

# Supporting Adult Learners from Outside Institutional Walls: The Experience so far of the Downtown Centre

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## **Introduction**

This article describes the experience of the Downtown Centre in establishing an accessible and recognisable centre in Limerick city, which represents regional higher education partners, and which provides services and programmes to support adult learners in progressing to higher education. The article reflects on the achievements of the Centre during its first year of operation and on the challenges and opportunities which have been highlighted for the future. It raises questions about how a diverse and dispersed adult learner population can, and should, best be supported and how far higher education should go in reaching out to this growing cohort of learners.

The Downtown Centre opened its doors to the adult learner population of Limerick and surrounding regions in September 2007. It is less than one year old. However, it has already reached out to over 160 learners, or future learners, during its first eight months of operation. The Centre functions as an access, guidance, and support centre for adults who are seeking to progress to higher education, particularly those who have not had an opportunity to do so in the past. It is a partnership initiative of four higher education institutions in the mid-west region: the University of Limerick, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick Institute of Technology and the Institute of Technology Tralee, and is funded under the Higher Education Authority's Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF). The SIF was established to support innovation in higher education institutions and one of its key objectives is to, "support access, retention and progression both at individual institutional level and through inter-institutional, sectoral and inter-sectoral collaboration" (HEA, 2006, Section 3.1).

While it has received funding for three years, the Centre's staff consider it a vital part of their work to review, evaluate and reflect upon the progress of the Centre, from a very early stage of its development. Writing this article presents us with the ideal opportunity to do just that – to sit back and reflect in a critical manner on the successes and challenges we have faced to date and on how, for the future, we can best support both the adult learner population of the mid-West region and our institutional colleagues in increasing access to higher education.

### **Background to the Downtown Centre**

One of the reasons for the establishment of the Downtown Centre in the heart of Limerick City was to bring higher education closer to a wider diversity of people within the region, by providing a more accessible conduit to higher education and by creating a more 'visible' presence amongst the local population for higher education in general.

The remit of the Downtown Centre is to provide a range of services which will encourage and support adult learners in accessing higher education programmes. One of its core services is an educational guidance service for adults (aged over 18) which offers clients an opportunity to identify and discuss their higher education aspirations and to choose appropriate pathways to achieve their goals. The Downtown Centre also offers a full-time access programme, which is fully accredited within the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland Framework, and which offers transparent progression options to partner institutions. It is anticipated that by offering such services the Downtown Centre will contribute to the development of a focused, integrated and regional response mechanism to access third level education and also to increase awareness of access and learning opportunities amongst adult learners. The strategic plans of each of the Downtown Centre's partner institutions endorse the need to increase enrolments of students who have traditionally been under-represented in higher education. The Downtown Centre's mission seeks to assist each of its partners in achieving these goals as indicated by its mission statement:

The Downtown Centre will work to improve access to higher education in the mid-west region by providing services and programmes which will create new pathways into undergraduate programmes for mature and other non-traditional learners. Its focus is on empowering individuals to make informed choices with respect to higher education. It aims to be a visible, dynamic and welcoming presence for potential learners in the heart of Limerick City.

The general focus of many access initiatives is to bring learners ‘up to speed’ with the skills and knowledge required to perform effectively on a higher education programme and also to develop the confidence to progress into what are often very traditional academic environments. Whilst some changes have begun to be made in higher education to accommodate the diverse learning styles, needs and experiences of an adult learner population, more are outstanding. To illustrate, there is a hugely important role for access initiatives to play in continuing to raise awareness of this increasing diversity in the student body, and to advocate the need for higher education to adapt its methodologies, structures, and supports in order to embrace a valuable and burgeoning adult learner population.

### **Context for the development of the Downtown Centre**

The development of the Downtown Centre adheres to both national and EU policy objectives. The Bologna Process aims to establish a European Higher Education Area by 2010 and emphasises the importance of developing life-long learning strategies as part of this process, while the EU has highlighted the need to “guarantee universal and continuing access to learning...for sustained participation in the knowledge society” (European Commission, 2000, p4). At national level the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education (National Access Office) is working to achieve equity of access in the higher education system by developing a national framework of policies and initiatives, creating new routes of access and progression to higher education and has set out key targets in relation to access to higher education for non-traditional learners (National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2007). The Downtown Centre’s aim is to work in collaboration with relevant departments in each of its partner institutions to assist the institutions to meet their targets in relation to increasing numbers of under-represented learner groups, and by providing services and programmes which will support and encourage such learners to progress to higher education.

