondary schools (as in

France and Belgium), alternative access qualifications for youth and adults (as in the U.K. and Japan, for example) and new options aimed at adults but open to all (Open Learning in Denmark, private universities in Portugal) have or are expected to have boosted participation from under-represented groups.

Further, more diverse patterns of entry and exit -- a pattern of lifelong learning -- mean that students can be expected to return in increasing numbers to complete degree programmes or undertake further studies. On the basis of an analysis of the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), undertaken by a number of OECD countries, that flow of returners could present a wider range of skills than otherwise might be assumed. For the IALS survey, "literacy skills" are defined as the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities and its usage in order to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential. Performance on the tests has been grouped into five levels. "Level 3" is set as a target level of competences needed to cope with the complex demands of everyday work life. An interesting set of findings relates to the distribution of adult literacy by educational attainment. For adults who have completed tertiary education, the proportions who fall below "level 3" exceed 10 per cent in 7 of the countries examined. (Table 6)

The reasons for these proportions and inter-country differences are many, and the IALS tests provide only one, limited measure of what adults know and are able to do. But they raise two questions for tertiary education policy and programmes: first, how can programmes, teaching and learning prepare students so as to minimise the numbers who lack these skills or other requisite knowledge? And, in a framework of lifelong learning, how can programmes and teaching at the tertiary level be adapted to take into account (and indeed improve) the varied levels of skills, knowledge and dispositions represented in the pools of learners returning to tertiary education? The U.S. experience with remedial education is an instructive, if controversial, example of one approach. These programmes are designed to build up the knowledge and skills of entering students who may lack adequate preparation in certain areas – an effort normally associated with lower levels of schooling. What is perhaps too little appreciated is that these programmes cater to significant numbers of adult learners, not just immediate school leavers.

New ways to think about standards and qualifications: diversity and clarity

With expanded participation in learning over a lifetime, the growing diversity in learners and programmes is leading to consideration of new approaches to standards and standard setting. The direction followed in some countries is to seek greater clarity and transparency in the expected or intended outcomes of study programmes. For example, in the United Kingdom, the initiative to define "graduateness" -- what every graduate should know or be able to do -- has counterparts in the reforms of the general component of bachelor's degree studies in the U.S. The U.K. initiative has evolved into efforts to establish "threshold standards", i.e. sets of competences elaborated for specific fields. A second example is the establishment of a qualification framework, as introduced in New Zealand and Australia (among other countries). The New Zealand approach aimed for the elaboration of quite specific "outcome" standards, intended to provide for recognition of learning for those who have mastered the identified skills or competences. This approach has now been transformed into a more flexible arrangement – not unlike the approach adopted with the new Qualifications Authority – which involves wide consultation and a range of bodies in the elaboration of standards and qualifications. Both the U.K. and New Zealand experience represent a search for clarity and transparency in outcomes, at a time when learners are pursuing more varied options, pathways and timing in education and training.

From a lifelong learning perspective, the current debate in continental Europe on bachelor's degrees, echoes of which can be heard in Mexico, is also of interest. First, there is an expressed interest in introducing a strong employment orientation into these short first degree programmes (specific reference is made in the so-called Sorbonne agreement of the U.K., French, Italian and German education ministers). Second, there is an expectation expressed in some countries – Finland, for example – that graduates with shorter bachelor's degrees will eventually return to tertiary education to

complete a long degree. This is an interesting line of development, because it opens up the possibility of building a lifelong learning pattern directly into formal structures for tertiary education study programmes and qualifications.

Expanded partnerships and links, within and across sectors and levels

Countries are also seeking ways to extend partnerships and linkages, both to extend and improve learning.

First, there are clear efforts in some countries to bridge the "divide" between secondary and tertiary education. Policies now provide for greater cross-level sharing of teaching and deeper, more varied contexts and methods for learning at the tertiary level. In several countries, tertiary-level teaching takes place in secondary schools: France and Belgium (Flemish Community) have introduced reforms aimed at *both* sides of the divide: counselling and preparation on the side of secondary schooling (as mentioned earlier); more flexible teaching and organisation of study programmes and additional support for student learning on the side of tertiary education. In the Flemish case, the so-called "10-point" plan in fact is less of a "bridge" than a set of initiatives aimed separately at either side of the "divide". The plan, as implemented to date, has not had its intended effect on reducing dropout or failure or expanding the range of options selected by different groups of secondary students. The Ministry has re-launched the initiative.

Second, there are policies, which seek to promote new partnerships and links across tertiary education sectors as well as from outside the sector. France, in its contracting policy, provides incentives to bring employers and local authorities together with regional tertiary education institutions to address a range of issues concerning employment, student life and international competitiveness. Japan now has private universities working in co-operation with special training colleges to offer dual degrees, one academic and the other recognised specifically on the labour market. The co-operation reduces the time required by students to acquire these two qualifications. Corporate universities in the U.S. and Germany now attract public recognition if not financial support. Public policy might well move from monitoring, information and funding to strategic efforts to more fully develop the benefits of linkages between these programmes and those in public institutions.

Such partnerships and linkages are in line with OECD education ministers' view of lifelong learning as a continuum or, to use a term with currency in New Zealand, 'seamless'. In such a vision, learning spans the boundaries of education sector and level and benefits from a pooling of resources and expertise from all quarters.

New approaches to securing and using resources

All countries are moving to a comprehensive financing strategy for tertiary education, extending from a substantial public stake to embrace funding from other channels, public and private; efficiency improvements and a lifelong orientation in participation and programmes.

With respect to the first of these, a number of countries are calling for increased participation of learners in financing the costs of their tuition, via tuition fees or repayable support. Among the more innovative approaches are: means-tested tuition fees in the United Kingdom; deferred, income-contingent and differential contributions in Australia and an interesting proposal (not adopted) for a further subsidy after a break in study in New Zealand (Sweden's 25-and-4 scheme, in which funded places are reserved for persons who are at least 25 years old and have 4 years of relevant work experience operates in a similar way). These latter approaches go beyond what has been a gradual evolution to place tertiary education financing on a lifelong basis, with provisions for earmarked and tax advantaged savings in advance and repayments of costs following initial and subsequent periods of study (via loans, graduate taxes and deferred contributions). The effects of that evolution -- in terms of access, choice of subjects or institutions or subsequent life-cycle choices – are not yet fully known.

TABLE 6

PERCENTAGE OF ADULTS WITH TERTIARY EDUCATION AT EACH LITERACY LEVEL (PROSE SCALE), 1994-96

Level of Education	**Level of performance on IALS prose scale**		
	Level ½ (%)	Level 3 (%)	Level 4/5 (%)
Canada			
University	11.0	29.8	59.1
Other tertiary	25.3	46.9	27.7
Germany			
University	21.0	39.4	39.6
Other tertiary	18.1	49.2	32.6
Ireland			
University	11.8	40.9	42.1
Other tertiary	25.3	53.1	21.9
Netherlands			
University	13.2	52.3	34.5
Other tertiary	a	a	a
Poland			
University	41.6	42.0	16.4
Other tertiary	50.6	40.7	8.6
Sweden			
University	7.0	32.2	60.7
Other tertiary	10.8	43.4	45.8
Switzerland (French)			
University	18.2	49.4	32.4
Other tertiary	32.6	56.8	10.7
Switzerland (German)			
University	27.8	46.7	25.5
Other tertiary	36.9	54.1	9.0
United States			
University	16.8	35.7	47.5
Other tertiary	24.3	39.9	25.8

The data are based on tests administered in each country to samples of 2 500 to 3 000 adults broadly representative of the civilian, non-institutionalised population aged 16-65. Individuals provided background information and described learning activities in an interview of about 20 minutes; literacy was assessed on the basis of responses to a set of tasks of varying degrees of difficulty. The test booklet was designed for completion in about 45 minutes. The section covering prose literacy was intended to assess the level of knowledge and skills to understand and use information from texts including editorials, news stories, poems and fiction. Details on methodology and scaling are provided in the publications from the survey.

Sources: OECD and Statistics Canada (1996), *Literacy, Economy, Society*, Paris and Ottawa; Mark Morgan, Brendan Hickey and Thomas Kelleghan (1997), *International Adult Literacy Survey: Results for Ireland*, Department of Education, Dublin.

Policies now seek to encourage improved efficiency, primarily by shifting funding to an outcomes basis. The Danish "taximeter" approach is among the more innovative and interesting: funding for students is time-limited (support when the student is actively engaged in study) and funding for institutions is based on passed end-of-year examinations (funds flow when students pass their exams; no funding when students do not pass). The funding approach allows for flexibility: a student may draw on funding support in consecutive years or choose to delay or stop-out without losing eligibility. Thus, the link to specified learning outcomes recognises varied timing and pathways more responsive to the needs and interests of learners.

Finally, new policies in the United Kingdom, France and the United States now introduce features which break even further the traditional pattern of funding immediate school leavers in conventional forms of tertiary education. These policies open up the types of tertiary-level education eligible for funding and situate that funding in a lifelong learning perspective. In the United Kingdom, Individual Learning Accounts opened in local banks are topped up with subsidies from the public budget. Learning eligible for ILA funding does not come specifically under review by the higher education funding councils or the higher education quality assurance agencies, but rather under the broader monitoring of the University for Industry. Tertiary education institutions, along with other providers, can propose courses for ILA funding. In France, a contestable pool of funds has been established to encourage universities to provide new types of programmes and learning for adults. Programmes eligible for funding are expected to be multi-disciplinary and will lead to distinct certificates which are not specifically linked to national qualifications. In the U.S., greatly expanded tax breaks for education now allow learners to deduct costs for as little as one course module offered in a very wide range of accredited tertiary education institutions. Further, courses offered by distance education providers are now recognised and accredited, making students enrolled in such courses eligible for student financial aid.

Concluding observations

I draw this wide survey of policy orientations and country approaches to a close with a few summary comments. I have suggested that the forces at play are raising new demands and combining to create a new context for learning and for education policy, not least at the level of higher or tertiary education. A broad lifelong learning orientation offers a useful way to think about needed policy and programme responses, and countries are beginning to frame new policies in ways which correspond to such an orientation.

I identified five key directions for higher education policy: a relationship between higher education and learners which extends over a lifetime; new ways to think about standards and qualifications: diversity and clarity; expanded partnerships and links, within and across sectors and levels; and new approaches to securing and using resources. Policies adopted in these areas have not in all cases had their desired effects. Some are very new, some have been weakly implemented and some already have evolved in ways intended to improve their impact on practice and learning. Moreover, the directions and policies are not always seen by authorities or those in the institutions as elements of an overall lifelong learning approach. But, some of the policies were adopted with more explicit lifelong learning aims and goals in view, and all of them fit within such an orientation.

One vision of the way forward is to move beyond a narrow focus on specific quantitative aspects of lifelong learning volume, arrangements and funding toward broader, system-wide and institution-level qualitative development which could be driven by policies which welcome demand, and to some extent influence it through information and expanded options; promote flexible, boundary-spanning networks and partnerships within and outside higher education; and shape high quality, responsive, "tertiary-wide" and "lifelong" provision.

There is no question that the challenges are being recognised in Ireland, and recent and ongoing debates and reflections – including this conference -- provide rich opportunities to "raise the vision" in a continuing, forward looking search for the best solutions as the Green Paper on *Adult Education in*

an Era of Lifelong Learning leads onto new legislation. It was put this way in the OECD's *Redefining Tertiary Education*: "Those countries, systems and institutions that accept the challenges and seize the opportunities in a quest for new solutions seem likely to do best".

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Higher Education - The Challenge of Lifelong Learning: Questions and Issues for Policy

Don Thornhill,
Chairman, Higher Education Authority

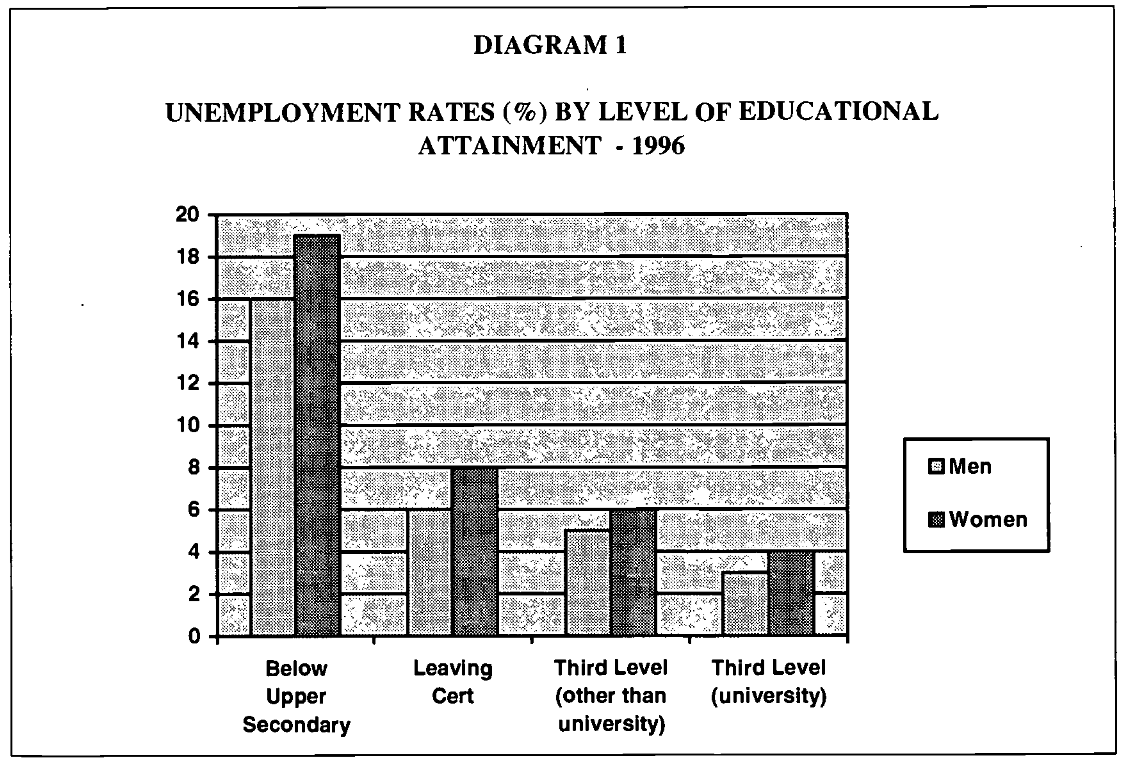
I would like to congratulate the Education Department and the Centre for Adult and Community Education in the National University of Ireland Maynooth for taking the initiative in organising today's event. This conference is very timely. The consultative process initiated by the publication of the Green Paper on Adult Education that will lead to the publication of a White Paper is now underway. Today's meeting has the opportunity to make a very substantial input into that process.

Education is, of course, a transcending area of policy. It is important for social, economic and personal reasons. For most people it is a very important, perhaps the most important, determinant of life chances. Against that background the issues of access to education and in particular the importance of providing opportunities for second and indeed subsequent chances and progression through the system are a vital part of policy.

Just why education is so important can be seen from the data which is illustrated in Diagrams 1, 2 and 3.

DIAGRAM 1

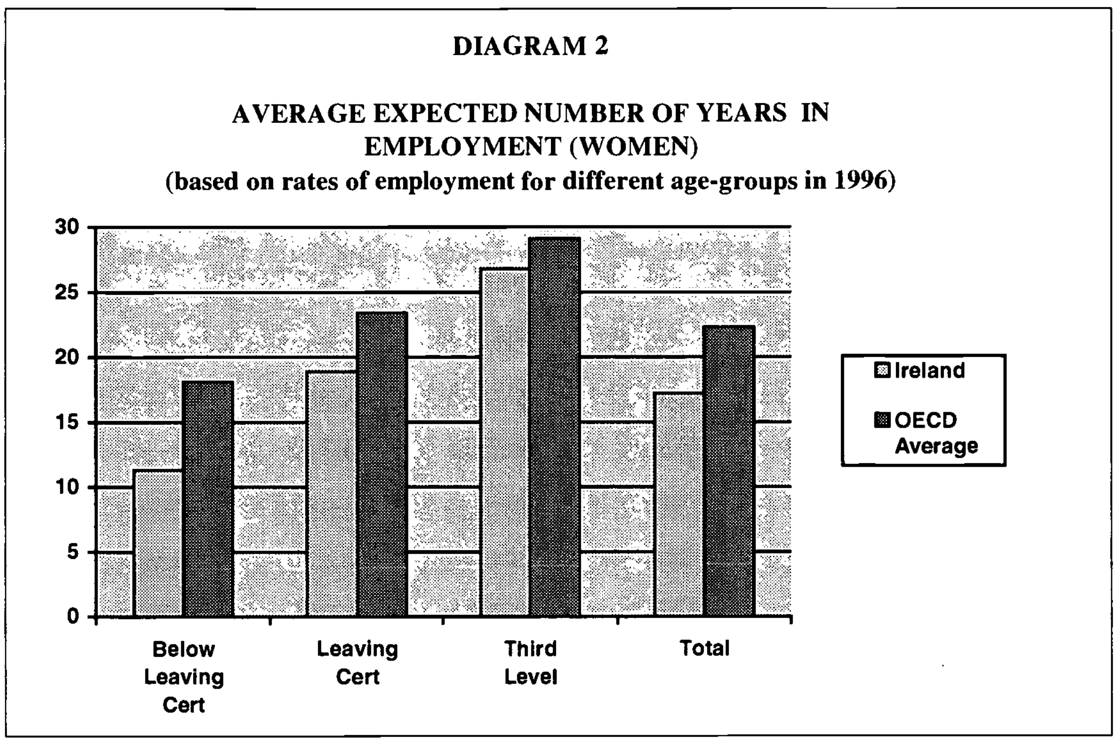
UNEMPLOYMENT RATES (%) BY LEVEL OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT - 1996



Source: OECD, *Education at a Glance, 1998* (p. 345).

