

ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION

Ted Fleming, Andrew Loxley and Fergal Finnegan



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ISBN 978-1-137-56973-8
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-56974-5

ISBN 978-1-137-56974-5 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016951434

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Cover illustration: Cover image © Ray Wise / Getty Images

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
The registered company address is: The Campus, 4 Crinan Street, London, N1 9XW,
United Kingdom

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Ania Zajko, Maya Finnegan, Fiona McKibben, Jerry O’Neill, Barbara Merrill, Sarah Meaney, John Baker, Niamh McCrea, John Field, Aidan Seery, John Baker, Brid Connolly, Dave McCormack, Marie Moran, Sarah Meaney, Ann Hegarty, Linden West, Adrianna Nizinska, Ewa Kurantowicz, Pepe Monteaguedo, John Walsh and the Cultures, Academic Values and Education Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin. Also, thanks to Mark Kirwan in the Higher Education Academy for kindly facilitating our requests for data.

Also very many thanks to our contributors to Part II, who have made this project possible through the generous sharing of their research with us.

We would like to thank those practitioners who work within the complex world of access and disability services. And lastly, a very big thanks to those who have made the journey as ‘non-traditional’ students through the gates and classrooms of Irish higher education. They are the central players in this story of widening participation and broadening access. Over many years and through a number of research projects, they have with great generosity and interest told us about their experiences in the education system. Without them and their attending to our invitations to be interviewed, neither this book nor the research projects would be possible. We not only acknowledge this contribution but hope we can do justice to their stories and experiences.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAO	Central Applications Office
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
DES	Department of Education and Skills
EC	European Commission
FET	Further Education and Training
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
HEI	Higher Education Institute
IG	Irish Government
IoT	Institute of Technology
NOEAHE	National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RANLHE	Retention and Access of Non-traditional Learners in Higher Education
SEN	School of Education University of Northampton
T&L	Teaching and Learning
WP	Widening Participation

Introduction

Ted Fleming, Andrew Loxley, and Fergal Finnegan

ACCESS AND THE IDEA OF THE UNIVERSITY

Over the past 20 years, access has moved from the margins to centre stage in higher education (HE) in the Republic of Ireland. We have seen a steady stream of policy statements and reviews on the topic of access from the state and the Higher Education Authority (the body which directs and funds the sector), a growing body of research on widening participation (WP) and on a more local level the mushrooming of access programmes in universities and in community and further education. All this effort and creativity has added a new and intriguing layer to the “idea of the university”. Alongside the traditional goals of teaching and knowledge creation and the less traditional, but very central goal of contributing to economic growth, we now have access and WP. This has become a familiar idea but the aspiration to open up third-level education to social groups that have been previously excluded from HE, such as mature adults, people from working class and ethnic minority backgrounds and people with disabilities, is in historical terms a very new proposal which reflects significant changes in culture and politics and the place of education in modern economies.

Access has become an integral part of how HE understands itself and how it explains the value of what it does for society as a whole. Improving access to education, it is contended, strengthens social cohesion, lessens inequality, guarantees the future vitality of tertiary

institutions and ensures economic competitiveness and flexibility in the era of the “knowledge-based economy” (KBE). These heady hopes and bold claims reflect a deep and in some sense an extraordinary faith amongst policymakers and the Irish population more generally in the power of education to effect progressive change. Access in this sense is part of a much larger narrative – and one we want to claim is central to Irish society – about the importance of education in creating a fair and truly modern society.

Despite this to date, there has been no book-length study of access and WP in Ireland. There is a good deal of relevant work in policy and research to draw upon, but there has been no extended piece of work concerned with the impact and significance of access upon Irish HE.¹ This book fills this gap and critically explores the topic by tracing the emergence and development of access within HE and situating this within a broader socio-historical and political context and through a detailed thematic and conceptual analysis of Irish access policy; a complete review of the empirical research on access; a mapping of the core themes and some of the gaps in the existing academic literature on this topic; and exploring through the lens of critical theory the limits and possibilities of access. This book offers an account of the forces and actors driving the “access agenda” and explores the implications of this in relation to policy, research and pedagogy in HE. By doing so, we want to ensure that the people at the heart of the story, non-traditional students, are kept firmly in view. The structure of the book reflects this and the middle section is dedicated to exploring what we know about and what remains unknown or under researched in relation to these groups of students. Taking students as a key reference point opens up valuable space for critical discussion about the meaning of HE and its wider societal goals. As part of this effort to keep students at the centre of access, the text contextualises, problematises and interrogates the development of access categories and the way we currently understand access through “target groups”.