‘Guidance’ covers the spectrum of educational, vocational, personal and social support and lifelong guidance is a priority area for development at European level. The OECD Review of Career Guidance Policies (2002) highlighted the integral role which guidance plays in national education and labour portfolios, while the EU Commission’s Report on Lifelong Guidance (2005, p.41) endorses the right of individuals:

of any age and at any point in their lives to avail (lifelong) of guidance to identify their capacities, competencies and interests, to make meaningful educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life path in learning, work and other settings in which these capacities and competence are learned and/or used (life wide).

At national level, the National Guidance Forum (2007, p.33) highlighted the need recently to:

address the present gap in access to services by employed adults, and more particularly by adults not in the labour force... There was widespread agreement that the focus of guidance for adults needs to be widened, to include adults who are employed as well as unemployed, adults with financial difficulties and those who are earning a good income, students who are engaged in higher education and adults who have retired.

There appears to be a need, therefore, for more access to professional guidance services for adults, particularly in relation to learning opportunities. The Downtown Centre's Guidance Service is a specialised service in that its focus is specifically in relation to educational guidance for entry to higher education programmes and it offers referral to other guidance services as appropriate.

### **The Downtown Centre in practice**

The Downtown Centre is managed and run by three full-time staff members – a project manager, an educational guidance co-ordinator and an administrator. For the time being, the Centre is located on the second floor of the Limerick Diocesan Pastoral Centre, within the courtyard of St Michael's Church, in close proximity to the main shopping thoroughfare in Limerick city. It is not necessarily highly visible, with certain restrictions being placed on signposting to the Centre and neither is it a purpose built 'mini-campus' with all the supports and facilities one might associate with a higher education institution. However, the vision for the future, when it has become more established on the education landscape of the city, is to locate the Centre more centrally and visibly within the city, with space and support for a greater range of facilities for clients and students. A very positive aspect of its current location is that it has use of fully accessible classrooms within the Pastoral Centre for all classes and workshops which it offers.

The desire to be in a purpose-built location, however, is not the primary focus of the Downtown Centre during its early years of operation. What is more important is to reach out to potential learners and to let them know that there is an accessible and welcoming centre available in the city which represents local higher education institutions and which will do its utmost to support learners in accessing higher education. This it hopes to achieve through the provision of a professional guidance service and by running programmes and workshops aimed at increasing participants' awareness of educational opportunities and developing confidence in pursuing their individual learning paths. The Downtown Centre staff have been liaising closely with a wide range of community groups and other education providers in the city, and further afield. It has received tremendous support for its work so far. Colleagues in its partner institutions, both from academic and administrative departments, have also been hugely supportive of the initiative. The first year of the Downtown Centre has focused on offering three core services: a Certificate in General Studies; an Educational Guidance Service; and a series of Return to Learning workshops. Each of these three core services will be described briefly below.

#### *Certificate in General Studies*

The Downtown Centre's Certificate in General Studies, accredited by FETAC at Level 5, is a full-time access programme and is jointly delivered by the partner institutions. Its primary focus is to prepare students for entry to the first year of an undergraduate programme and offers guaranteed places on a range of programmes in its partner institutions. These progression opportunities are determined by the specialist elective chosen by the student, as the programme offers humanities, science and mathematics as electives, as well as delivering core modules in the areas of community studies, information technology and communications. It also offers a work placement module which facilitates students to gain a small amount of work experience in a company operating within the area in which they hope to pursue their future studies. Previous research has shown that access programmes can play a very important role in building student confidence prior to entry to higher education (Coveney-O'Beirne, 2006; Walker, Mathew and Black, 2004).