These diagrams illustrate very starkly something that we already know. An individual's prospects of employment are directly and very powerfully related to her or his level of education. It is also very interesting, and this is shown clearly in Diagrams 2 and 3, that the differences between employment prospects for individuals in Ireland and the average across the OECD virtually disappear the higher

the level of education attainment. In particular, it is clear that education attainment has a very important impact on the length of time a woman is likely to spend in the labour force.



Source: *Education at a Glance, 1998*, OECD, Paris (p. 66).

These diagrams illustrate not only the important link between education and the opportunities for living a fulfilled life - having regard to the dicta of Freud and Jung that satisfying and interesting work is one of the key determinants of human happiness. They also illustrate the central and every increasing importance of education in knowledge-based economies.

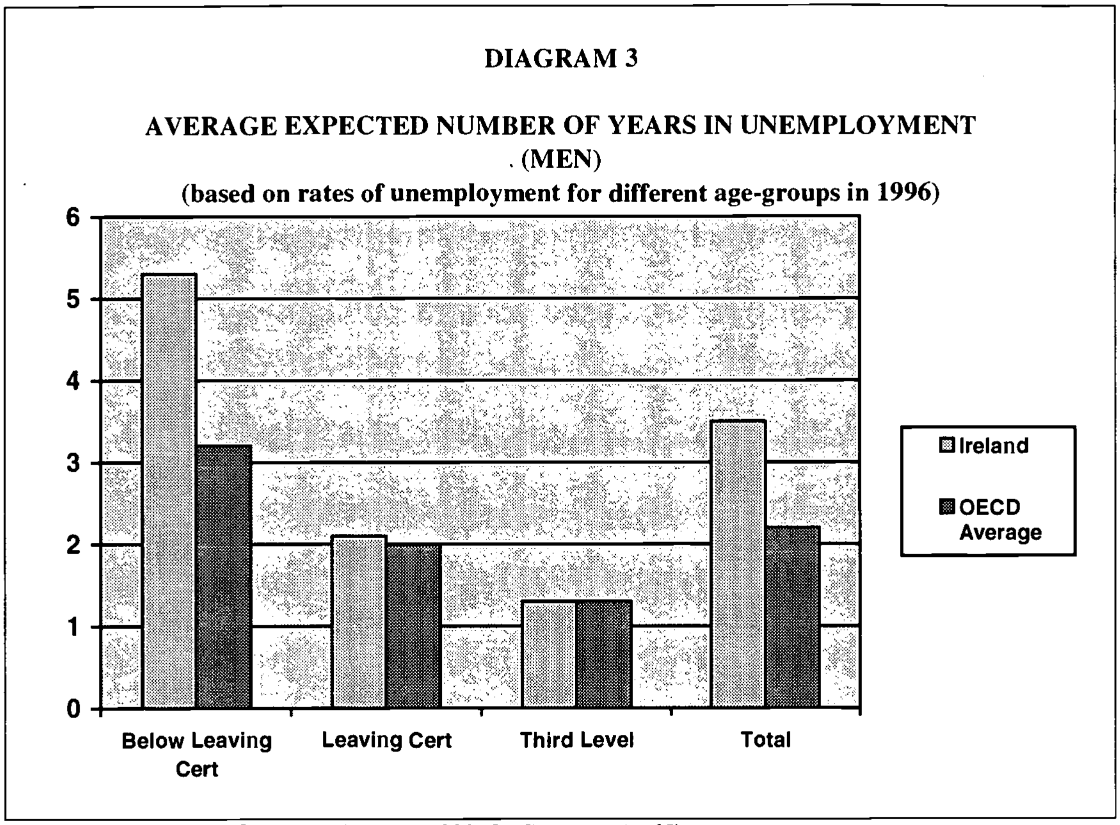
Adult Education

There are of course three strands to adult education. There is the so-called "catch-up strand", the phenomenon of continuing education with particular emphasis on professional and vocational education and indeed that of adult education in continuing personal development. This subdivision is somewhat artificial and stylised but it is helpful to us in considering issues from a policy perspective. The three strands are of course not mutually exclusive and indeed are all encompassed under the heading of lifelong learning.

How Ireland Compares

A survey of the international data (see tables 1 and 2 below) helps to bring out two points:

- education attainments in the adult population are lower than the OECD and EU averages
- we have a very low proportion of mature students in our third-level institutions.



Source: *Education at a Glance, Indicators, 1998*, OECD, Paris (p. 65).

The issue of poor education attainments is quite striking. We are catching up but, according to the OECD and EU projections, by the year 2005 or 2015 we will still be below the OECD averages assuming current completion rates in all the countries in the sample. Therefore in order to catch-up and indeed pass out our competitor countries (and education attainments are critical to economic competitiveness) we will need to continue to improve our participation rates in education.

The low proportion of mature students in the overall student population (see table 2) illustrates that there has been a virtually exclusive focus on improving access to third level for school leavers. This has been the top policy priority and as a result the major concern of institutions. This policy has been very successful as illustrated by the data in tables 3 and 4 and in Diagram 3. We are rapidly catching up on the more advanced OECD countries in terms of education participation - the data illustrated in Diagram 3 illustrate just how rapid the increase in third level participation has been.

TABLE 1

PERCENTAGE OF THE POPULATION WHO HAVE COMPLETED AT LEAST SECONDARY EDUCATION, BY AGE GROUP (1995, 2005 and 2015)

	1995		2005	2015
	25-34	25-64	25-64	25-64
Ireland	64	47	58	66
EU Country Mean	67	54	58	70
OECD Country Mean	71	60	69	73

Source: OECD Education at a Glance, 1997
Projections assume current---graduation---rates, i.e. current completion rates

TABLE 2

THIRD-LEVEL PARTICIPATION BY AGE GROUP (Percentage Of First Time New Entrants Into Third Level Institutions: 1995)

	IT and other Tertiary			University		
	25 and under	26-34	35+	25 and under	26-34	35+
Ireland	98.9	1.1	-	97.7	2.0	-
Group (16) average	72.1	20.9	15.9	83.4	11.4	7.9
Denmark	58.9	31.1	9.9	72.0	19.1	8.9
UK	52	23.7	24.3	77.5	12.4	10.1
Canada	60.4	19.4	18.1	79.2	10.4	9.0

Source: *OECD Education at a Glance: 1997. Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning. Green Paper* 1998

TABLE 3

NET ENTRY RATES FOR THIRD-LEVEL EDUCATION 1996
(% of age cohort)

	University			Other Third Level		
	ALL	MEN	WOMEN	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
OECD Country Mean	34	31	37	19	20	22
United States	52	46	58	47	41	52
Norway	29	24	34	26	20	33
Denmark	35	26	43	10	11	9
Ireland	29	28	30	24	23	24

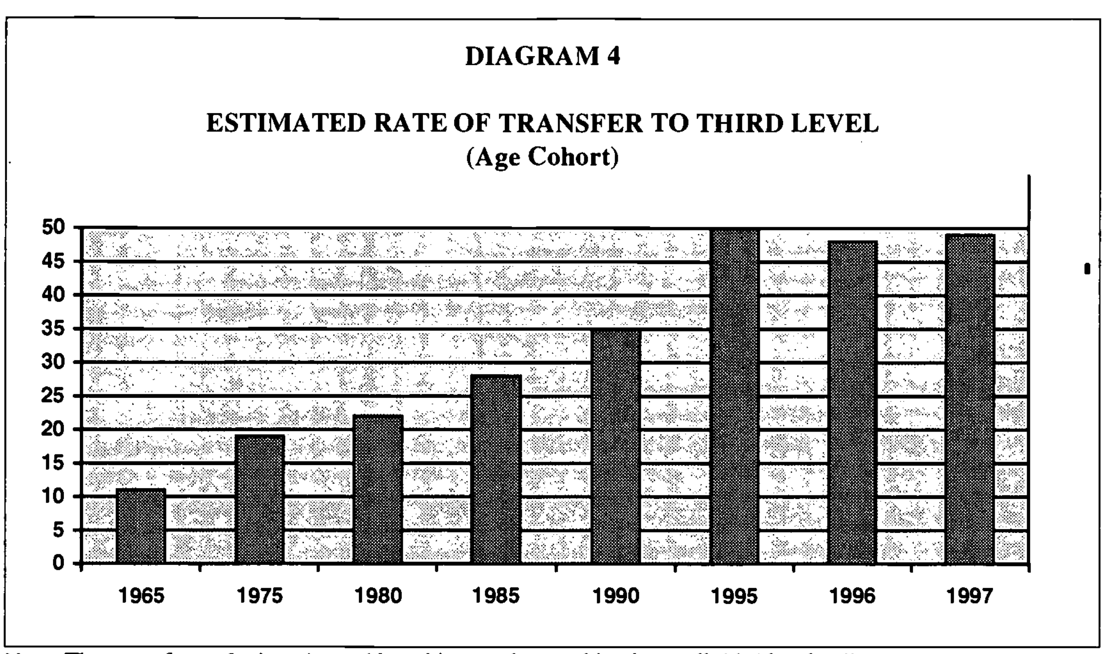
Source: OECD, *Education at a Glance, 1998*

TABLE 4

RATIO OF TERTIARY GRADUATES TO POPULATION AT THE TYPICAL AGE OF GRADUATION (1996)
(Short and Long First University - Degree Programmes)

GROUP 1	Australia, US, UK, Canada, New Zealand	30%+
GROUP 2	Denmark, Norway, Spain, Korea, Ireland, Finland, Japan, Hungary, Netherlands	20%-28%
GROUP 3	Sweden, Belgium (F1), Portugal, Iceland, Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Mexico, Austria	10%-19%

Source: *OECD, Education at a Glance,* 1998



Note: The rate of transfer is estimated by taking total annual intake to all third level colleges as a percentage of the estimated population at age 17. Some persons entering third level may have previously entered. Mature students and entrants from outside the State are also included.

Source: Department of Education and Science (entrant's data) and CSO (population data)

Changes In the Offing

There are two principal factors which will ease the up to now virtually total preoccupation of policy makers and institutions with providing for school leavers. The first is that the demographic bulge culminating in the peaking of the birth rate in the early 1980s has now worked its way through first of all the primary system and then the second level system - see Diagram 4. Thus we have perhaps a happy conjunction between the increasing emphasis which we need to place on adult education and participation and an easing of the demographic pressure from school leavers.

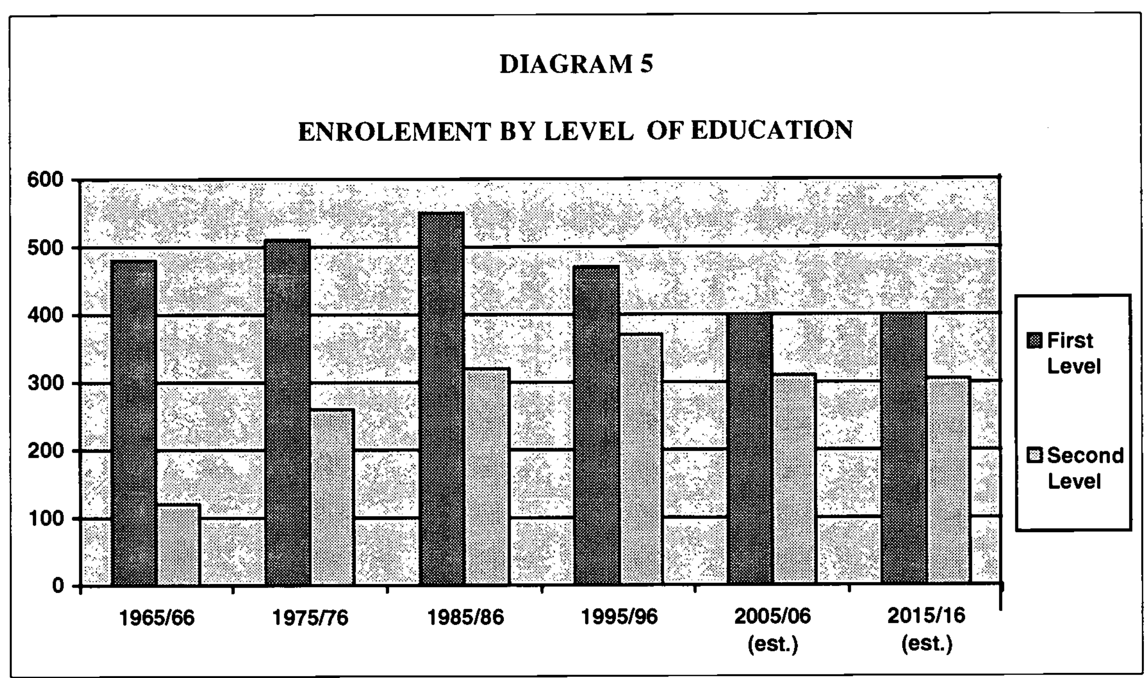
Policy Changes Will Be Required

The needs of mature students are self evidently very different to those of school leavers. Catering for them will require putting in place a very sophisticated array of policy instruments. The 1998 Green Paper on Adult Education flagged some of these. They included:

- establishing quotas in disciplines with low mature student representation
- putting measures in place to ensure proportionate representation for less well off students and for under-represented socio-economic groups
- devising new approaches to teaching and assessment - in particular the application of "adult friendly" methods and criteria
- the need to widen the range of provision which encompasses modularisation, the provision of part-time courses, the provision of education opportunities in the work place and very importantly putting in place progression arrangements

- the need to provide wider access routes which of course would include off-campus tuition and the need for greater collaboration between institutions particularly in the growing and burgeoning area of distance education.

The HEA under its targeted initiatives programme has been providing some support to the universities for innovative activities in the area of adult education - see table 5.



Source: Department of Education and Science

TABLE 5

FUNDING FOR ADULT EDUCATION

1996/97	**£0.25m**
1997/98	**£0.62m**
1998/99	**£0.64m**

The policy pointers from the White Paper of course throw up a number of questions for policy in which it might be useful to debate today.
Under the heading of application routes you might give thought to the tension between ensuring flexible access on one hand and ensuring equity, consistency, transparency and certainty on the other

hand while avoiding having a system which is too rigid and intimidating as arguably is the case for the Points System for students who are taking a second chance route. This raises a question as to whether we need some form of prior certification, possibly in the framework of the national certification system, which would be set up following the enactment of the Qualifications Bill? Resources as always are central to the issue. Is there a case for setting up a central admissions mechanism for alternative routes to third level? There then, of course, are the other broad categories of issues, the delivery and provision issues, the issues of timetables, modularisation, outreach education, distance education and progression and finally the issue of financial support mechanisms.

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Participation of Mature Students in Higher Education in Ireland

Professor Patrick Clancy
National University of Ireland Dublin

1. Introduction: Demographic background

A central theme of this conference must inevitably be our very limited provision for mature students in higher education. The main objective of this paper is to chart some features of this pattern. To provide a context for this description the paper starts by setting out some aspects of our demography since it is not unexpected to find a relationship between the patterns of participation in higher education and underlying demographic processes. For much of the 19th and 20th century Ireland was unique among European countries in having a high birth rate and a very high level of emigration. The former was paradoxically linked to a third unique feature of our demography, namely the pattern of postponed marriage and high level of non-marriage. However, this feature will not concern us in this paper.