Access is best understood as one part of a wider range of policy initiatives and interventions designed to redress underrepresentation and inequality in society as a whole. It is linked to egalitarian and democratic hopes and projects. We do not underestimate the positive effect this has had on HE and Irish society. New pedagogies and practices have emerged, and there has been a great deal of sectoral diversification and development. New types of students have entered Irish HE – most notably students with disabilities and mature students – and access initiatives have had success.

Yet as we discuss in this book, the progress has been patchier and slower than policymakers hoped. Enduring and deeply embedded inequalities in participation throw up a number of knotty questions about the relationship between the economy, the state and education that call for an extensive and considered analysis. Access begs very important questions about how we imagine our society progressing. This book sets out to peel back the layers of this access narrative and peer into the policies and the practical realities of access to HE.

EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC MODERNISATION

In order to frame the story of access accurately, we have to step back and say something about how HE has changed more generally and how this is linked to wider social trends. Within two generations, a tiny, elite, HE system has been transformed into a “mass” system with a comparatively high rate of public participation. Our dynamic HE system is a source of a great deal of pride in Ireland and positive references to education and our young highly educated population abound in media and everyday life. This is commonly understood as part of Ireland becoming “properly” modern. But the truth about the education system and indeed the process of modernisation is more complicated and has its shadows. The purpose of this book is to offer a more dialectical account of the relationship between HE and Irish public policies. HE and indeed access can point to achievements but there are very real, well-documented, limits to access and WP in tackling inequalities. A blithe faith in modernisation, tightly bound to a liberal and linear conception of history, may be very commonplace in contemporary educational policy but as the book will explain the empirical evidence invites scepticism of such claims.

However, this narrative of modernisation has deep roots in social and educational policy. As [Chap. 2](#) outlines, it can be traced back to the Lemass government (1959–1966) which launched two National Programmes for Economic Expansion (Irish Government [1958](#), [1963](#)). As part of this modernisation and economic liberalisation, a succession of innovations in education was embarked upon in the 1960s including free secondary education (1967) and free school transport (1969). A second tier of HE was introduced in the form of Regional Technical Colleges (announced in 1963), and *Investment in Education* (IG [1965](#)) was by far the most significant policy report of that era and arguably established the

paradigm with which we are still working. This report firmly linked modernisation and economic development with education.

This was part of an attempt to open up the Irish economy to international foreign direct investment. A largely agricultural economy which was highly dependent on exports to the UK was catapulted into “late industrialisation” (Whelan and Layte 2004). Regardless of the fact that this term is somewhat misleading given that Ireland has gone through several cycles of industrialisation and deindustrialisation of cities and regions over the past 200 years (O’Connor 2011; Bieldenberg 2010), the phrase does at least alert us to the scale and novelty of the change that followed these reforms from the 1960s onwards. Increased flows of foreign direct investment and new forms of statecraft did transform the economy and the labour market, education and Irish culture.

Since the 1960s this particular form of economic development, however unevenly, has progressed in waves. Multinationals have considerable sway in the Irish economy: pharmaceuticals, information technology (manufacturing and software development) and finance have become leading sectors in terms of GDP and the social imagination (McCabe 2011; O’Hearn 1998; O’Riain 2000).² Many small and medium enterprises, professions and infrastructural developments depend on foreign direct investment. Unsurprisingly, this has also led to a change in the composition of and the leading ideas held by the Irish elite who have become both more global in outlook and far more sensitive to the needs of international business. Favourable tax breaks, light touch regulation, an educated work force and easy access to a European Union (EU) market from an English-speaking base have all played a role in this transformation. This required a “compliant state”³ to encourage investment, but one is also strong enough to fund and manage the stresses and strains of a society in transformation.

Of course, part of this remit involves the education system – including HE – that would supply skilled workers for a growing economy. This economic and utilitarian orientation is deeply embedded in Irish society and policy, but it is also visionary and idealistic, wedded to this belief in the efficacy of the market to bring growth, social cohesion and even equality. This has a strong international dimension, and the peculiar and rapid transformation in education and society has been observed, supported and nudged by transnational bodies, especially the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU). The OECD was founded in 1961 and made its first major mark just 2 years later (Walsh et al. 2014). Ireland appears to have been a

laboratory for the testing of their policies, as it was a willing respondent to the guidance of the OECD.