While access programmes are already offered by partner institutions to specific cohorts, for example mature students or school leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, the Certificate in General Studies has opened entry to higher education to a wider range of potential learners by requiring

only that participants be over the age of 18 and have the motivation and capability of undertaking a Level 5 programme. Its priority target clients are those aged between 18 and 22 who, for one reason or another, have not had the opportunity, or do not have the necessary qualifications, to seek a place on a higher education programme, and who would otherwise have to wait until they reach the age of 23 to be eligible to apply as a mature student. Mature students are also a key target group of the programme as it offers an alternative to existing access programmes for mature students, both in terms of its structure, delivery times and its elective choices. All of the current cohort of students on the course have applied for a place on an undergraduate programme for September 2008 and it is anticipated that the majority will be successful in progressing.

As mentioned previously, part of the rationale for establishing the Downtown Centre was to bring higher education closer to people within the region. Amongst the barriers to accessing higher education, particularly for adult learners, is often a feeling of 'lack of entitlement' due to previously negative experiences of education (Bamber & Tett, 2000). By basing the Certificate in General Studies in the Downtown Centre, it gives students an opportunity to commence their preparation for higher education in a smaller and more supportive environment, whilst still being taught by higher education lecturers. The elective modules, however, are actually delivered on campus in the partner institutions, with the result that students also gain first-hand experience of life on different campuses. This delivery in different locations has proven generally to be a positive experience for the participants as revealed in a preliminary evaluation of the Certificate (McMahon & Whisker, 2008). The evaluation also revealed a generally high level of satisfaction with the student support offered by the Downtown Centre, both from academic and administrative staff.

#### *Educational Guidance Service*

The Educational Guidance Service in the Downtown Centre is aimed at adults, aged over 18, who want to enter, re-enter or continue with education at third-level. The main activities undertaken by the Educational Guidance Coordinator during the first eight months of operation have been:

- Giving information, advice and guidance about pathways into higher education to clients, either through appointments or drop in; and recording some details about these client meetings;
- Following up with information by email or snail mail;

- Occasionally advocating a pathway into partner institutions;
- Visiting external community based organisations to make contact and increase visibility;
- Giving talks to groups in a community setting who may have particular challenges in accessing higher education, for example groups of people with disability, young mothers in community settings and women's groups, in order to make them aware of the service;
- Liaising with other agencies in the region which provide adult guidance services such as the Local Employment Service, the Adult Educational Guidance Service in Limerick, Co. Limerick and Clare, in order to develop an appropriate referral system;
- Contributing to the development of a map of differentiated guidance provision for end users in Limerick City with other members of the Limerick Adult Guidance Partnership.

Very soon after its establishment, the Downtown Centre Guidance Service was invited to join the Limerick Adult Guidance Partnership, a voluntary partnership of local organisations which provide adult guidance services to specific client cohorts in the region. A sub-group of this partnership is currently working on a road-map of guidance provision for the city in order to differentiate each service for potential clients. This has proven a useful way for the Downtown Centre Guidance Service to examine its priority target groups and seek to add value to the existing guidance provision in the city.

An early evaluation of the Downtown Centre Guidance Service was undertaken in April/May 2008 and its preliminary results are very encouraging. A response rate of 29 per cent (16 responses), from 10 women and 6 men, showed that amongst their priority reasons for attending the guidance service were: to get assistance on clarifying their learning aims; to identify their main interests; to obtain guidance on learning options; and to obtain information on access courses and application procedures to higher education. Respondents expressed confidence in the confidentiality, impartiality and relevance of the service and felt that the service was structured to meet their needs. All respondents indicated a willingness to use the service again if the need arose and all would recommend the service to another person. The majority of respondents recorded a high level of satisfaction with their experience of guidance in the Downtown Centre.

### *Return to Learning Workshops*

The Downtown Centre believes that it has a role to play in the provision of non-formal supports to future learners. As a result, 11 evening workshops were planned as an introduction for learners to the kinds of skills which are deemed necessary for third-level participation. The workshops are aimed at anyone aged over 18 who is starting in higher education this year, or at people who may be thinking of applying in the future. Offered free of charge, the workshops are designed to be interactive and fun and to raise participants' awareness of, and confidence in, their own skills. The workshops were advertised through partner institutions, press advertising and by email to community contacts. To date, they have attracted considerable interest, with attendance growing steadily each week. The workshops demonstrate that there is an appetite for what might be described as the development of skills for learning in higher education.