The high birth rate and high level of emigration have contributed to a high dependency level, accounted for mainly by the relative size of the young population. As recently as the mid 1980s, 29% of the age group was under the age of fifteen; the comparable rate for all EU countries was less than 20% at this time. Because of earlier emigration there was a correspondingly depleted number in the active age group to support this large youth population. In this context it is not surprising that as a society we have tended to give priority to the educational needs of the young. High levels of dependency place a large burden on the exchequer. The high level of emigration influenced our attitude to other members of the population. Over a period of sixty years from 1926, the year of the first census after independence, to 1986 we lost almost a million people through net migration. This amounts to a loss of close to a quarter of our population. With the exception of the last few years and a very brief episode in the 1970s we accepted the reality of having a large labour force surplus which emigrated. This 'excess' consisted mainly of unskilled labourers but it also included large numbers with modest educational credentials, and significant numbers of doctors, engineers and other professionals. What is being suggesting is that these two demographic features help to explain the nature of educational provision. Firstly, the high levels of dependency created pressure on public finances forcing us to prioritise provision. In this context the claims of the young took priority. Secondly, the almost constant labour force surplus meant that we never viewed the labour force supply issue as problematic, therefore there was little concern for retraining or upgrading of skills of the existing labour force.

Of course things have changed radically in the past few years. The birth rate has reduced dramatically (Table 1). For much of this century the birth cohort was somewhat in excess of 60,000. It reached a peak of more than 74,000 in 1980 after which it commenced a very steep decline to reach its lowest level of under 48,000 in 1994. There has been a modest recovery since, the figure for 1997 was more than 52,000 and, on the basis of figures for the first three quarters, will be slightly higher in 1998. Interestingly, the number of births in 1997 was less than the number (53,904) of school candidates who sat the Leaving Certificate for the first time in that year. The level of dependency is rapidly reducing and indeed our demographic prospects are amongst the most favourable in the western world. This has been well illustrated by Fahey and Fitzgerald (1997) in a research monograph commissioned by the Combat Poverty Agency. Some of the main elements on their analysis are presented in Figures 1, where the situation in Ireland is contrasted with a number of other European countries. In 1960 the level of Old Dependency in Ireland, at 19.4% was the highest among the countries listed - however, the differences were not very large by comparison with several other countries. By 2020, on the basis of CSO projections at 23%, it will be the lowest of these countries. By comparison, the projections for Italy are about 37% with Greece and Sweden being only a little lower. In respect of youth dependency, the projections are that while we may still be the highest at about 33%, this represents a huge reduction from 54% in 1960. Combining the two elements of

dependency the net effect is that Ireland has moved from what was, by the standards of developed countries, a uniquely high age dependency ratio to quite a normal level which will persist for at least the next two decades.

The second and equally momentous change has been with respect to migration. We have moved from a situation of uniquely high (at least by western European standards) out-migration to having a net inward flow of migrants. The transformation in migration flows is, of course, a product of the so-called Celtic Tiger. The remarkable achievement of this decade, particularly the last five years is that economic growth has, if somewhat belatedly, been accompanied by spectacular employment growth. The growth, within a decade, of about a quarter in the number at work is indeed a remarkable achievement. The success in employment creation has led to labour shortages, which have become the concern of policy makers. In simple terms there are two main instruments at our disposal to solve these skills shortages. We can import labour or we can increase the labour force participation of our existing population. In respect of the latter strategy, given that for the foreseeable future the number of school and college leavers will begin to decline, the main untapped resources are the ranks of the unemployed (still too high at over 200,000) and those, mainly married women, who have not sought to rejoin the labour force. The labour force changes and especially the skills shortages have fundamentally altered the policy agenda. The labour force is no longer a 'residual' after emigration. It is now a resource, which must be maximised. We are now at a unique juncture, which has major implications for adult education at all levels, especially for further and higher education. The coincidence of acute labour market demands, the beginning of a decline in the school leavers cohort and our increased capacity to fund extended educational provision all require us to prioritise the education of adults.

2. Age profile of higher education students

Comparative data on participation reveal a consistent pattern whereby Irish higher education students are amongst the youngest if not the youngest in the western world. This is well illustrated in Figure 2 taken from the *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators, 1997* (OECD, 1997,a). Of the 16 countries, for which data are available on the age distribution of university-level new entrants, the age distribution of students is lowest in Ireland for all measures used. For example, if we examine age at the 50th percentile, for Ireland it is 18.6 years compared with the country mean of 20.5 years. France, the United States and Greece are the next lowest at 18.9, 19.0 and 19.4 years, respectively. In contrast, the figures for Norway, Sweden and Germany are 22.7, 22.1 and 21.7, respectively.
While there is some evidence of change in the Irish pattern, part of which must be related to the more widespread availability and take-up of the Transition Year Programme, the rate of change is very slow. The age of new entrants into full-time higher education has been monitored in three national studies of participation (Clancy, 1995). In 1992 and 1986 the modal age of entry was 18 years - it was 17 years in 1980 (Table 2). These distributions record age as of 1 October in the year of entry, not the age mid-way through the first year, as reported in national and most international statistics. Also, it should be pointed out that this strictest and arguably more accurate measurement refers solely to new entrants, excluding repeat and transfer students who make up about 8% of first year students. Looking at Table 2 we notice that, while there has been a reduction in the percentage of those who were under 18 at entry, from 44% in 1980 to less than 33% in 1992, there is little change in the percentages of those aged 21 or over. This was a mere 4% in 1992, and although this represented an increase from 2.8% in 1986 it represented a reduction on the 1980 figure of 5%. While we do not yet have figures for the current year's (1998/99) intake, the results of a special analysis by the author of CAO data on the 1997 intake can be compared with the findings from the last published survey, to quantify the degree of ageing of higher education entrants. These figures in Table 3 include all first year students, including repeat and transfer students. We note that there has been a slight increase in the age of first year students. While the percentage of entrants under the age of 18 has decreased by 8%, the percentage of mature students has shown only a modest increase from 3% to 4.7%. An alternative approach, which utilises the most recently available published figures on stock enrolment, also reveals some increase in the age of full-time higher education students. Again the changes in the age

distribution are very modest. The percentage of all full-time students aged 23 or over was 16.6% in 1996/97, an increase from 13.8% in 1992/93. There was a corresponding reduction of about 4 % in the number aged 18 or under (Table 4). While noting this very limited change, it should be borne in mind that part of this 'ageing' of the student population, which is reflected in stock figures such as these, is a function of some increase in the duration of study.

The most comprehensive analysis of the participation of mature students in higher education is that completed by Kathleen Lynch, as part of the research carried out by the Technical Working Group which supported the Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education (Technical Working Group, 1995; Lynch, 1997). Using data supplied by the colleges, Lynch's census of mature entrants into higher education in 1993/94 suggests that a total of 6,665 entrants were mature students (Table 5). Of these, 25% were full-time students representing some 5.4% of all full-time entrants. In contrast, 75% of mature entrants were part-time students; these represented more that 80% of all entrants to part-time higher education in 1993/94. Interestingly, the majority (57%) of mature entrants was male. This contrasts with the situation for all higher education entrants where females now take just over 50% of places. The male majority is accounted for their greater participation in part-time higher education, where they constitute 59% of entrants and two-thirds of stock enrolments. While taking account of differences in the definition of 'mature students' as between Ireland, where those aged 23 or over are classified as mature by comparison with the UK, where those aged 21 or over are so classified, Lynch notes that mature students are more than five times better represented in full-time higher education in the UK than they are in the Republic of Ireland.

There is no single explanation for the very low percentage of mature students in Irish higher education. As suggested above, part of the explanation is related to our long-standing unique demographic characteristics. More significantly, the key determinant has been the policy response, which these characteristics evoked. A recent example has been the abolition of tuition fees for full-time undergraduates and the retention of fees for part-time students. We will return to discuss this issue later in the paper. However, at this point it is appropriate to point out that the level of demand from mature students is not fully reflected in the enrolments achieved. This is illustrated in Table 6, which is based on a special analysis of the 1997 intake through the CAO system, showing the distribution by age of all CAO applicants, the percentage of those receiving an offer and the percentage of those with an offer who accept. The main departure from the general trend is in respect of mature applicants. While 68.5% of all applicants received an offer, only 50% of mature students received an offer. In contrast, mature students receiving an offer had the highest acceptance rate (80%) in contrast to an overall acceptance rate of 75%. This low offer rate to full-time programmes is well illustrated in a recent study of the experience of mature students at UCD by Inglis and Murphy (1999). They reported that while the offer rate to applicants to the BA Modular (evening) degree was 84 %, the offer rate in respect of full-time courses was a mere 6%. However, this figure is artificially low because of some double counting, where applicants apply for more than one course.

3. Some consequences of past and existing policies

The consequences of the recent rapid expansion in education provision beyond the compulsory years, together with the paucity of provision for adults, are well illustrated in census figures on the educational profile of the adult population. Using Census of Population figures from 1966 to 1996, Table 7 shows the distribution of the population, whose full-time education had ceased, by the age at which education ceased. The changes over the thirty-year period are quite dramatic. For example, the percentage of the population whose full-time education had ceased under the age of 15 had more than halved - from 55% to 24% in the period 1966 to 1996. Correspondingly, the percentage that left school or college at age 19 or over had more than trebled, from less than 6% to over 19%.

While Table 7 shows changes over time, Table 8 shows differences by age group at the same point in time. This table shows, for the different age groups, the percentage of the population aged 20 or over who have left school, by the age at which their education ceased. These differences are striking and illustrate the emergence of large educational gaps between the younger generation and the older

generation. While almost half (48%) of those in their early twenties had left school at age 19 or over, this was true of only 16% of those in their late forties and early fifties. The differentials are even more stark if we focus on those who left school under the age of 15; the differentials here are in the order of 13 to 1 for the same age groups. It is of interest to note that, it was in the light of such data on generational inequalities, the Swedish government in the early 1970s adopted the famous 25/5 scheme, whereby adults aged 25 or over with at least five years work experience were deemed to be eligible for admission to higher education without the traditional matriculation requirement.

Having looked at the situation in Ireland it is now appropriate to make comparisons with other western counties. Again the OECD provides a useful approach. Figure 3 shows the proportion of adults aged 25-64 with at least upper secondary education in 1995 and the proportion who would be at this level in 2015 if the present rates of graduation were maintained. According to these data Ireland ranked 16th out of 20 countries in 1995, leaving only the four Mediterranean countries (Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece) below us. It is appropriate to enter a caveat in respect of these figures, considering the ranking of the UK in this table. The UK seems to have adopted a very generous definition of what constitutes completed upper secondary education. The ranking of the countries for 2015 is not a forecast but a projection made on the assumption of no significant policy change. Of course policies will change but this projection demonstrates that effecting change in the overall stock of human capital is a very slow process, if we rely on a policy on raising educational attainment levels solely by increasing participation among today's youth cohorts. Countries, which want to upgrade attainment more quickly, can also aim to do so by expanding adult education.

Another consequence of past policies is reflected in the findings of the recently published study on Adult Literacy (Morgan et al, 1997). This study differentiates between five different levels of literacy, where the lowest represents that where people are able to perform at best, only the simplest tasks, typically those that require the reader to locate a single piece of information in a text, when there is no distracting information and where the structure of the text assists the search. It is clear that in a comparative context the Irish performance is poor. The percentage at the lowest level of literacy is higher in Ireland than in each of the other seven countries for which these data are available, with the exception of Poland. The percentage of Irish at the highest levels - combining levels 4 and 5 - is particularly poor (13.7%), being little more than a third of the figure for Sweden (34.6%). More interestingly, in the context of today's discussion, age was found to be strongly associated with literacy. The percentage of those, aged 55 to 65, scoring at the lowest level was almost two and a half time that of those under the age of 36, while in contrast, the percentage of those at level 4 or 5 was significantly greater for the younger cohort (14.8%) than for the older cohort (8.7%).

An important feature of these generational inequalities, which we have briefly illustrated, is the way in which they interact with social class background. The latter have been well documented and do not need to be rehearsed in any detail here. The three national studies of participation in higher education (Clancy, 1995) found very large socio-economic group inequalities which have persisted over time although there has been some modest reduction between 1980 and 1992 (Table 10). Furthermore, since the socio-economic group inequalities evident at the point of entry to higher education are merely the final stage of a cumulative process, we need to examine how class differentials emerge much earlier. In some work done by the present author for the Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education it was shown how class differences are evident at each 'educational transition' (Table 11).

- students from lower socio-economic groups are significantly less likely to complete second level education

- those students from lower socio-economic groups who sit the Leaving Certificate tend to achieve significantly lower grades

- for students with modest levels of achievement in the Leaving Certificate, those from the higher socio-economic groups have higher transfer rates into higher education

When we take the foregoing research findings into account it is clear that generational inequalities are further differentiated by social class inequalities. Therefore, if we seek to redress these inequalities we need to attend to both dimensions. In this context it is important to note that the present limited provision of higher education for mature students has scarcely begun to touch the social groups which are in most need of second chance education. While we lack comprehensive data on the social background of mature students Lynch's data confirms our impressionistic evidence on this topic. Lynch shows that mature students are disproportionately drawn from the lower middle classes. The groups with the highest proportionate representation are Salaried Employees, Employers and Managers, Lower Professionals and the Intermediate Non-Manual (Table 12). In contrast those from lower socio-economic groups have much lower levels of participation.

4. Conclusion

It is not possible within the confines of this short paper to give detailed consideration of the policy implications, which follow on from the findings which have been summarised. At least two considerations take precedence. Firstly, social justice considerations impel us to seek to tackle the generational and associated social class inequalities. Wider access to higher education is not the sole prerogative of school leavers. In Ireland, public policy has determined that, in retaining the binary policy, we have chosen to sustain a diversified system. However, this diversification relates only to the structuring of the system and to the range of programmes offered. We have very little diversification with respect to access to this system. Access to higher education is through a very narrow, sequential pathway which follows directly from school. At the start of this paper it was suggested that our unique demography may help to explain why the system emerged in this way. Our changing demographic and economic circumstances now provide a unique opportunity to move away from this narrow perspective.

One element of the rationale, which promotes the social justice imperative, is the increasingly close links between education and employment opportunity. The transformation of the occupational structure, which has seen very rapid growth in those occupations requiring technical and professional qualifications and the demise of employment opportunities for those who lack educational credentials, has increasingly led to a view of education as a form of cultural capital, which is analogous to economic capital. The opportunity to acquire this capital is a human right, and should not be an accident of birth or of generation. It is unlikely that, in our acquisitive and individualistic society, social justice considerations alone would lead to a substantial widening of access to higher education. Fortunately in the present climate, there seems to be a happy coincidence between ethical and instrumental considerations. Second chance education, up to and including higher education, is now seen as a solution to the problem of unemployment and as a crucial element in meeting the skills shortages which have emerged in our society. This conjuncture, together with the commencement of a decline in the size of the school leavers age cohort, offer an unprecedented opportunity to plan for a major expansion in provision for mature students in higher education. We must now put in place the policies which will facilitate this. One policy option, which should be re-examined, is the introduction of a level playing pitch with respect to the funding of full-time and part-time courses. For many adults the part-time route is more suitable than the full-time route. Yet the present arrangements discriminate against those who choose to pursue higher education as part-time students. While one can empathise with the view expressed in the Green Paper on Adult Education (1998) when it argues that, priority state investment in adult education should be directed at addressing literacy and basic education needs, rather than in granting free fees, this argument is analogous to that which suggests that expenditure on primary education should take precedence over third-level expenditure. However, if we change the nature of the comparison to that between part-time and full-time higher education students it is difficult to justify a policy which gives preference to full-time students both in respect of fees and maintenance.

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TABLE 1.

CHANGING BIRTH RATES.

	No. of Births (Thousands)	Birth Rate (Per 1,000)
	%	%
1950s (Yearly Average)	61.7	21.2
1960s	62.4	21.7
1970s	69.5	21.6
1980s	61.0	17.5
1990s	50.4	14.0
1980	74.4	21.9
1994	47.9	13.4
1997	52.3	14.3

Source: Central Statistics Office, *Vital Statistics,* various years.

TABLE 2.

AGE ON OCTOBER 1ST, OF NEW ENTRANTS TO FULL-TIME HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND 1992, 1986 AND 1980.

	1992	1986	1980
AGE			
Under 17	0.3	1.0	2.1
17	30.3	34.0	42.0
18	47.0	46.3	38.5
19	15.4	13.5	9.6
20	2.9	2.3	2.8
21	1.0	0.8	1.4
22	0.5		
		1.2	2.3
23-25	1.0		
26-30	0.6	0.4	0.7
31-40	0.6	0.3	0.5
Over 40	0.3	0.1	0.1
Total % Total N	100 25,084	100 17,152	100 13,360

Source: Clancy, (1995).

TABLE 3

AGE ON OCTOBER 1, OF FIRST YEAR ENTRANTS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND, 1992 AND 1997
(Percentages)

	1997	1992
Age	%	%
17 or less	20.1	28.4
18	48.0	45.1
19	20.5	17.2
20	4.3	4.0
21	1.6	1.5
22	0.8	0.7
23 or more	4.7	3.0
Total % Total N	100 32,585	100 27,065

Source: Clancy, (1995) and special analysis of 1997 CAO entry data

TABLE 4.