Similarly, Irish educational policy is tightly bound to the EU's conception of lifelong learning and the enhancement of "human capital" in a knowledge-based economy. It is difficult to overstate the influence these international bodies have had. In this sense, Ireland is an interesting case study of a small, peripheral highly open and globalised economy which is part of a much larger project thinking about and imaging the role of non-compulsory education in relation to work and society envisaged by the EU and the OECD.

The Irish HE system is organised around a binary divide between the universities and the Institutes of Technology (IoT), which is a significant contextual factor when discussing not only about access and WP, but also about the orientations and foci of higher education institutions (HEIs) more generally. Until the early 1970s, the system comprised five small universities (expanding to seven in 1989) with a total enrolment of 18,500 students or 6 per cent of the relevant age-cohort (DES 1972) and drew, unsurprisingly, from the higher social classes (Clancy 1982). Despite the two sectors having similar number of academic staff and undergraduate students, there are marked structural and cultural differences which in a number of respects, put them into different HE "spaces" from one another. Part of this is of course historical, but it is political as well (see Walsh et al. 2014; Loxley 2014; Walsh and Loxley 2015). The universities have a strong research orientation, which is not a significant feature of the IOTs. In annual funding, the universities account for 83 per cent of all research money, employed 82 per cent of all contract researchers, generated 94 per cent (or 74,007) of publications since 1998, 84 per cent of all academic staff have doctorates (as opposed to 26 per cent in the IOTs) and account for 79 per cent (or 26,486) of all postgraduate students (Loxley et al. 2016b). Undergraduate programmes are also different in a number of respects, with the IOTs not only working within their "professional and technical remit" (with a small sprinkling of the humanities), but also offer NFQ Level 6 and Level 7 programmes, whereas these are rarely found in the universities. The Central Applications Office (CAO) points required for entry to what are equivalent Level 8 programmes are also different, with the universities being more demanding. Most of the IOTs are also quite small institutions (circa 5,000 students in comparison to 14,000 for the universities) and work in communities which are either sparsely populated and/or areas not traditionally known for HE provision or

easy physical access to HE. This latter characteristic runs counter to the current emphasis on sector rationalisation (HEA 2012b), despite a long held recognition of the need for a coherent national spatial strategy in order to manage an imbalance in population distributions around Ireland (IG 2010). It is also important to note that there is no political desire to create a unified system as per for example the UK. Indeed, the highly influential 2004 OECD report advocated for its retention, and amongst other things, the IoTs should not focus their attention on research except in a localised and applied manner. In particular, the report was against IoTs engaging in doctoral education. Even more telling was the report's description of the IoTs being "on the front line of the widening participation agenda and will be key players in this in future years. They have higher proportions of local students and attract far more students from less advantaged socio-economic groups than the universities" (OECD 2004, p. 32). The semiotics of this is writ large and we shall come back to it later. But in simple terms, access and WP are "implemented" within a system which is highly differentiated and stratified.

THE STAKES OF THE GAME: PROSPERITY, JUSTICE AND AN ANXIOUS QUESTION

Access then is linked to discourses of modernisation, economic development and social justice. Lifelong learning and human capital "optimisation" are the most enduring and seductive versions of this approach in education sector. This has encouraged cultural and structural shifts in attitudes to learning and education and to kinds of learning that are deemed useful for the global knowledge economy. Social justice is also perceived as a product and the likely, even necessary, result of economic development. Sean Lemass asserted in the Dáil directly quoting President Kennedy: "A rising tide lifts all the boats" (Dáil Debates 1964). In the same days, the opposition in the Dáil called attention to the "rising tide of emigration"!

BARRIERS TO ACCESS

One of the most enduring concepts in the access story is that of barrier. There are barriers to access, barriers to WP, barriers to learning, barriers to finance and barriers to childcare. This is a useful concept at two levels. It gives an accurate understanding of the nature of the obstacles faced by

students and of institutional rigidities. Secondly, it gives a sense of achievement to all (including institutions) who can surmount barriers and celebrate successes. Some barriers are institutional; others are social, economic and cultural. The access agenda involves addressing these barriers and each intervention addresses one or more of these barriers. However, just as a metaphor can illuminate, it can also hide important realities. In this case, one barrier is dominant. We name this as inequality and poverty. These inequalities are foundational and at a different level to others.