### **Where are we Now? reflection on the Downtown Centre's services**

#### *Certificate in General Studies*

The Downtown Centre faces a number of challenges in its development. Beyond the issue of resources, is the crucial issue of providing services which are flexible enough to meet the needs of a diverse range of learners. The Certificate in General Studies is a conventionally structured full-time programme which attempts to give learners a wider experience of third-level by offering delivery across a range of campuses. The recent evaluation of the Certificate has shown that the learners are very satisfied with elements of the programme such as course instruction and student support, noting in particular that they feel most at ease in the Downtown Centre. The provision of both personal and academic support to students in their transition to higher education is a crucial one, particularly for those learners who may not have engaged with the formal education system for some time.

The learners, however, would prefer more tailored learning pathways through the programme, in order to be able to focus primarily on the discipline of their choice, and also a more flexible delivery timetable. The challenge for educational providers is therefore to design programmes which deliver the necessary learning supports to develop learners' skills in preparation for higher education, whilst at the same time developing and maintaining their interest in the core discipline areas. Resources, accreditation, quality assurance and credit system procedures all impact upon the feasibility of designing flexible programmes. This becomes more difficult, but not impossible, when a programme is jointly



designed and delivered by a number of different institutions. In fact, it sets the challenge for providers to be flexible and innovative in their thinking, not only with regard to timing of delivery but also with regard to content and to how, and in what format, support is provided to learners.

The policy of widening access to higher education is unquestionably necessary in this day and age. However, while having less strict entry criteria than other access programmes is a very positive feature of the Certificate in General Studies, this also brings with it some 'moral' challenges. Not least of these is the strategy of positively discriminating in favour of candidates, particularly those aged between 18 and 22 years, who have not been in a position, due to life or other circumstances, to apply to higher education to date, whilst potentially denying opportunities to those who simply have been unlucky through conventional application procedures first time around. Whilst this dilemma did not arise for the initial delivery of the programme due to adequate places being available for all candidates, with a visibly growing awareness of the programme it is a dilemma which will potentially need to be addressed in an objective manner in the future.

#### *Return to Learning Workshops*

The 'Return to Learning' workshops delivered by the Downtown Centre have proven very popular and show a huge demand amongst both potential and current learners for support activities on their learning pathways. The 'drop-in' nature of the workshops has allowed learners to attend workshops on the topics in which they are most interested without the obligation of having to sign up to the full series. The experience to date has been that approximately a 50 per cent attendance rate has been achieved compared to the original sign-up for each workshop. Nonetheless, the evaluations of the workshops delivered to date have been overwhelmingly positive with a demand expressed for more in-depth insights into topics and for a greater range of topics.

The challenge for the Downtown Centre in the future, when resources become more limited, will be the need to ensure attendance of a 'critical mass' of learners in order to justify the continued provision of such workshops. However, the necessity to demonstrate 'return on investment' becomes very difficult in the delivery of non-accredited and once-off support activities for members of the public. Such activities may well play a significant role in encouraging learners to progress to higher education, but how do we prove their value and the tan-

gible impact which they have on student numbers at the end of the day? While such a question may not be the guiding principle for an initiative such as the Downtown Centre, in the practical world of limited resources, it is one for consideration. From the experience and feedback we have gained so far in working on this initiative, our own view is that provision of such informal support activities is vital to the successful transition and retention of students in the long-term and should continue to be supported.

### *Educational Guidance Service*

The focus on third-level learning opportunities is the unique selling proposition of the Downtown Centre Guidance Service. In practice this means that the service is mapping out new territory. It is not operating within the partner institutions, so the emphasis is not on career outcome or on the links between academic achievement and career goals, although this may be part of the guidance conversation. Neither is it bounded by socio-economic constraints although, in common with other providers, clients who may be experiencing socio-economic disadvantage form part of the primary target group for the service. Nor is it bounded by geographic considerations such as residence in a particular area, as the service is open to anyone over 18 years who is interested in pursuing studies at third-level.

Thus, in these respects, the Guidance Service can be distinguished from other guidance providers currently working in Limerick. Since its inception, the Downtown Centre has worked on developing relationships with other guidance providers and with community groups so that the service can become known at community level. As a result of these connections, it is humbling to see the sacrifices that people are prepared to make to get into higher education. However, the service is developing a growing realisation that if clients are not willing or able to go back into full-time education, there still is not much available to them in their own locality, and distance learning is not necessarily the answer for people who may not have engaged with formal learning for some time. The provision of flexible and part-time courses is crucial to truly open access to higher education and our system has a long way yet to go in doing this.