DISTRIBUTION BY AGE OF FULL-TIME ENROLMENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN 1992/93 AND 1996/97 (PERCENTAGES).

Age	1996/97	1992/93
18 or less	21.3	25.5
19-20	40.4	41.3
21-22	21.8	19.6
23 or more	16.7	13.8
Total % Total N	100 107,501	100 84,339

Source: Higher Education Authority, *Reports, Accounts and Student Statistics,* 1992/93 and 1996/97.

TABLE 5.

MATURE STUDENT ENTRANTS 1993/94.

Registration Status			
	N	**%**	**Percentage of Total Entrants**
Full-Time	1,697	25.0	5.4
Part-Time	4,968	75.0	80-85
Total	6,665	100	
Distribution by Sector	%		
Universities	35.0		
Institutes of Technology	46.0		
Other	19.0		
Total	100		
Distribution by Gender			
	Full-Time	**Part-Time**	
	%	%	
Male	50.0	59.0	
Female	50.0	41.0	

Source: Lynch, (1997).

TABLE 6.

DISTRIBUTION BY AGE OF ALL CAO APPLICANTS, THOSE RECEIVING AN OFFER AND THOSE WITH AN OFFER WHO ACCEPT.

	Applicants	**% of applicants receiving an offer**	**% of applicants with an offer accepting**
Age			
17 or less	13,451	76.3	63.9
18	29,279	78.3	68.2
19	12,346	78.7	68.7
20	2,961	77.3	61.2
21	1,186	74.7	59.8
22	635	75.3	54.6
23 or more	3,816	57.7	69.0
Total **N**	63,674	76.6	66.8

Source: Author's analysis of 1997 CAO applications

TABLE 7.

PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF PERSONS WHOSE FULL-TIME EDUCATION HAS CEASED ACCORDING TO AGE AT WHICH FULL-TIME EDUCATION CEASED, 1966-96.

		Percentage who left school, university, etc					
Year	Total whose full-time education has ceased (excl. age not stated)	Under 15	15	16	17	18	19 and over
1966	100	54.8	11.4	13.7	7.2	7.5	5.6
1971	100	51.0	11.4	14.1	8.5	8.4	6.6
1981	100	36.8	12.8	16.5	11.7	12.1	10.1
1986	100	28.6	13.2	18.3	13.0	15.0	12.0
1991	100	27.8	12.2	17.5	13.3	15.7	13.4
1996	100	23.9	11.0	15.9	13.7	16.4	19.2

Source: Central Statistics Office, *Census of Population,* various years.

TABLE 8.

PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF PERSONS AGED 20 YEARS AND OVER, CLASSIFIED BY PRESENT AGE AND AGE AT WHICH FULL-TIME EDUCATION CEASED (1996 CENSUS)*

		Age at which full-time education ceased*			
Present age group	Total	Under 15	15-16 years	17-18 years	19* and over
Persons	%	%	%	%	%
20-24 years	100	2.5	16.2	33.3	48.0
25-29	100	3.9	23.3	38.2	34.6
30-34	100	6.4	29.7	37.9	26.0
35-44	100	15.2	29.2	34.6	21.0
45-54	100	32.2	28.3	23.6	15.9
55-64	100	41.8	26.1	19.9	12.2
65-74	100	49.6	24.8	16.7	8.9
75 years and over	100	54.6	23.5	14.1	7.8
Total	100	20.8	23.5	26.2	29.5

*Persons aged 20 years and over still receiving full-time education are included with 19 years and over.
Source: Adapted from *Census of Population, 1996,* Volume 8.

TABLE 9

INTERNATIONAL ADULT LITERACY SURVEY: DISTRIBUTION OF SAMPLE FOR SELECTED COUNTRIES BY LEVEL OF LITERACY (PERCENTAGE). *

Country	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4/5
Canada	17.2	25.5	34.0	23.3
Germany	10.0	31.7	40.2	18.6
Ireland	24.3	29.9	32.1	13.7
Netherlands	10.3	27.1	44.2	18.4
Poland	42.4	31.8	20.6	5.2
Sweden	6.8	19.3	39.4	34.6
Switzerland (French speaking)	15.6	29.0	39.9	15.5
Switzerland (German speaking)	17.2	30.3	37.8	14.7
USA	21.8	25.7	31.7	20.9

The figures presented represent an average for each of the three literacy domains: prose, document and quantitative. Source: Adapted from Morgan et al. (1997).

TABLE 10

ESTIMATED PROPORTION OF AGE COHORT ENTERIING FULL-TIME HIGHER EDUCATION BY FATHER'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUP IN 1980, 1986, AND 1992

Socio-Economic Groups	1992	1986	1980
Farmers	.49	.36	.24
Other Agricultural Occupations	.22	.12	.04
Higher Professional	.89	.75	.67
Lower Professional	.53	.54	.38
Employers and Managers	.67	.43	.48
Salaried Employees	.53	.58	.59
Intermediate Non-Manual Workers	.33	.30	.22
Other Non-Manual Workers	.26	.11	.09
Skilled Manual Workers	.26	.13	.09
Semi-Skilled Manual Workers	.16	.11	.09
Unskilled Manual Workers	.13	.04	.03
TOTAL	**.36**	**.25**	**.20**

Source: Clancy (1995)

TABLE 11

EDUCATIONAL TRANSITIONS: DIFFERENTIAL PARTICIPATION AND ACHIEVEMENT RATES BY FATHER'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUP

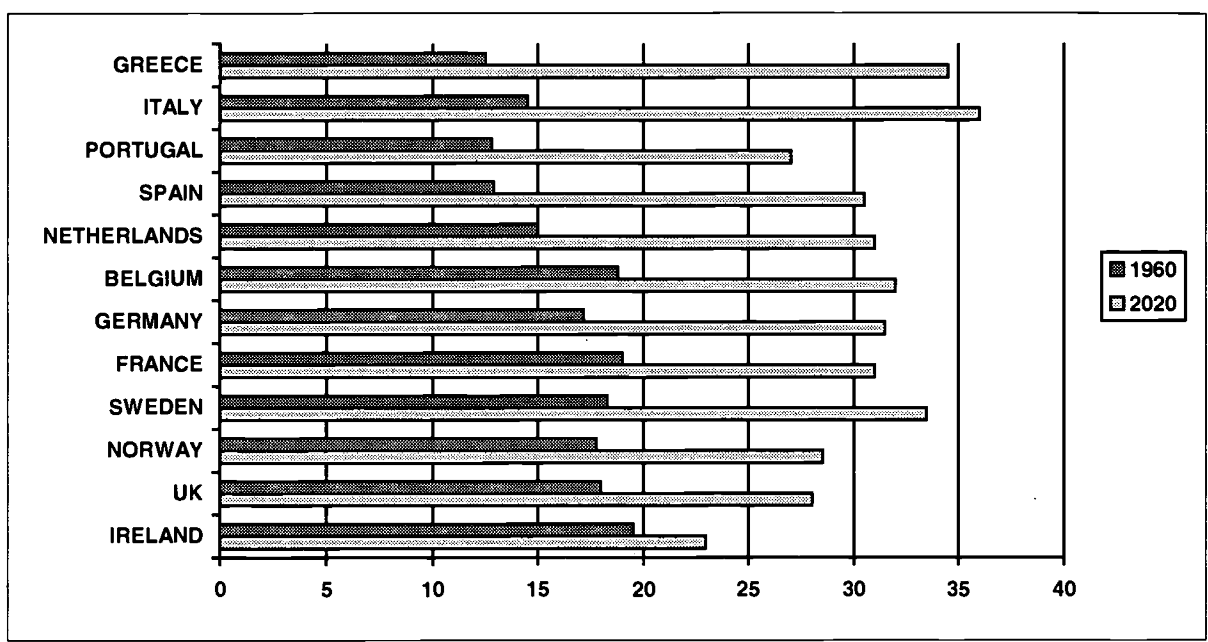
Fathers' Socio-Economic Group	Percentage Reaching Leaving Cert. Level	Of those Reaching Leaving Cert. Level: % with at least 5 Passes	Of those Reaching Leaving Cert. Level: % with at least 2Cs at Hon. Level.	Of those with at least 5 passes in Leaving Cert. % enrolled in Higher Education	Of those with at least 2Cs at Hon. Level % enrolled in Higher Education
Farmers	88.3	91.3	56.8	48.5	66.6
Other Agricultural	63.0	90.2	38.0	33.7	71.4
Higher Professional	97.1	92.8	80.1	76.8	84.1
Lower Professional	95.7	95.5	74.9	61.0	73.7
Employers and Managers	90.7	90.3	65.1	62.2	76.1
Salaried Employees	93.2	93.3	61.8	53.0	70.9
Intermediate Non-Manual	84.3	91.7	60.8	51.1	70.4
Other Non-Manual	70.5	87.7	42.2	32.4	57.6
Skilled Manual	75.9	89.2	41.4	35.9	63.3
Semi-Skilled Manual	61.7	80.0	28.0	30.0	57.1
Unskilled Manual	52.5	79.1	28.8	23.0	55.8
TOTAL*	**78.0**	**89.5**	**52.6**	**46.3**	**69.5**
Percentage Difference between 5 Highest (3-7) and 5 Lowest (2,8-11) Socio-Economic Groups	22.9	5.3	29.1	28.8	14.9
Percentage Difference between 2 Highest (3&4) and 2 Lowest (10&11) Socio-Economic Groups	42.1	14.7	49.3	45.4	23.8

Source: Technical Working Group (1997).

FIGURE 1.

OLD AND YOUNG DEPENDENCY IN SELECTED EUROPEAN COUNTRIES, 1960 AND 2020

A. Dependency (elderly per 100 aged 15-64)



B. Young Dependency (young per 100 aged 15-64)

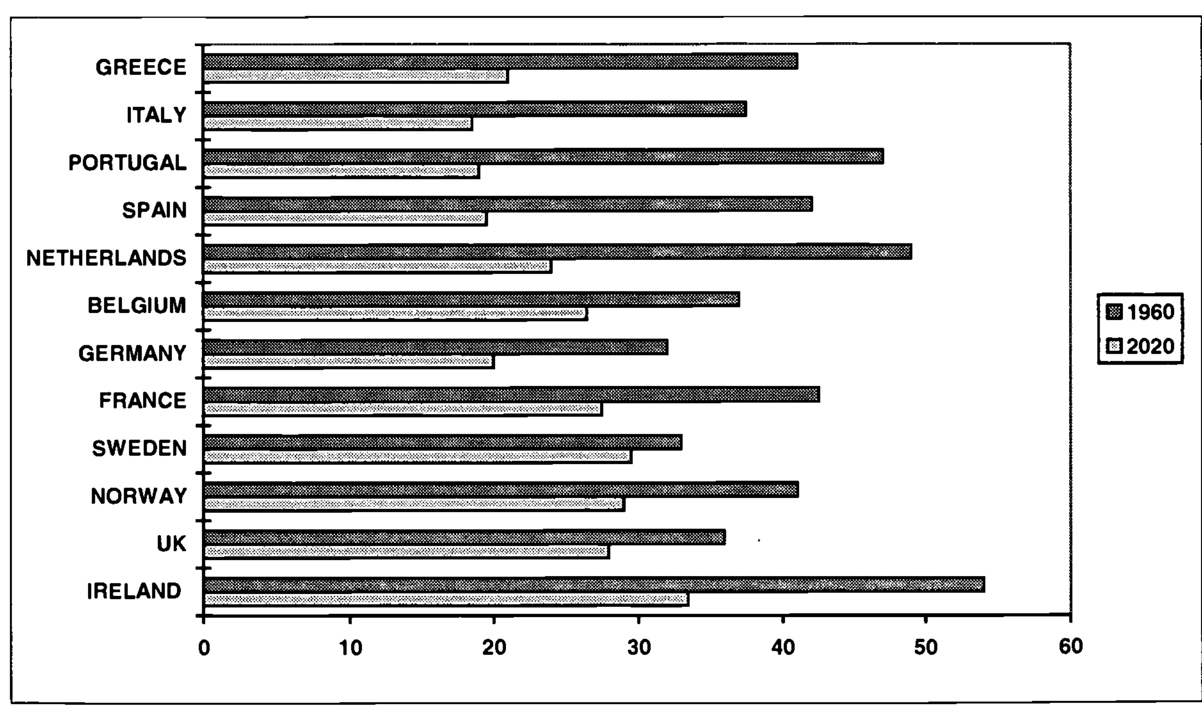


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FIGURE 2
AGE DISTRIBUTION OF UNIVERSITY-LEVEL NEW ENTRANTS (1995)

Ireland
France
United States
Greece
New Zealand
United Kingdom
Turkey
Canada
Austria
Netherlands
Iceland
Switzerland
Germany
Sweden
Norway
Denmark

18 20 22 24 26 28 30

Age

50th percentile

20th percentile 80th percentile

Source: OECD (1997, a)

Figure 3. Projected Growth in the Educational Level of the Adult Population
Percentage of the Population aged 25-64 having completed upper secondary education
Assuming 1995 youth qualification rates

PORTUGAL
SPAIN
ITALY
GREECE
IRELAND
AUSTRALIA
BELGIUM
NEW ZEALAND
NETHERLANDS
DENMARK
FINLAND
FRANCE
AUSTRIA
SWEDEN
CANADA
UK
NORWAY
SWITZERLAND
GERMANY
US

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90

1995
2015

Source: OECD (1997,b)

The Adult Learner – Developments and Research in the United Kingdom: Contextualising Access in the UK

Dr. Barbara Merrill
University of Warwick

University undergraduate student numbers, both 18 year olds and adults, expanded significantly during the 1980s and 1990s in the UK for the first time since the impact of the Robbins Report in the 1960s. However, what is different this time round is that university expansion is not aimed only at 18 year olds, the traditional clientele of universities, but also adults. This paper focuses on adult access to universities in the UK by examining policy and practice both nationally and institutionally. Several factors have been identified in contributing to the recent heterogeneity of the student population (Parry and Wake, 1990) such as demographic changes resulting in declining numbers of the 18 year age cohort, influence of the Access movement and the introduction of CATs and modularisation. The main motivating reasons, however, are economic and social. A changing economy in a postmodern society demands a highly skilled workforce. The view shared by the Government and industrialists is that if the UK is to compete in the global market a highly educated workforce becomes an imperative. In the UK Government's Green Paper, 'The Learning Age' (1998) justification for widening access and lifelong learning is rooted in economic arguments:

We now stand as a nation on the brink of a new learning age. Jobs are changing and with them the skills needed for the world of tomorrow. Whereas the industrial revolution was built on capital investment in plant and equipment, the information revolution of the 21st century will be based on knowledge and human capital. Learning is the key to economic prosperity – for each of us as individuals, as well as for the nation as a whole. It has a vital role to play in promoting social inclusion. That is why the Government has put learning at the heart of its ambitions (Secretary of State for Education and Employment, Press Release, 25 February, 1998).

In information societies the acquisition of knowledge, therefore, becomes important and essential (Castells, 1996); those without become the socially excluded. Widening access, however, is not wholly about economics. Certain groups within the further and higher education sectors have campaigned successfully for the inclusion of adults on grounds of equity and social purpose (Parry and Wake, 1990).

An indication of the Government's changing attitude about who universities should be for became apparent in a 1987 Government policy document; 'Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge':

Places should be available for all who have the necessary intellectual competence, motivation and maturity to benefit from higher education (DES, 1987: 7).

In quantitative terms the Age Participation Rate (APR) for 18 year olds changed significantly from 10% in 1970 to 30% by the mid 1990s. Trow (1989) maintains that a 30% participation rate means that the UK now has a mass HE system. Although student numbers may have increased institutional structures remain traditional particularly in the 'old' universities (universities under the binary system). Adults may now have achieved access to HE but once in they have had to fit in to existing systems and practices. As Parry points out:

The achievement of 'mass' levels of participation in a system retaining 'elite' characteristics has been one of the distinctive features of the rapid expansion of British higher education in recent years (Parry, 1997: viii).

Concern with preserving the elite status of universities in some quarters against a mass HE system has led to use of the terms 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' students in discourse about access to UK universities. The debate is related to issues of standards and quality.

More young people are now participating in higher education. However, the new opportunities have resulted in reproducing more white, middle class 18-year-old students, the traditional entrants. Working class young people remain under-represented. More optimistically the number of adults participating has grown rapidly since the mid 1980s. In the UK an adult student is defined as being 21 and over at undergraduate level and 25 and over at postgraduate level. Adults now consist, nationally, of just under 50% of the total undergraduate student population. This includes part-time and full-time students and those on other undergraduate degree programmes. Most adults study part-time. For example, 96.8% of new entrants on part-time degrees were adults contrasted with 26.8% as new entrants on full-time degrees (HESA).