Impediments to participation or “barriers”, as they are commonly referred to across the literature, were seen to be a polygonal mix of the cultural (e.g. value orientations towards HE as well as within HE), as well as the structural (e.g. financial, organisational, geographical and so on). However, it is also important to note that this demographic asymmetry in terms of participation was not confined to Ireland. Rather it seemed to be a phenomena replicated across Europe (see Woodrow’s 1996 “Access to higher education in European” project report),⁴ the US, Australia (Gale and Tranter 2011; Gale 2015) at roughly the same time. Internationally, the pursuit of expansionist agendas seemed to run up against similar problems in relation to broadening participation amongst non-traditional groups. What appears to have occurred at this point in time, is a high degree of policy convergence (Bleiklie 2005; Kyvik 2004), but nonetheless played out in their respective socio-political contexts and driven by a similar mix of motives, influences and rationalisations.

We also ask whether the concept of barrier is a sufficient metaphor. As we examine each barrier, it also at the same time acts like a prism that refracts and breaks light into its component parts (wavelengths). Light enters a prism at one point and emerges at the other face at different points depending on wavelength. Blue light emerges at a different point to red. Barriers also refract. Each barrier segments, separates and refracts students too. Even if finance is given to a student in grants, they will not emerge at the same point as those who arrive together at the access point with financial security. Even the equal opportunity debate allows (or tries to allow) all to enter HE at the same point, but of necessity, each moves along a different path within HE. Inequality, poverty and social class are the big issues of the access story and are enduring realities for many students.

One simple question suggests itself (though the answer may not be simple): to what is access given? Once HE is seen as a binary system with access to different qualifications, disciplines and careers, one can immediately see that HE segments students into academic and vocational careers and

when increased access is given to HE, the access is to segmented and stratified disciplines and careers. Within HE, some students have access to a wide range of disciplines and vocations, while others are on an access route to a more limited range of departments, disciplines and careers. Students on access routes are competing for a small number of places in a narrow range of disciplines. Mass HE has arrived for some and elite HE remains in place for others.

CRISIS AND COMPLEXITY

The Great Recession has put these questions about enduring inequalities, how we make sense of them through narratives and metaphors, and the precise role of HE in society into sharp relief. After 7 years of austerity, HE is overstretched and understaffed as this will be discussed in the next chapter. There has also been a rethink of some of the more optimistic projections for increased participation (the aim is 72 per cent for 2020) (HEA 2008a, p. 5). There is a major review of funding, a reintroduction of tuition fees, a wholesale reform of adult and further education and far more pointed emphasis on outcomes, key performance indicators, a wide range of metrics and employability. Access is in a very significant way being recast as access to employability and for the first time in two decades, serious questions are being raised about the value of expansion. A meaningless word “overeducation” has begun to be bandied about. This is a significant shift and part of the intensification of neoliberal logic in Irish society.

However, in noting the intensification of market logic and the consequences of austerity, we do not want to conjure up a “university in ruins” (Readings 1996). First, HE is a very complex set of institutions deeply embedded in society, however divided they might be. Enacting policy aimed at major change – be that neoliberal or egalitarian – is not a straightforward or linear process. HEIs are sedimented with history and are maintained, sustained and changed through the agency of powerful actors at the centre of the system and, less visibly, by dissidence at the margins. On one level:

The university can be understood as the intermingling of narratives of itself that have been laid down over time. The strata that form the narratives are not neatly layered on each other: they are like rock formations, the separate strata being visible and also running into each other, with old strata reaching up into the new. (Barnett 2011, p. 73)

Or maybe the more accurate metaphor is magmas, which suggests movement, structure and complexity. The part of our aim here is to hold on to this complexity and to ask how the old and the new, the solid and the fluid, the residual and the emergent become meshed together when exploring access policy in HE.