Financial barriers are a big part of this – for example, people are afraid that they will lose their entitlements to social welfare benefits if they undertake a course. Alternatively, they are keen to have a definite idea of a return on the investment that they will have to make both in terms of time and money commitments.

Thus, we are sometimes asked, 'what kind of job can I get if I do an Arts degree?' There needs to be joined up thinking by Government agencies who deal with provision of allowances and benefits so that individuals can more easily access information about grants and about how their social welfare payments are affected or changed when they decide to undertake third-level study. The development of the new HEA website, [www.studentfinance.ie](http://www.studentfinance.ie), will go some way towards resolving this issue; however, for people who are not familiar with or who do not have access to the internet it is not the answer.

Support for learning is one of the issues that has surfaced in the guidance service's work with clients. Sometimes people have expressed a need to learn how to structure essays, or want to receive reassurance that they are 'doing all right' in a new course that they have taken on. This is an area that may merit investigation in terms of new services that the Downtown Centre can provide. The response to the current 'Return to Learning' series of evening workshops seems to support this. It is also a matter of concern to see how little the secondary school system has offered in terms of guidance to people who just did not engage with it at the 'appropriate' time in their lives and who have subsequently found themselves excluded from opportunities to enter higher education. Age and lack of subject requirements remain significant barriers, particularly in the 18-22 age group. Another concern is the number of people who have difficulty with mathematics as a subject. There is a need to look at how this can be addressed. One wonders whether there might be scope for the Limerick Adult Guidance Partnership to work more closely together to provide a reconfigured model of guidance within the city area – one that would truly, "accompany the citizen throughout life, supporting transitions and promoting the attitudes, knowledge and skills needed to be active contributors to, and participants in, the learning society/economy"? (Sultana, 2004, p14). Legislative change and the development of a new working template which would enable staff to work across boundaries to provide a single client-centred service appropriate to the clients' needs may be required to achieve this.

The critical issue at present for the Downtown Centre Guidance Service is to become known and valued for the additional resources it can bring to the landscape of guidance in Limerick itself and in the surrounding areas. The preliminary evaluation of the service, which will inform the ongoing development of the culture and practice of the Centre, has provided encouragement and support for the educational guidance service at this early stage.

## **The Future**

The concept of a 'one-stop shop' for learning is not a new one. However, it is new for the mid-West region and there is enormous potential for an initiative such as the Downtown Centre to encourage adult learners in their progression to higher education, and collaborate with existing education providers in supporting adults on their learning journey. The extent to which it is feasible to develop such a concept is most often limited by practical issues such as resources. However, the authors recognise that there are also a range of other barriers, financial, social, structural and personal; which any adult learner faces in returning to learning. Unless all stakeholders work together to develop solutions to break down such barriers, the extent to which any one initiative can make a measurable and long-lasting difference is limited.

For the moment, the Downtown Centre is funded until 2010. During that time initiatives will continue to be developed that will bring people who want to engage with higher education closer to the partner institutions. Delivery of guidance services will continue to be a feature of that delivery as will the Certificate in General Studies which offers a FETAC Level 5 qualification. Innovative courses or practices will be built on qualitative feedback from evaluations, and from consultation with other partners. Linkage with work-based learning, and in particular with the development of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) procedures in the partner institutions, and by extension in the region as a whole, may form the basis of activities which will take place in the future in the Downtown Centre. Activities connected to citizenship offer another possibility, especially given the social development initiatives which are particular to Limerick at present, such as the work of the Regeneration Boards.

## **Conclusion**

So far preliminary evaluations conducted show that the Downtown Centre has made a good start to its work in Limerick and in the mid-West region. It has provided a presence for each of the partner institutions in the heart of Limerick city. For many of the current cohort of Certificate in General Studies students, it will provide a pathway into higher education that would not otherwise have been there for them. Evaluations have also shown that clients of the Guidance Service have found it very useful in assisting them with identifying their third-level learning options and would recommend it to others. The challenge now for all involved is to balance the resources available against identifiable needs to which the Downtown Centre can respond, and to sustain the momentum for the longterm.

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