In terms of gender female adult students dominate 56.8% to 43.2% (HESA first-year students at British Universities 1996-97). Adults are differentially distributed across the system. Most are located in the 'new' universities (former polytechnics) where there is a more flexible and modular curriculum reaching 80% or more of the undergraduate population in institutions like the University of East London, for example. Cynics argue that the former polytechnics admitted adult students for economic rather than for equity reasons (Ainley, 1994) in using adults to fill the places left as a result of a smaller 18 year old population. Adults are also not evenly distributed within universities by field of study. Social sciences are the most popular choice while sciences are the least popular as the following table indicates:

TABLE 1.

ADULTS AND SUBJECT CHOICE

First-year students at British Universities – by field of study and over 21 (%) 1996-97 (HESA)

Field of Study	21 and more
Sciences	5.0
Applied Sciences	15.1
Health Studies	15.3
Social Sciences	36.8
Humanities	27.8
Others	-
Total	100.00

Widening Adult Pathways into Higher Education

Widening the number of entry routes into HE has been an important enabling factor for adults wanting to do a degree. Traditionally 'A' levels were the only route of entry. For adults who have been out of education for a long time insistence on 'A' levels was a barrier to entry. Pressure for change came largely from the Access movement during the late 1970s and 1980s. The movement campaigned for those who have traditionally been excluded, questioning 'inequality of participation in higher education' (Corrigan, 1992). Corrigan characterises 'the recent success and growth of Access courses

as developing essentially at the level of practice with little direct involvement at the level of central government' (1992: 19). At policy level the impetus was translated into the introduction of Access courses, initially introduced by the then Department of Education and Science to target specific groups (women returners and black people) onto preparatory courses for teacher training and social work degrees:

> ...to bring up to the standard required for entry to courses of professional training and to higher education generally, potential students whose experience could be valuable in such careers but lack the entry qualifications and have additional special needs which cannot be met by existing educational provision (DES, 1978).

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 1999) reveals that 4% of adult undergraduates entered with Access credits, many others progress onto HND programmes. Access courses are mostly delivered by FE colleges, largely in social sciences and humanities. The majority of Access students are women (Davis, 1994). Recent research by Field (1999) indicates that part-time Access courses are now recruiting better than full-time, as are those courses which are vocationally oriented. Access credits were given equal status to 'A' levels, recognised as the 'third' entry route into higher education (vocational qualifications such as BTEC being the second).

Undoubtedly Access courses have opened university doors to adults, albeit in a limited way in the 'old' universities. Admissions tutors in some institutions continue to act as gatekeepers, keeping out those who they consider to have 'non-standard' qualifications. Staff development work is needed here to change attitudes. Access courses have, however, led the way for other non-'A' level qualifications to be accepted as entry routes such as APEL, GNVQs and, in some cases, no formal qualifications. The 2+2 degree programme at Warwick is an example whereby adults can enter a degree programme without formal qualifications by demonstrating that they are capable of studying at this level.

At another level access to HE in the UK has been widened by FE colleges undertaking HE work through franchised degrees (Bird et al, 1993). In practice this means teaching the first one or two years, and in some exceptions, the whole of a degree course in local colleges. Policy issues relating to access and lifelong learning have been given a high profile recently through the publication of a plethora of Government reports and policy documents; Dearing (1997); Kennedy, Fryer, The Green Paper (1998). Government rhetoric is, therefore, strong on advocating widening access but financial constraints makes the policy contradictory.

A pilot survey undertaken by the Departments of Continuing Education and Sociology at Warwick indicates that mature students are finding it harder to study owing to financial reasons. The causes of the hardship are; changes to the grants and benefits system and, more recently, the introduction of course fees. Several 2+2 students stated that they would not have started their degree course if they had been confronted by these economic conditions at the start of their studies. Even without the recent financial changes mature students have to make economic sacrifices, especially those with families as the following account illustrates:

> I knew it would be a struggle, but I didn't realise how much of a struggle. With four children life became very difficult (her husband received unemployment benefit). The closest I came to giving up was the day I went to see the bank manager before Christmas and asked if he would give me an extra £100 over my overdraft...I am on first name terms with most of the people in the second hand shops in------ which is fine. I call it recycling but I drive to Banbury to stock up there because their food is so cheap. I am working all hours (study and paid employment)...but to be honest we are so much in debt from the last three years, I don't know when we are going to surface which is probably why I wouldn't do it again (female law student).

Many students, younger and adults are having to take on part-time employment to survive but this has consequences for their studies:

> I am trying not to think about finals next term. I have not got behind with my work but I am not working as well. To juggle a job as well as a course is extremely difficult. I knew it was going to be difficult but it was a toss up between not being able to do the course because I did not have the money or taking the job which was really quite convenient but it is actually in my own study time. I cannot make up for that at night because of the family (2+2 social studies).

Mature students are the biggest users of the University's Access Fund, particularly the 2+2 students. Nationally the impact of economic changes is reflected this year in the declining number of mature student applicants to universities through UCAS. This year, so far, has witnessed an 18% decline in applicants over the age of 25 and a 13% decline in the 21-24 age group.

What Makes Institutions Accessible? Warwick Case Study

Providing more entry routes into higher education is an important but not the only aspect of widening access for adults. Access is also about making institutional provision meet the needs of older learners, not just 18 year olds. Institutions need to be accessible to ensure an inclusive learning experience for both younger students and adults. This paper draws on case study data from a project undertaken by the University of Louvain, Belgium and the University of Warwick, UK to look at what makes a 'learning university'. Data was collected through questionnaire and life history interviews at the start and end of participants' university career. In broad terms the research focused on the issues and problems facing mature students in HE by using the voices of adult students and lecturers.

Warwick has three categories of adult students: part-time, full-time and 2+2 (also full-time). 2+2 degrees are aimed at adults living locally who have been out of education for a long time and/or who may have few or no qualifications. It is a four-year degree with the first two years being taught at a local FE college and the last two years at Warwick. Years one and two are equivalent to year one of a three-year degree course. Most part-time students are in part- or full-time employment. The part-time degree is, therefore, more flexible in terms of time. A Part-times Degrees Office with a Part-time Degrees Director has been established, managed by the Department of Continuing Education but operating university-wide. Similarly there is a 2+2 director for each programme area. Both the Part-time Degrees and the 2+2 programmes have been embedded within the institution. The Board of Lifelong Learning monitors such activities.

Policy makers and lecturers talk about adult students as if they are a homogenous group. In reality adults are differentiated by mode of study (part-time/full-time), age, gender, ethnicity, class and disability. Part-time students frequently talk about being marginal to the institution. Many did not perceive themselves as students as they only come onto campus one or two evenings a week for 2-4 hours. The atmosphere of a university is also different in the evening to the daytime with many facilities being closed:

> As a part-time student I feel very detached from the hustle and bustle of University life. It's difficult to make friends with full-time students as they have already formed groups.

Married women with children and single parents experience the student world in a different way to single women. Younger adult students who are just over the age of 21 want the full student experience, academic and social, while those with family commitments and part-time students in full-time employment being a student is just one aspect of their identity.

Taking the Decision to Return to Learn

For many adults returning to learn is a daunting experience. Most have been out of the education system for a long time and are, therefore, unfamiliar with the culture of higher education institutions. Universities can also be off-putting in terms of size and formality. Participants gave a range of reasons for choosing to study for a degree. There were clear gender differences in the reasons given for returning to learn. Women wanted to actively change their lives, escape from domestic boredom and do 'something for themselves':

> Freedom from the mundane aspects of family life. Learning more about issues which affect and interest me. To increase my self-confidence and to provide a role-model for my children, especially my daughters (female, 2+2 social studies).

For some, critical incidents in their biography such as divorce or unemployment played a role. The key reasons can be identified as:

- the desire to move out of a boring job
- the need for better qualifications to improve chances on the job market
- to prove to themselves that they are capable of studying and fulfilling an ambition to 'finish' their education
- for the women with families to do something for themselves now that their children are older and ultimately to obtain a more interesting job than previously
- enjoyment of previous education courses
- redundancy and unemployment and the need to re-train.

Several participants left school with few qualifications and at the earliest possible age because of class and gender factors:

> I got no encouragement from my parents. In those days from a working class background the idea was that you worked for a few years and then got married (female, 2+2).

However, many of these did not have a negative experience of school. Several felt that their education was incomplete. Studying for a degree would 'complete' their education:

> The opportunity to take advantage of a system of education, which for some is taken for granted, but which for me at 18 was never an option (male, full-time).

By the end of their degree course they shared a longer-term view of lifelong learning as many wanted to continue with postgraduate studies.

Once adults have taken the decision to opt for a degree course how they are treated at the admissions stage and in the initial first weeks of the course can be critical to whether or not they remain on a course or which institution they choose (McLaren, 1985). One part-time student stated that she chose Warwick simply because it was the only local university where the switchboard put her through to somebody who knew about part-time degrees. Initial support through good practice for adult students at the early stages of their student life is, therefore, vital for building confidence:

> My interviewer made me feel comfortable and confident as if I had every right to come to university even though I was more than 18 years of age.

A few confessed that they very nearly did not make it through the door:

> I really had to make myself come to the mature students' induction day. I can remember sitting in the car park wondering and feeling scared, why the hell have I

> done this? It would have been so easy to have driven off. By the end of that day I was so relieved that I had done it. I knew a few faces. It was chaos at the start of term and if I had walked into that I would not have survived.

On entry participants had high expectations of what a university degree could potentially do for their lives in terms of personal and career development.

Learning the Student Role

Once in the system the student role has to be learnt (Becker et al, 1961). To cope with university life adult students formed subcultural groups. The work of Clarke et al on cultures and subcultural theory is relevant here:

> We understand the word 'culture' to refer to that level at which social groups develop distinct patterns of life, and give expressive form to their social and material life-experience. Culture is the way, the forms, in which groups 'handle' the raw material of their social and material existence...A culture includes the 'maps of meaning' which make things intelligible to its members (Clarke et al, 1976: 10).

Certain parts of the University were marked out as the territory of mature students such as the 2+2 and part-time degrees common room and certain areas of some coffee bars.

Experiencing Learning as an Adult Undergraduate

Lectures and seminars are a dominant aspect of student life:

> Seminars, in particular, constitute one of the main arenas for social interaction between mature students, lecturers and younger students. To draw on Goffman's (1969) dramaturgical approach, seminars provide a stage for mature students to present their self to others (Merrill, 1999).

Being in the minority in seminars can occasionally result in a lack of confidence:

> Sometimes when you are the only mature student you can feel out of step with the rest of the group – even if you know what you are saying is valid but if others don't agree it can create all sorts of self-doubt.

Women with children and part-time students generally arrive on campus just for lectures and seminars, with possibly a visit to the library and then depart to fulfil domestic or employment responsibilities. The situation for married men is different. All were able to spend more time on campus, particularly in the library. In school holidays several women reported having to take their children to lectures and seminars owing to a lack of child care facilities. The library facilities were frequently cited as being problematical. In particular they felt that the short loan system was geared to the lifestyle of younger students living on campus rather than adults in employment and living several miles away. As a result the University has set up a special section for part-time students.

On entering university adults who have been out of education for a long time have to learn an academic discourse. For some this can initially be off-putting. As one Labour Studies part-time student, a trade unionist, explained: 'I wondered what on earth I was doing here because of the language used but I persevered and now I enjoy and understand it'. On reflection many participants stated that they experienced a mismatch between their perceptions about learning at university and what it was like in practice. By internalising the student role they soon learnt to cut down on reading and trying to be perfectionists with assignments. All, particularly women, found it a struggle from

time to time to cope with their roles of student, parent, carer, employee etc but thought that it was worth it:

> Being a student has become a major commitment in my life. Sometimes the task of studying and domestic life, that is, children, is exhausting but it is necessary in order for me to achieve my future goals.

Negotiating the System

Mature students encounter 'problematic situations' at university and at home. At university level this was related to the different attitudes and cultures or as Becher (1989) describes it, 'academic tribes'. Some departments were more welcoming than others towards adult students. Times of seminars and lectures were key areas of concern for women with children. Classes had to be chosen that fitted in with the school day. Occasionally, they had to opt for a course that they were less interested in. For 2+2 students teaching during the first two years at FE colleges is centred around school hours. Similarly part-time students complained that course choice was becoming limited in the evenings. On the other side of the coin, lecturers pointed out that they wanted to spend time with their families in the evenings.

Others suggested that although the University's policy is to encourage the access of mature students the structure did not always accommodate them:

> There is a lot of rhetoric in terms of mature student support. I still feel that more could be done. Positive discrimination in a way. I do not feel like it is asking for an awful lot to try and give certain times which are easier for mothers. If you are going to have mature students and encourage them, I do think that you have to accept that they have more constraints and try and do a few things (full-time sociology student).

In the absence of institutional change some women took action to solve immediate problems by negotiating with individual lecturers and departments to change teaching times. 2+2 students felt that they were perceived and labelled as being different to other full-time undergraduate students:

> I would like to drop the 2+2 label. It sounds simplistic. Younger students never mention it but it is just in your own mind that you are different from the others. It would be nice to integrate with the others. You feel that some lecturers might treat you differently because you have come that route and have not got A levels.

Adult Students from the Lecturer's Perspective

In talking to lecturers the tribes of academia became apparent. Certain departments like Sociology and Law were more favourable towards adults than Biological Sciences. However, nearly all stated that they enjoyed teaching adults, expressing a range of reasons: greater motivation, could refer to use life experiences in the learning process and were more equal in terms of age:

> Often adults are people who could not afford university at an earlier age and I do not believe it should be now or never at 18. They value education greatly and appreciate the experience more as they have experience of things beyond education (Law lecturer)

A few declared that teaching adults had led them to reassess their teaching approaches and move more towards group work. Initially some sectors of the University were sceptical about the 2+2 degree but attitudes have changed once the first cohort graduated with good degree results. This has now made it possible to offer courses in departments, such as Biological Sciences, who would previously not have considered teaching 'non-traditional adult students'. As one Sociology lecturer pointed out:

Mature students do just as well, if not better statistically, than non-mature students and some of our best results, our outstanding students, have been mature students. I think that the general view of the Department is that mature students do just as well and that mature students make the life of the Department healthier in some sense. In that way is has made the whole experience of teaching more rewarding.

Summary

Despite the struggles faced by mature students, particularly women, all participants in this study enjoyed learning. The benefits were both individual and collective: increased self-confidence and development. Many commented that as a result of studying they looked at the world in a more critical way:

> Knowledge is wonderful. I'm questioning things. Why did I get to 40 before I went to university? I've learnt so much. Whatever happens no one can take the two years away. It's been like gold. I've really enjoyed it.
>
> I have enjoyed learning new things – it broadens your mind. I have become more flexible. It's been a very valuable experience. It's moulding me as a human being for the better. It's given me a lot more confidence.

Most felt that they were changed people and could not return to the person they were before undertaking the degree course. Other studies highlight these outcomes of adult learning (Edwards, 1993 and Pascall and Cox, 1993).

The presence of adults in universities is a learning process not only for adults but also for younger students, lecturers and the institution itself. Adults enrich the life of a university yet, on the whole, institutions have done little to accommodate their learning needs. Despite the advocacy and rhetoric for lifelong learning universities remain still largely places for younger students. Adults have to learn to cope and fit in. Changing institutions, however, is not straightforward. Certain tribes of academia (Becher, 1989) continue to defend the need for elitism in universities. Such attitudes are not easy to change. However, some institutions in the UK (mostly the new universities) are attempting changes to introduce a more 'adult university' for their local communities. In opening doors to adults universities need to recognise the heterogeneity of adult students and their different learning needs by mode of study and age.

Nationally the rhetoric on lifelong learning needs to be translated into practice. In the UK this means resolving the contradiction of promoting lifelong learning while at the same time imposing financial constraints on adults wanting to study. Above all institutionally, 'adultification' of universities necessitates a re-assessment of the purpose and role of universities in modern society:

> We do not conclude that universities alone can transform society, overcoming social exclusion and inequality. They do, however, have a new and a continuing role to play in terms of access and social inclusion. Acts of purpose and will as well as shifts of perception are needed for this to occur. This road leads to a reaffirmed, strong and confident idea and role of the adult university of the twenty-first century. Other paths may seem tempting; but they lead to degradation and diminution of distinctiveness and pride for all but a few universities in the mass systems which the third millennium is to inherit (Bourgeois, Duke, Guyot and Merrill, 1999: 177).

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Higher Education and Lifelong Learning: The Experience of Adults at College

Dr. Ted Fleming and Dr. Mark Murphy
National University of Ireland Maynooth

Introduction
Several reports have highlighted and explored the policy and practical aspects of access to higher education for mature students in Ireland (Morris, 1997; Martin and O'Neill, 1997; Inglis & Murphy, 1998). The Report of the Steering Committee on the Future of Higher Education proposed that mature students as a proportion of full-time entrants should increase to 20 percent of total entrants by the year 2015 (1995, p. 139). Both the Government's Green Paper (1992) and White Paper (1995) on education emphasised the importance of achieving greater equality in education and viewed lifelong learning within higher education as a stimulus to achieving this equality. Partnership 2000 (1996, p. 22) promised;

> a strategy to enable non-standard applicants, particularly disadvantaged and mature students, to participate in third level education, in particular by encouraging third level institutions to develop initiatives similar to NCIR.

The Universities Act (1997) defined one objective of the university as: "to facilitate lifelong learning through the provision of adult and continuing education." More recently, the Government's Green Paper on Adult Education (1998) proposed that there be quotas for adults in disciplines with low adult intake and that students from lower socio-economic groups be better represented. This interest is welcome, because until recently there were only isolated examples of government interest (Commission on Higher Education, 1984; Committee on Adult Education, 1973) or research on the subject (Cochrane, 1991; Morrissey, 1990). In these reports and legislation there is a concern for equality and disadvantage. The Steering Committee's report summarised this link;

Mature students from disadvantaged backgrounds deserve to be given access to higher education both because of the disadvantages which they experienced as school leavers, and because of their on-going relative disadvantage vis-à-vis other adults (1995, p. 139).

Clancy (1995) also makes a connection between "socio-economic and age disparities" in higher education. He echoes many of the recommendations of other reports when he states that second-chance education;

> must not be seen as a luxury which we can attend to when the demographic pressure has passed at the end of this decade. Social justice and economic considerations dictate that it be seen as a current priority (1995, p. 115).

So the rhetoric, at least is in place.

The question that faces the government, higher education institutions, adult education advocacy organisations and mature students themselves, is the following: How can institutions of learning increase their access so that more mature students can avail of Irish higher education? We also need to address how the economic development in the country can be supported and enhanced by the university? We argue in this paper that the debate should move away from a focus on access and instead discuss issues of accessibility to the institutionalised knowledge and power of the university. In this way we wish to connect the debates surrounding access and mature student provision to the issue of institutional power, knowledge and privilege.

We know that we do not have many mature students in our colleges and universities. Five percent of students in higher education are mature students. Other countries have up to 30 percent. There is a

'generational inequality' (Clancy, 1995) and a social class bias towards middle-class students (Lynch, 1997). There is a particular urgency about bringing adults from other backgrounds, from other educational and life experiences, other social classes and other age groups into higher education (Inglis & Murphy, 1999, p. 6).

Rather than see this a bleak situation I would like to present the task ahead as an exciting opportunity and challenge. In this paper I would like to get behind the statistics and the rhetoric and look at some recent research done on what it is like to be a mature student at college. There have been a number of such studies. Among them are *No Room for Adults?* (Inglis & Murphy, 1999); the Aontas report *Everything to Gain* (Healy, 1998) and *College Knowledge* (Fleming & Murphy, 1998).

The voice of students is important. They are the customers; clients and indeed tax payers of the system. Adult or mature students have a good deal to say about getting into the system and their experience there.

A number of reports make a distinction between *access* and *accessibility*. I would like to stay with that division as way of organising what I want to say. *Access* is about routes into third level; access courses; admission policies and procedures; recognition of prior learning, etc. *Accessibility* is about what happens when students come to college. It refers to curriculum and teaching methods; assessments; students supports and other facilities.

Access

To get into college is very difficult. Going to college, for mature students, is the fulfilment of a dream, very often a lifetime ambition. As you know students gain access by having a Leaving Certificate or on the basis of their age. There are no entry requirements for this latter group, no publicly agreed criteria, no publicly agreed, transparent, clear requirements. Neither those who are accepted nor those not accepted actually know how the decision was made to accept or reject them. Though some welcome developments have taken place the entry requirements as far as students are concerned are in fact a secret.

Access courses are available. Return to Learning, VTOS, and the provision of NCI are the most frequently travelled routes. Students rate these very highly. They make the difference between success and failure for most. They are however an Irish solution to an Irish problem because thought they aim to prepare students for third level studies they do not grant any right of access. If ordinary second level students "get the points" they get the place! Adults from non-traditional backgrounds have no sense of what exactly they need to get! Doing the Leaving Certificate is not the most attractive prospect and not the most suitable either.

The absence of Adult Guidance and Counselling for prospective mature students is a serious handicap. It must be available to adults too. Students at secondary school have this service available. It is equally an essential service for adults.

Where do our students come from? Taking at look, for instance, at the Third Level Allowance (or Back to Education Allowance – a funded support mechanism operated through the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs) those who take advantage of these schemes for returning to university and college come from counties which already have Institutes of Technology and Universities. Roscommon, Laois, Cavan, Leitrim, Longford, Monaghan, Offaly, Kilkenny, Meath, Wexford and Clare all had insignificant numbers on TLA. Dublin (45%), Leinster (24%) and Munster (20%) together account for 89% of those on TLA at third level. Connaught/Ulster accounts for a mere 12% (Healy, 1998).

Accessibility

Accessibility has to do with what happens at college. What is the experience of third level? Do mature students do well? The reaction from all research is that mature students are overwhelmingly positive about college and university, the subjects they have chosen and the teaching. Over 90% satisfaction rating. On the down side there is equal agreement that libraries, crèche, counselling facilities, study skills and feedback on assignments and examination performance is not satisfactory. In a new era of openness and accountability the service expected by students in these areas is not provided. The success of the sector in attracting non-traditional students and working with them effectively will depend on how the system deals with these areas. Quality of the product, customer satisfaction, and accountability are not just add ons for these new groups but essential requirements.

The university is accessible to women and men in quite different ways. Women arrived as a network of relationships and what we called *external commitments* which were difficult to let down. We sometimes were told by women of driving long distances in the middle of the day to collect children, reschedule a baby-sitter or keep in touch with a sick child. Sick children at exam time put the entire project at risk. Many spoke of feelings of guilt at these stresses and pulls. Men on the other hand arrived disconnected, unfettered and guilt free.

While looking at relationships we also discovered that going to university could damage relationships. For some, going to college put an unbearable strain on their relationships. The jolt in the marriage caused by one partner reinventing themselves produced what we called *developmental envy*.

If examinations are an important indicator of success then it is important to say that all research in Ireland shows (some of it checking with examination office and official results) that adults do at least as well as other students. They have a higher pass rate than traditional students. What we were able to track was how people who applied with a Leaving Certificate from their secondary school days performed relative to those who were on a second chance track. The advantage of having a Leaving Certificate from the first chance stayed with mature students up to their final examination. This raises challenging and provocative questions for the higher education sector as to how it can help to objectively change this reproduction of inequality.

In our study at Maynooth, all the mature students who failed all their subjects in First Arts were on TLA/ social welfare. All the mature students who got full honours in First Arts in 1997 were not on social welfare.

In the survey, a modest 13% indicated they were working while at college. But from interviews and focus groups, we concluded that only a minority of mature students do not work while at college. Financial concerns are a significant factor in their experience.

There are then many barriers to mature students shining at college at university. In the research undertaken at both Maynooth and UCD it is clear that that, although these issues were important and presented difficulties for students, it was the learning process itself that presented students with the most difficult barrier to achieving a degree. What we found intriguing was how mature students attempted to meet both their own learning needs and the requirements or needs of the college. Susan Weil, in previous work on mature students (1986; 1988), refers to the students learning needs as their "learner identity" and refers to the needs of the college as the "learning context." She found dissonance between the two identities.

We take this idea further. We argue that what exists between the individual mature student, with their experiential knowledge, and the college, with its highly structured, abstract theoretical knowledge, is a latent conflict that manifests itself in various ways. In particular the conflict arises in the processes of essay writing and examinations. These are the two areas which caused major anxiety for students and created dissonance for their learner identity.

Essay writing: Essay writing can cause significant problems for mature students, particularly for those who have had no previous experience of higher education. Their only real experience of writing was at school. Many can, at best, just about remember the kind of rules that applied then. The university has a different set of rules when it comes to the structure and content of essays. Much of the anxiety mature students experienced was caused by not knowing what was expected of them. Those who have worked in the academic field for a longer time know the traditional academic structure of an essay and the content with an emphasis on description and analysis. Liam, a mature student, was made aware of what was required of him when he handed in his first essay;

> my history tutor in first year, she was excellent, and when she handed my essay back, and when I read it, I couldn't believe I had written it, it was like a sixteen-year-olds. I had a bit of a clash with what I felt I should write. I think it was a lack of confidence in my ability to write. I kind of stopped myself writing....It was basically a narrative with no references, no quotations. I had given my own interpretation...I suppose that had to do with my own view of education being participatory.

"A nightmare" is how Julie described the experience of her first essay. In the following quote, she provides a stark portrayal of the kinds of problems mature students face when their understanding of what is expected of them does not coincide with that of their lecturers and tutors. She did not do as well as she hoped in her first essay;

> I was at a talk and there was a woman talking, and she said she cried over an essay, and I laughed and thought, cry over an essay? I could never make it to the bridge, tears, God, and I thought "cop yourself on" and I was terrified someone would see me....and there were roadworkers, and seriously I nearly died. Got to a phone anyway...and I said get (sister's names) to ring me. Nobody rang me until it was ten o'clock at night and I was going round in floods of tears getting the dinner....Half ten at night I was still crying, my younger sister rang, and I answered the phone and told her I hadn't stopped crying since half eleven that morning, and she went, what? And I said I'm never going back there again. The amount of work I put in to the essay, and she (the lecturer) just said to me, you just passed it, and it was like putting a knife in my back, and she went, oh for god's sake, and she turned around and said, that's the thing about mature students. And I went what do you mean? And she went, you take everything to heart...it was a major shock just passing it, 'cause I had done a lot of work...I went up to the lecturer and said to her, I can't do this (the essay), and she said just go home and write from the heart, so I went home and wrote this flowery essay...

When Julie and Liam both wrote their essays in a flowery and personalised way they had not yet learned that what was required was a more de-personalised content and style. Achieving this brought better essay marks. Mary also had trouble with the essays, but she did much better, precisely because she de-personalised the essay-writing process. As she put it, the first essay;

> nearly killed me, I got 68 but it nearly killed me doing it cause I never did an essay, it was a different thing. I mean I don't know about analysing, from all I knew, even on the diploma course, that was just facts, facts, facts, it took a lot, I had to twist my whole mind around, but I did very well in it.

This "twisting the mind around" to suit the wishes of the academic faculty is a major factor influencing their success or failure. This intellectual game-playing was also a factor when it came to the techniques necessary for effective studying.

Study-skills: Students must learn how to study and quickly develop learning skills if they are to succeed. Tom, when asked why he felt people failed at college, had this to say;

> I think they failed to grasp...they missed what it was, it's a very subtle thing, I know a few

people who failed, who you know were just off centre, they weren't grasping, they were working very hard, but they weren't working at what they should have been, but they weren't concentrating...they should have been doing half an hour instead of two hours, the same people tend to grasp the wrong idea, the lecturer is saying something, and he's saying it in black and white, I want you to do the following, and he'd say it that slow, and they don't pick it up, and I think it's concentration.

What is this "very subtle thing" that Tom is talking about? John provided the following explanation;

> the one insight that I had was that you can't do everything, and there's certain areas that you zone in on, there are certain areas that are more important...it was something that one of the lecturers said. Someone said, don't read whole books, read chapters.

Jim also learnt in his first year at college that "there was no need to take down everything the lecturer says". Irene agreed, adding that what you take down during lectures is fundamental to success. She got 75% in her first essay by "making information her own". She got to this stage;

> first of all, by a desire to get through first year. I knew that I had to do more than just give back the facts if I was going to get good grades, so, also being interested in what I was doing, and wanting to go beyond what I was given...(learnt this) mostly from what the lecturers were saying. To get the good marks you have got to give a critique. I just knew that it would be enough to get an honour, but not a first class honour.

In many ways, what these mature students are doing here is learning the "tricks of the trade", learning what we can call "**college knowledge**". The ability of students to learn this knowledge is a determining factor in the success of mature students. Trish, in her twenties, provided a good example of this, when she explained the difference between her and older mature students;

> we were asked to study a particular diagram in class, and learn it off, and this older friend of mine was saying, that arrow shouldn't be there, and I was saying, it's there so just learn it that way, and she was going, but why is it there and I said, I don't know and don't care, just learn it so you can regurgitate it in the exams and get marks for it....She wanted to know the mechanisms and the nitty gritty of it, which would need a bit more knowledge than anyone would have in second year....It wasn't necessary to know the nitty gritty in second year, and by asking why, she was actually dragging herself deeper into the mire.

So Trish felt that she could "run with the hare and dash with the hounds". It is very clear that, for Trish, the dissonance between her own learner identity and the college identity was diminished. It was a very conscious process for her. The only way she could reduce the dissonance and get through college was to give the college what they wanted - **college knowledge**. She put it most clearly when she named two kinds of learning;

> Yeah, one is the monkey business and the other is the research....In Departments, each person is looking for something different and you can do the monkey business for one lecturer and the research for another....It's a question of finding the dynamic equilibrium between the two of them...it's about passing your exams as a means to an end....I knew what was necessary to pass this time.

In contrast, Paul did not learn some of these tricks of the trade and did not learn how to play the game properly. He, as a result, had to repeat first year because of the way he approached the writing of his exam questions. As he explains;

> the head of [names Department] couldn't understand why I failed, and they were really worried. They thought they had got the marks wrong or something. They said I had attended the lectures. I got these great results in my essays, and then they looked at my exam papers and

> they found that I was averaging a page and a half per answer, and it's just not on, you know...I learnt to give lot longer answers basically (laughs). Skill in the economy of space.

It is the learning of skills such as the one Paul described that is more than likely the major academic experience of mature students at college. This process of skills learning, however, is really only a manifestation of the underlying latent conflict between these mature learners and the learned of the college. The process through which mature students go in attaining these skills is one of constant compromise with the demands of the college, of a giving in to an authority which will not accept their experiential knowledge. It is important to point out in this instance that the college never compromises. The students themselves are always on the losing end, and the process of skills learning, of playing the game, is the only realistic way students have of losing less.

Discussion and Conclusion

We found that when it came to exam results and generally doing well at university, it was the mature students' ability to understand the academic culture and its tricks of the trade, i.e. 'college knowledge,' that played a key role in their success. Those students, who did not grasp the essence of college knowledge, did not fare as well. We were able to confirm from our data that, in so far as this is a conflict, the university wins.

There are two dimensions to this concept of **college knowledge**. The first refers to these 'tricks of the trade' and the other dimension is the abstract, theoretical knowledge of the university/college. These two aspects are connected in that the college uses examinations and assignments as instruments in the furthering of its college knowledge.

Zygmunt Bauman (1990, p. 8), Myles Horton and Paulo Freire (Horton & Freire, 1990) refer to and discuss the existence of these different kinds of knowledge. Bauman (1990, p. 8) eloquently argues that sociology is a way of thinking about the human world that is in contrast to common sense thinking. The sociologist is more interested in the general than the particular; in accumulating and testing evidence rather than guessing and relying on individual beliefs, etc. If we replace sociological knowledge and common sense knowledge (Bauman's categories) with college knowledge and experiential knowledge respectively, then our argument is close to Bauman.

Unfortunately, Bauman does not ask the adult education question: how to help a student move from a common sense to a sociological understanding? How can someone embedded and even submerged in common sense or experience based knowledge be brought to explore a different kind of knowledge that is more critical; more interested in generality than anecdote; in logic, evidence and testing rather than guessing and individual beliefs? How can the student be helped to move to a more abstract, theoretical, contextualising, investigation of reality?

This is discussed by Horton and Freire (1990, p. 150-151) and both tell similar stories. Freire's version is about;

> ...a travelling salesman....He got lost and didn't know which way to go. He found a little boy beside the road, and he said, 'Hey there son, do you know the way to Knoxville? The boy said, 'No, sir.' And he said, 'Do you know the way to Gatlinburg?' 'No, sir.'...And he said, 'Boy, you don't know much, do you?' 'No, sir, but I ain't lost!'

The task of the university is not so much to transfer knowledge but to help students 'get some distance from their own experience in order to understand the reasons why they are having this kind of experience' (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 156). Students arrive at university and 'bring with them their knowledge at the level of common sense, and they have the right to go beyond this level of knowledge' (Horton & Freire, 1990, p.157). Both adult educators agree that teacher and student must come together critically and dialectically and 'make this walk with people' (p. 158). They are pointing to a different relationship between student and teacher and a different way of constructing knowledge.

Adults as learners thus pose interesting and significant questions as to what constitutes a university and its knowledge. This may challenge the university to redefine access and accessibility not just as administrative issues but as core issues dealing with the identity of the university and its understanding of knowledge, learning, teaching, curriculum and teacher/student relationships. In involves a reconstruction of the very understanding of knowledge and learning. The university needs to become 'adult educated.' Then there is the real possibility of discovering new frameworks, paradigms and worldviews. The university might then become a location for transformative rather than formative learning (Mezirow, 1996). All may yet be redefined by adult education and mature students!

The policy proposals emerging from this research highlight the need for the higher education sector to engage in the redistribution of power, equality and accessibility in its own systems, philosophy and practices. The proposal is the transformation of the university.

That to us is the real goal of research in the education of adults.

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Implications of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Bill 1999

Dick Langford, Chairperson, TEASTAS

I intend at the outset to make a few general observations on lifelong learning with particular reference to higher education. These will draw on some relevant aspects of the Green Paper "Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning". I will then describe some aspects of the recently published Qualifications (Education and Training) Bill which is currently being processed in the Houses of the Oireachtas and drawing attention to some of the lifelong learning implications of this proposed legislation for our institutions of higher education.

Lifelong learning is not a novel concept; in fact the "education permanent" thinking prevalent in France in the late 1960s was widely discussed here in Ireland in the preparation of the Murphy Report on Adult Education which was published in 1973. However, as a reality in our lives with implications for many traditional approaches in our education provision it is a fairly recent phenomenon.

1996 was the European Year of Lifelong Learning (EYLL) which aimed to raise general awareness of its importance. It also coincided with Ireland's EU Presidency and the seminal work of John Coolahan, aided by Tom Collins, his colleague in Maynooth, in the National EYLL Conference in June of that year which is reflected also in Ireland's Presidency input on the same topic is highly commendable reading. Their further development of many aspects of this topic is manifested in a significant way in the Green Paper on Adult Education.

A fundamental part of their thesis is that adult education, no matter how widely defined, and lifelong learning are not synonyms. A true lifelong learning approach has profound implications for all aspects of education, including initial education, from pre-school and primary through higher education. The inculcation and development of key skills, including enhancement of the capacity to learn, assume very great importance in the preparation of individuals for ongoing participation in learning opportunities throughout life. The phrase "lifelong learning" itself is noteworthy for its reference to learning rather than teaching or schooling presupposing a future emphasis for education providers in facilitating and supporting learners in meeting these needs. Adult and continuing education can no longer be viewed as an eccentric stand-alone activity but must be a key element in a mainstream education continuum.

I offer congratulations to the organisers of the conference for taking the opportunity to highlight the importance for our higher education institutions of ensuring that their overall provision is viewed in a lifelong learning setting. Despite many laudable individual initiatives within the sector, it appears that to date adult education provision has largely been consigned to a separate existence – often being seen as a desirable community service – and for understandable reasons has not impacted significantly on the core teaching role of the higher education institutions.

The demographic context in which Ireland must face the challenge of a lifelong learning society is particularly interesting. It is quite unlike that of most of our European neighbours and of most other developed countries.

Until 1981 our annual birth rates were for many years within the range of 68000-75000. Pressures on education provision were compounded by increased retention rates in post-compulsory schooling. Taken together these meant that initial education provision at secondary and higher levels was

prioritised. Ireland can point to huge successes in this regard in the last 30 years. Despite a bulging dependent population and a GDP per head which was relatively low in international terms facilities were improved, teacher supply and quality was maintained, and rates of retention at secondary level and of transfer to post-secondary higher and further education and training have been subject to continuing significant increases. It is arguable that our decision in the 1960s to opt for a unified secondary schooling – paralleling USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand and dissimilar to many of our EU neighbours – and the courageous increases in education investment, for which there was wide societal consensus, has been one of the principal, crucial variables in our recent economic achievements.

While we can be proud of our successes in the increased provision over many years of necessary initial opportunities at secondary and higher education, these have undoubtedly been countered by our relative neglect of second chance and continuing education. Ireland's unsatisfactory performance in this area is illustrated by some statistics gleaned from the Adult Education Green Paper.

TABLE 1

ADULT PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION (1995-1996

	United Kingdom	**Ireland**
% of intake over 23 in full-time mode	33	45
% of enrolment in part-time mode	38	19

There are higher rates of participation in post-Leaving Certificate courses in the further education sector with more than 25% of students being over 21 years of age on enrolment.

In recent years annual birth rates have reduced, falling from a 1980/81 high of 75000 to close to 45000 in the mid-1990s. While these rates may have again begun to rise – but with no expectation that the levels of the early 1980s will be reached – and the population has been supplemented by inward migration, a major demographic dividend is forecast for higher education over the next ten to twenty years. This together with increases in higher and further education places will mean that resources will become available to meet many of the needs which until now have been largely unmet. It will be possible to provide opportunities at a much higher level than heretofore to those whose previous education experience was limited and unsatisfactory and who now wish to have a second chance. We will also be able to pay a lot more attention to the continuing education needs which are increasingly a requirement for successful living and working in the world of today and tomorrow. In this lifelong learning context it is likely that there will be many changes in the nature of future higher education and training provision.

Higher and further education and training institutions will experience the demands of a buyer's market in place of the seller's market in which they have operated for a generation. Learners will not be content to just fit into the available offers; these offers will become increasingly customised to meet the particular needs of individuals and groups of learners – and indeed to take account of specific needs of the workplace. This will require some changes in the existing culture of some providing institutions and of many individuals responsible for delivering their services. Learning will take place in a variety of settings and will not be limited to existing institutional arrangements. Existing and new institutions will compete to provide services to learners in the workplace or in community bases.

Autonomous learners will operate at home supported by the services of institutions. We will see a greater emphasis on atypical learning modes with some movement away from the traditional full-session full-time approach. The provision of learning opportunities at times to suit the convenience of the learner will give rise to further development of modular approaches and to the exploitation of the benefits of new technology in teaching and other learning support services. Accreditation of prior learning will become more commonplace. The facilitation of transfer within and across the various sectors of higher and further education will increase in importance giving rise to the need for a national credit framework.

TABLE 2

SECOND CHANCE
UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATION BY AGE GROUP

	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	25-64
United States	86	49	85	76	85
Germany	90	44	84	72	84
Switzerland	89	84	79	73	82
United Kingdom	86	78	69	57	74
Ireland	61	47	35	27	45

The main aim of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Bill 1999 is to provide a setting which will assist and support this changing future provision. Some considered that the task set for TEASTAS was simply to bring some order to an existing untidy and often confusing range of awards and qualifications bodies and mechanisms. This is to understate the position. While that limited vision is indeed important, the advice of TEASTAS, built upon and expanded in the carefully crafted proposed legislation, was targeted at establishing revised arrangements for the making of awards in a manner which will facilitate learners and other client interests in a lifelong learning context. These proposed arrangements are founded on the following underpinning principles:

- the establishment and maintenance of quality.
- Ensuring recognition of qualifications – at inter-institutional, intra-institutional and transnational levels
- The facilitation of access, progression, transfer and mobility.

This is already a particularly manifest need in the case of adult and continuing education. Its importance will also increase greatly as the proportion of admissions to higher and further education of students not coming directly from the Leaving Certificate increases.

I propose now to outline for you some of the main provisions of the Bill. There is not time to deal comprehensively with all aspects but I would suggest that it is clearly learner-centered and a careful reading even of the definitions section will help to establish this. I would like to acknowledge in particular the assistance of Sean Ó Foghlú of HEA/Department of Education and Science who has allowed me to use parts of a presentation developed by him on the main features of the legislation.

The underpinning principles of the legislation to which I have earlier referred are clearly reflected in the principal objects of the Act which are as follows:

- to establish and develop standards of knowledge, skill or competence
- to promote the quality of further education and training and higher education and training
- to provide a system for co-ordinating and comparing education and training awards
- to promote and maintain procedures for access, transfer and progression

It is proposed to establish three bodies which will have the main responsibility for the implementation of the terms of the legislation. These are:

- The National Qualifications Authority
- Further Education and Training Awards Council
- The Higher Education and Training Awards Council

All three bodies are inter-dependent and their respective roles are clearly specified in the functions assigned to them. The legislation as framed is enabling in nature with an emphasis on establishing where responsibility is to lie for quality assurance and improvement and for the establishment and maintenance of a national framework of qualifications. This is a wise approach as to be overly prescriptive in relation to operational detail would risk setting in stone many things which will require to be viewed in a dynamic and developmental future context. There will be fewer absolutes in the future in defining the how, the when and the where of learning opportunities.

The main objects of the Qualifications Authority are

- to establish and maintain a framework of qualifications based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners
- to establish and promote the maintenance of the standards of further education and training awards and higher education and training awards (other than existing universities)

to promote and facilitate access, transfer and progression

The key-overarching role of the Authority makes it responsible for the establishment and maintenance of the credit framework. It will not make any awards as its role in this regard is regulatory and supervisory; it will be responsible for the oversight and monitoring of the processes of the various awards bodies with a view to ensuring quality and facilitating access, progression, transfer and mobility. This role is illustrated diagrammatically in Diagram 1.

The various bodies referred to in the terms of reference assigned to TEASTAS are contained within the rectangle but it can be noted that the legislation also provides for key linkages to the existing universities and to the general education system and its awards through the mechanism proposed for consultation with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

The objects of the Authority are more fully developed in the functions assigned to the Authority.

- establish the policies and criteria on which the framework of qualifications shall be based

- review the operation of the framework of qualifications

- establish, in consultation with the Further Council and the Higher Council, procedures for the performance by them of their functions and review those procedures

- determine and publish the procedures to be implemented by providers of programmes of education and training for access, transfer and progression

- facilitate and advise universities in implementing these procedures and review this implementation with the HEA

- consult with and advise the Minister

- liase with awarding bodies outside the State to facilitate the mutual recognition of awards

- inform itself of the education, training, skills and qualifications requirements of industry including agriculture, business, trade, the professions and the public service

- give effect to policies established by the Minister

The functions assigned to the two main awarding councils complement those of the Authority and these are summarised as follows:

To establish policies and criteria for:

- the making of further/higher education and training awards

- the validation of programmes of further/higher education and training

To determine standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners:

- before an award may be made by the Council or by a provider to which authority to make awards has been delegated

- who request from the Council recognition of an award made by a body other than the Council

- to make or recognise awards given or to be given to persons who apply for them

- to ensure that providers establish procedures for the assessment of learners which are fair and consistent

- to ensure that procedures for access, transfer and progression are implemented by providers

- to facilitate and assist the Qualifications Authority.

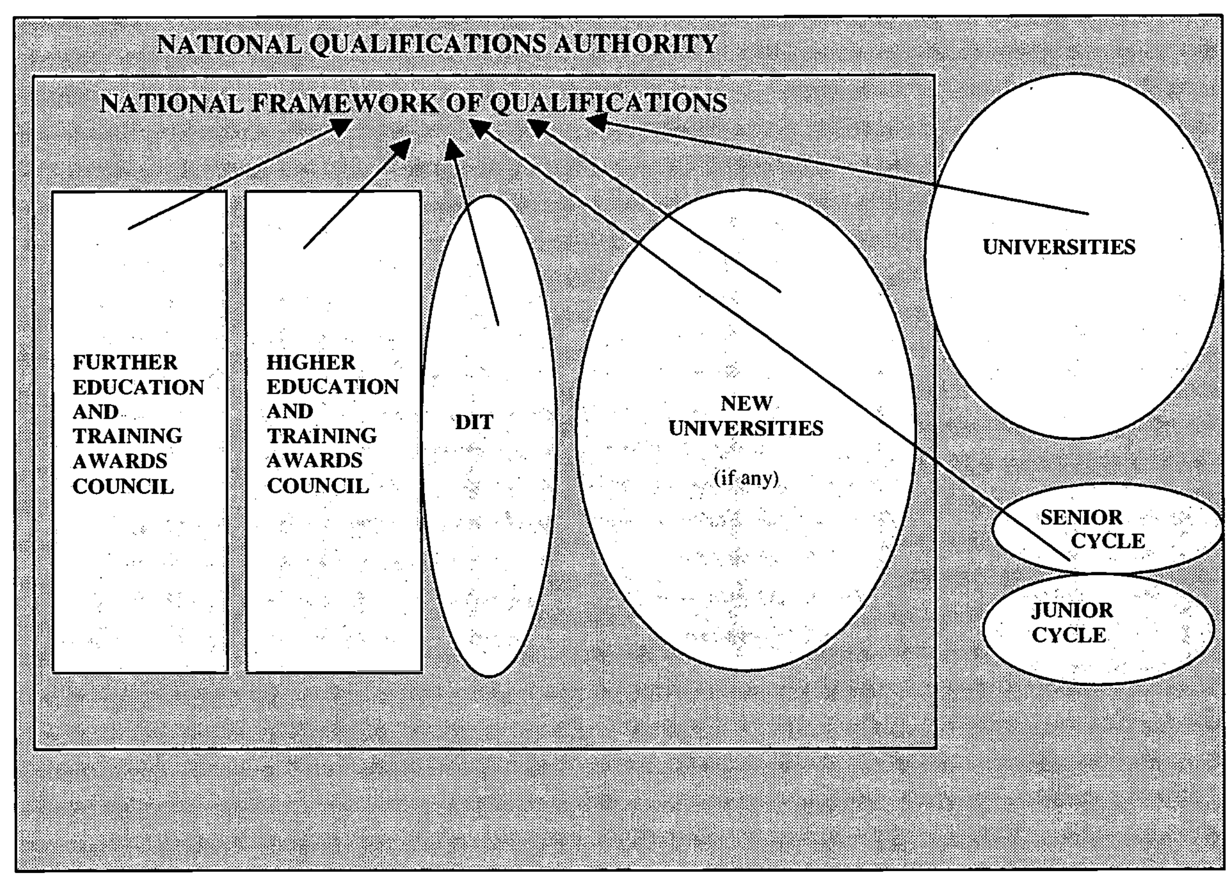
The establishment and development of the two new major Awards Councils will build on the extremely valuable previous work of NCEA, NCVA, FAS, TEAGASC, NTCN, and NRB. It will be especially important in making the transition to these new arrangements to protect the existing market credibility of previous qualifications and awards.

The development of effective quality assurance mechanisms is provided for within the legislation and the main features are

- prime responsibility for provider
- procedures to be agreed with the relevant awarding Council
- regular evaluation, including involvement of learners and international experts
- review and publication

DIAGRAM 1.

ROLE OF NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY



The legislation also allows for the delegation of authority by Awards Councils to certain bodies to make their own awards as follows:

- by the Further Education and Training Awards Council to FAS, CERT and TEAGASC
- by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council to Institutes of Technology

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However, any such delegation is permissible only following a detailed and rigorous process to establish a proven capacity on the part of the bodies. This must be established through a process of self-evaluation followed by a determination by an international review group. An example of this process is the significant work already undertaken by the Interim Review Group chaired by Professor Dervilla Donnelly which has resulted in a recommendation that, on enactment of the legislation, authority to make their own sub-degree awards should be delegated to the Cork and Waterford Institutes of Technology. Decisions to delegate award-making authority are to be subject to regular review and the authority to make awards can be withdrawn if strong internal processes are not maintained by an institution.

The arrangements provided for the inclusion within the scope of the legislation of the qualifications and awards of the Dublin Institute of Technology take account of the particular aspects of that Institute's own legislation in relation to its authority to make its own awards. Its central importance within a vibrant technological sector of higher education is also recognised.

While no new university has yet been established under the terms of Section 9 of the Universities Act of 1997 special arrangements are proposed for the inclusion within the scope of the legislation of any such universities that may be established in the future. This takes particular account of a number of points with regard to the possible future emergence of multi level universities which were raised in the recent Nally Review Group Report on the application of the Dublin Institute of Technology for its establishment as a university under Section 9.

Given the changing nature of future education provision in a lifelong learning society, particularly in the case of higher education, it is important also that the existing universities not be excluded from participation in the proposed national qualifications framework and this too is provided for.

This network of relationships between the different interests is illustrated in Diagram 2.

It may seem a little complicated and at first one might wonder if any proposed tidying up of existing arrangements may have given rise to an even more confusing situation. However a careful examination of it from the perspective of learners and other end-users of the various qualifications and awards will show that all roads lead to a single national qualification framework.

The legislation as drafted has gone considerably further than was envisaged in the terms of reference given to TEASTAS. It also exceeds significantly the wishes of the European Union in the Operational Programme for Human Resources that all vocational and training programmes which are EU supported should have national certification available to them. This is particularly so in the case of the proposed linkages with the universities and NCCA and in the provision being made for the protection of learners. It could be argued that it is more ambitious in its comprehensive approach than is the case in any other EU member state. Its closest parallels are probably in New Zealand and Australia where similar work has been underway for a decade. However, experience from there would seem to indicate that there will be a significant transition period necessary while the new arrangements are bedded down.

I am confident that, given careful implementation, the legislation when enacted will effectively and satisfactorily serve the needs of learners, other end-users of awards, providers of programmes and society at large for many years to come in a dynamic and developing lifelong learning setting. To determine standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners:

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DIAGRAM 2

NETWORK OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN DIFFERENT INTERESTS

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Some Policy Recommendations Emerging From The Working Groups.

The changing role of the higher education sector, particularly in the way in which it engages with adult students and the wider community, raises a number of critical issues for the organisation of the sector. For the purpose of this Conference, participants were asked to focus on five of these issues, specifically their policy implications. These issues concerned:

- Mature Students and Continuing Education;
- Pedagogical Innovations – particularly the use of ICT in Higher Education;
- Accreditation and Certification;
- Course Structures – particularly Modularisation and Semesterisation
- The Role of Higher Education Institutions in Regional Development

Mature Students and Continuing Education

Concern was expressed, in this group, at an apparent lack of clarity with regard to the entitlements of mature students in gaining entry to higher education. A lack of consistency between institutions in their respective entry criteria; a lack of transparency within the institutions in their criteria and a poor quality of feedback from the institutions to mature student applicants were instanced as being particularly problematic.

Access, however, is only one element of the mature students' difficulties in higher education. Other barriers include finance, poor government support, inappropriate pedagogical and assessment methodologies, and over-stretched or inadequate services in areas such as childcare, guidance and counselling.

It was suggested that higher education institutions should publish their policies on mature student entry and that such policies could be published in the form of a charter specifying the entry entitlements and procedures for mature student access. It was generally felt that institutions should be empowered to develop such policies on an individual basis, as a national mechanism could prove excessively rigid and unresponsive to the needs of a highly differentiated applicant population.

Pedagogical Innovations and ICT

The main issue to be addressed here concerned the potential of new Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in expanding the frontiers of higher education: in democratising and customising access and its potential particularly in the area of distance education.

There was general recognition of the enormous potential of ICT in 'deconstructing' the nature of higher education, particularly in its capacity to overcome limitations of space and distance in accessing higher education. Optimism regarding its potential was, however, tempered by some concerns, particularly in:

- the tendency for ICT to replicate the power differentials in conventional education institutions between the 'teachers' and the 'taught';

- the high initial investment costs in the area, threatening the viability of indigenous higher education institutions, especially in third world countries, in an emerging global higher education market;

- the predominance of a white, male, mono-cultural ethos in the I.T. field; and

- the requirements of some learners, possibly second chance learners in particular, for face - to - face support in association with ICT based learning.

Accreditation and Certification

The area of accreditation and certification in education - including higher education – received extensive treatment in the Government's Green Paper - *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning* and is, of course, now the subject of detailed legislation through the Qualifications (Education and Training) Bill 1999 (dealt with in detail elsewhere in this report).

Issues surrounding the area of accreditation and certification in higher education which were of concern to the participants at the Conference included:

- the need for clarity in defining and holding standards against a background of a multiplicity of providers;

- the need for interagency recognition of qualifications within an overall coherent and transparent framework; and

- the need to reassert and retain the value of the learning process within a growing emphasis on learning outcomes.

While welcoming the legislative framework for accreditation and certification, it was felt that the implementation of this common framework elsewhere be carefully monitored so as to ensure its effectiveness around principles elucidated above, and that its establishment and work programme be supported by a proactive public information and awareness campaign.

Course Structures: Modularisation and Semesterisation

While the establishment of a coherent framework for certification and qualifications can introduce much needed flexibility into this area, course structures and provisions for adults in higher education continue to be inflexible and rigid. In particular here, the failure to introduce a comprehensive modular programme across – and in many cases within – higher education institutions means that adults are frequently confronted with an impossible task of balancing and managing domestic, work and educational objectives. While recognising that the traditional, full-time undergraduate student may not have these difficulties, there was a consensus amongst the participants regarding the possibilities which a flexible modular and semester based programme, embracing seamless mechanisms for credit accumulation and transfer between institutions, offered to adult students.

The reluctance of institutional providers to introduce such systems was explored. This was in part attributed to a concern amongst academics at the threatened erosion of research time, which semesterisation - particularly summer schools – might introduce, as well as to the persistence of traditional notions within higher education institutions regarding the nature of knowledge and the role of such institutions. Generally, it was felt that it was unlikely that modularisation / semesterisation would be

driven by academics; such a move would be much more likely to come from central management of the higher education institutions, in the face of some likely resistance from academics.

Regional Development

In recent years, Irish universities and other institutions of higher education have begun to engage with their hinterlands in broad, developmental alliances, separate from the more traditional outreach course provision of these institutions. This activity has included the resourcing of community groups and statutory bodies by the higher education institutions in diverse areas of local planning; training for local development management; technical supports in local and regional development and the evaluation of such processes.

Much of this activity by the third level sector has gone undocumented thus far and has developed in an organic way rather than in any particularly planned or strategic way.

The consensus amongst the participants here was that this is a valuable public service provided by the third level sector; that it had extended the role and the contribution of the sector in the broader community; and that the sector had also benefited from it through enhanced public goodwill and political support.

There was concern, however, that the institutions themselves had not yet succeeded in building this agenda into their strategic missions or structures. Accordingly, much of this service was driven by committed individuals within the third level sector – who were themselves unlikely to reap any particular academic or institutional recognition for this work. In the absence of such recognition, the long-term sustainability of this activity was vulnerable.

Workshop Animateurs and Rapporteurs

Mature Students / Continuing Education:

Animateur: Ms. Anne O'Brien, NUI Maynooth
Rapporteur: Ms. Angela McGinn, NUI Maynooth

Pedagogy / Utilisation of ICT:

Animateur: Mr. Aidan Mulkeen, NUI Maynooth
Rapporteur: Ms. Brid Connolly, NUI Maynooth

Accreditation / Certification:

Animateur: Ms. Anne Murphy, NUI Maynooth
Rapporteur: Mr. Padraig Hogan, NUI Maynooth

Course Structures - Modularisation / Semesterisation:

Animateur: Dr. Thomas Collins, NUI Maynooth
Rapporteur: Dr. Maeve Martin, NUI Maynooth

Higher Education Institutions and Regional Development:

Animateur: Prof. J.A. Walsh, NUI Maynooth
Rapporteur: Ms. Kathleen Quinlan, Enterprise Ireland

Closure

Professor John Coolahan
National University of Ireland Maynooth

The title of my contribution on the Conference Programme is "Closure", but I think it would be more correct to view it as something of an overture or prelude. In a sense, the whole Conference is an opening up of the theme "Higher Education – The Challenge of Lifelong Learning", about which a great deal is likely to be heard in the years ahead. The dawn of a new century usually acts as a stimulus to fresh thought for the future. A century ago, in 1899, university education was also a live social and political issue although the student body for the whole island was only about 3,500 students. The various commissions and proposals of the time eventually led to the Irish Universities Act of 1908, which has stood well to the needs of the outgoing century. Now, as we face the twenty-first century, the context is very different. Following a period of great expansion and diversification we have entered the era of mass higher education. However, the vast majority of participants in our higher education system come from a very young age band and from the better off sector of society. The challenge posed now, arising from a host of developments in contemporary society, is to plan so that the benefits of higher education can be drawn upon by citizens throughout their adult lives within a policy framework of lifelong learning.

The decade of the nineties has been a truly remarkable one in the history of Irish education with an unprecedented amount of analysis, consultation, reportage, policy formulation and legislation. The emphasis in the first half of the decade was on the formal first, second and third level systems, as well as on special education. Childcare and early childhood education were focused on for the first time in a serious way in subsequent years. The first green paper on adult education was published in 1998. Thus, the whole spectrum of Irish education policy and provision has come under scrutiny with a view to development and reform. The approach taken has involved comprehensive consultation with all stakeholders. It has been a very timely process and gradually the various elements came to be seen within an embracive concept of lifelong learning.

While lifelong learning is not an altogether new concept is has emerged in developed countries in recent years with a new impetus as the animating principle for education in the new century. The simultaneous convergence of a range of political, economic, social and demographic factors has fostered a consensus view among politicians, industrialists, trade unionists and educationalists that lifelong learning is the way forward. It is this conjunction of forces which gives confidence that the attractive slogan of lifelong learning will be converted into a reality for coming generations. The designation of 1996 as "The Year of Lifelong Learning", served to focus a great deal of public attention on the theme and to foster many educational initiatives inspired by the concept. Also in 1996, the Education Ministers of the OECD issued a communiqué committing themselves to lifelong learning. The communiqué concluded as follows:

> Ministers call on their partners in the provision of education, training and those involved in the creation of employment to help them to generate a positive and encouraging climate of opinion in which lifelong learning can flourish, and to establish the mechanisms which will make it a reality. They have jointly committed themselves to taking such action, and are confident that as the 21st century begins, the strategy outlined about will usher in a new era of lifelong learning for all.[2]

The OECD published its major study, *Lifelong Learning for All*, early in 1996.

[2] OECD, *Lifelong Learning For All*, (Paris, OECD, 1996, p.14)

The Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, *Learning: the Treasure Within*, was also published in 1996. It too endorsed lifelong learning as the approach to be taken for the future. It stated:

> It is this educational continuum, coextensive with life, and widened to take in the whole of society, that the Commission has chosen to refer to in this report as 'learning throughout life'. A key to the twenty-first century, learning throughout life will be essential for adapting to the evolving requirements of the labour market and for better mastery of the changing time-frames and rhythms of individual existence.[3]

During the Irish Presidency of the European Union in 1996, the Ministers for Education adopted the policy document, "A Strategy for Lifelong Learning", an approach which has been sustained since then.

It is against this national and international background that Ireland shapes its policy on the achievement of lifelong learning in alignment with its distinctive ethos, culture and tradition. We are in the early stages of this process which is not a short-term one but rather the work of several decades. It is important that we take a strategic view and have a clear vision of the way we wish to go. Moving towards the goal of lifelong learning involves the cultivation of new understandings, attitudes, orientations and modes of organisation. Several speakers at the Conference referred to uncertainties, and problems which exist, and undoubtedly they do. However, as Michael Fullan would say, "Problems are our friends", and it is important that we be positive towards achieving such a worthwhile goal for all citizens. An attitude of openness to new possibilities, a reaching out towards worthwhile initiatives and an ability to both see visions and dream dreams are required.

> As was remarked in the Proceedings of Ireland's National Conference on lifelong learning, Lifelong learning is not a synonym for adult education, but it embraces adult education as part of a radical concept of education and training for the whole spectrum of human living from the cradle to the grave.[4]

Lifelong learning has implications for all sectors of the education system and requires new approaches, adaptations and linkages from each agency. This will be very much the case from the higher or tertiary education sector, many of whose academics have remained aloof from engagement with the implications for the sector of a lifelong learning policy.

At this Conference speakers presented us with a valuable range of perspectives which amount to a significant contribution to the emerging debate on the challenges which face higher education. Dr. Wagner of the OECD provided us with an insightful overview of the forces at work internationally which propose lifelong learning as the appropriate educational policy response. In a nutshell, he stated,

> Broadly, these reports are suggesting that the most promising directions for higher education are best seen and situated in a broader lifelong perspective and that there is great value in bringing new thinking from this perspective to the organisation, contents, methods and timing for learning at this level.

He identified four themes as exemplars: new relationships between higher education and learners; new ways to think about standards and qualifications; expanded partnerships and links; new approaches to securing and using resources. He informed us of initiatives and practices, under these headings, adopted by a variety of countries which are seeking to move forward the tertiary sectors in these

[3] UNESCO, *Learning: The Treasure Within*, (Paris: UNESCO, 1996, p.100)

[4] John Coolahan (ed.), *Increasing Participation: Proceedings of the National Conference on Lifelong Learning*, (TEASTAS and Maynooth, 1996) p.22

countries in line with concerns of lifelong learning policy. International trends were also referred to by a number of other speakers.

The Chancellor of the National University of Ireland, Dr. Garrett Fitzgerald, drew attention to the early stage we in Ireland were at in the process of expanding higher education beyond the category of school leavers, despite the fact that, in relation to our population we have more third level entry places than most other countries. Referring to demographic trends and educational aspiration, he pointed to uncertainties for the planning process. The demographic decline in school leavers is not likely to lessen the demand for the much sought after university places. He raised many well-targeted questions including how best to ensure that a growth in mature students does not exacerbate the imbalance in the social composition of third-level participants, and how prepared are our institutions to make their teaching methods more "user-friendly" for mature students. Drawing on a range of tables and graphs, Dr. Don Thornhill, Chairman of the Higher Education Authority, demonstrated the important links between level of education and an individual's employment prospects. He highlighted the points that the educational attainments in our adult population are lower than the OECD and EU averages and that mature students comprise a very low proportion of our third-level students. Dr. Thornhill raised a number of policy issues for consideration among which were the sophisticated policy instruments required in the mature student category, alternative application routes to third-level, the way institutions may need to alter their way of doing things and the potential impact of distance education. He pointed out that the time was ripe for much re-appraisal and that the stability of the current educational landscape could not be taken for granted.

Dr. Pat Clancy presented us with a masterly treatment of demographic trends and patterns and problems of participation in third-level education. He stated,

> The coincidence of acute labour market demands, the beginning of a decline in the school leavers cohort and our increased capacity to fund extended educational provision all require us to prioritise the education of adults.

It was clear from his data that generational inequalities in participation are further differentiated by social class inequalities. He concluded that social justice considerations impel us to seek to tackle these inequalities. The social justice argument was reinforced by considerations emerging from his analysis of the changed employment context. He made a particular plea as a policy option for the funding of part-time participation of adults. His tables provided a very valuable data bank.

There was a shift of focus in the papers of Dr. Barbara Merrill and Dr. Ted Fleming. They put emphasis on the findings of research studies of the actual experiences of adult learners within third-level institutions. Barbara dealt with such experiences in the United Kingdom. The human side of the story emerged in the context of the obstacles, attitudes and circumstances experienced by such adult participants. The message was clearly underlined that universities need to change more to accommodate the needs of a new adult student clientele. Ted Fleming highlighted the distinction between *access* to the institution and *accessibility* to the knowledge and conventions within the institution. Again, the nature of student experiences in coping with "college knowledge" emphasises the need for significant change in the way the university relates with such adult learners.

The final plenary paper was given by Mr. Dick Langford, Chairman of Teastas. In his introductory section he emphasised the significant and radical character of the concept of lifelong learning and the general challenges it posed for higher education. Against this background, he explained the purpose of the recent Qualifications (Education and Training) Bill. This purpose is seen to be timely and cognate to the adoption of a lifelong learning policy. He gave us a most informative account of key provisions and implications of the Bill for higher and further education. He also pointed out that the Bill was framed so as to be enabled to operate in a dynamic and developmental way in line with what will be a continually changing future educational scenario. The implementation process would need to be carefully paced to allow for a satisfactory bedding down of new arrangements and linkages.

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The workgroups allowed Conference participants to focus on five key sub-themes relating to the overall Conference theme. The rapporteurs have given us a succinct account of some key conclusions of the workgroups.

Much work lies ahead to ensure that third-level education is re-shaped to the needs of lifelong learning. In this context, I am reminded of points made in the OECD report, *Redefining Tertiary Education*, when it stated:

> Much more system-wide effort will be required in order to re-shape tertiary educational procedures as if they were part of universal lifelong learning.... Administratively, financially, culturally and in its social relations, tertiary education has in the past been somewhat apart and fragmented within itself. This is changing and may be expected to change much further as increased participation stimulates – and requires – greater integration not only of the administratively separate sector but of the various elements that condition continued learning. Such integration is not a matter of prescriptive government, but rather of a mutual recognition by the stakeholders and the institutions that successful learning by students over the life cycle is a collaborative affair.[5]

I am confident that a conference such as this has helped us to see the way forward for such a process.

The Conference organisers wish to thank most sincerely all who contributed to the success of the Conference. They are deeply indebted to the plenary speakers, the chairpersons and rapporteurs, staff of the Education and Adult Education Departments and to the Conference Secretary. We thank Vice-President Mulligan for opening the Conference and contextualising the theme so well. The fact that participants attended from 33 organisations indicated a lively interest in the theme and underlined the value of inter-institutional dialogue. The proceedings of the Conference will be published and, hopefully, help to enrich the preparation of the White Paper in the autumn. We have learned a great deal from the Conference which should help us to face and shape the exciting future ahead.

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[5] OECD, *Redefining Tertiary Education*, (Paris: OECD, 1998) p.106

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Signature: Ted Fleming	Printed Name/Position/Title: Dr. Ted Fleming lecturer	
Organization/Address: Centre for Adult education National University of Ireland Maynooth, Co. Kildare Ireland	Telephone: +353 1 708 3631	Fax: +353 1 708 4687
	E-mail Address: Ted.Fleming@may.ie	Date: 22/9/99

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