In the 1990s, addressing this situation of underrepresentation, a wholesale *laissez faire* approach by the Irish state was not possible. Market discipline in the context of HE has historically been used in a selective manner designed to suit specific policy objectives, rather than applied as a grand organising principle or ideological axiom around which all policy interventions are built. The legacy of the social partnership model (though now largely abandoned) and the Irish political landscape did not lend itself to the founding of a Hayekian-Friedman paradise. If anything, the system functions as a hybrid between a form of network governance⁵ and a neo-Weberian bureau-professional framework (see Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011; Walsh and Loxley 2015). Whilst neoliberal rhetoric about competition, market discipline, labour and organisational flexibility, outcome-based performativity have been woven into much policy discourse, it is far from a complete or finished process.

Higher education remains a space of contestation in which the belief in academic freedom, notions of equality, conceptions of education and even traditional liberal values are frequently at odds with neoliberal managerial reform. By saying this, we also want to avoid nostalgia for the university that never was. There is no golden era in the past when universities were unequivocally liberal and wonderful and they have been closed and elitist institutions. Just 100 years ago, Thorstein Veblen (1918) published his savage attacks on how the heavy hand of business was stifling universities in America. In the same way, we can assume that there is no panacea for the future either.

From a historical perspective (Archer 1979; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990), there can be little doubt that the elite and the burgeoning middle classes have managed to shape the new “mass” educational system according to their own needs, interests and values. This can be discerned in the institutional systems, practices and main philosophies which inform HE today. However, noting this should not lead one to be overly reductive about this historical process; the formation of the modern education system is a complicated story in which classes, and class fractions, collaborated and struggled against each other to articulate a vision of culture and society using a wide variety of registers and rationales (Williams 1961).

The Pulse of Freedom

There is a particularly rich line of critical theory (Honneth 2014) and other forms of radical social inquiry (Williams 1961) that remind us that there has been an insistent push to democratise everyday life in and through education. However, dim things may appear in the twilight of neoliberalism; it is important to bear in mind that access, however indirectly, reflects the spread of egalitarian and democratic ideas into previously elite-only spaces.

This gives any discussion of access a certain “doubleness”. Peter Alheit (2005)⁶ captures this well in his description of the expansion of education as part of historical compromise which was based on:

a somewhat unusual alliance between social-democratic reformism and capital’s drive to modernize both itself and society. What one side envisaged as an emancipatory opportunity for personal growth, especially for the working classes, was seen by the other side as the benefits of having the wide-ranging skills that were considered essential to remain competitive. (Alheit 2005, p. 391)

Higher education is a highly storied, powerfully symbolic cultural space, which is directly linked to processes of social reproduction and capital accumulation, but also, at least at the edges, creates space for democracy, citizenship and personal development. In discussing access in policy and practice, the challenge is not to lose the opportunities that are undoubtedly available for many more students to learn and enhance their own development and make a contribution to their families and society. So in pulling back the layers of this success story of access, we find ourselves confronting questions about myths of progress and modernisation in a complex landscape but also convinced that expansion and access have changed the university in fundamental and socially significant ways.

Students and the Limits of Access Categories

Finally, we want to note the complexity of student experience. The literature on access and WP is voluminous and covers an extensive array of cognate topics ranging from the pedagogic (teaching and learning, assessment) non-academic institutional structures (student supports such as disability services), the experiential (student voice, identity and transformation,

academic voice), entry routes and “pathways” (matriculation, types and location of access programmes), student retention and progression, differential rates of participation by social groups, social justice, funding mechanisms (student finance, recurrent and capital), a range of explanatory models (deficit, capability, social reproduction, etc.) and pretty much everything else that occurs under the label “higher education”.⁷ However, what seems to tie all this together, in both a distal and proximate way, is the focus on the so-called non-traditional student. This is a highly theoretical and methodologically problematic category, as it makes all sorts of assumptions about the socio-cultural characteristics of participants. Taking for example those labelled a “second chance” student or “educationally disadvantaged”, the emphasis is unequivocally on the possession of a deficit, whether captured at the individual or communal level. The role of access from this perspective is one of remediation and redemption, of beginning to “fix” past transgressions and acts of symbolic violence. The explanations of how non-traditional students become non-traditional students are numerous and varied, but what is important to note is that these categories that are used to corral individuals can become reified or fetishised by HEIs and policy-makers. Given this, we would argue that non-traditional students (as much as their traditional peers) are a heterogeneous group and as varied as the number of classification schemas that can be applied to them.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book has three sections. In the first section comprising [Chaps. 2–5](#), we outline the general contextualised story of access. The second section of [Chaps. 6–10](#) looks at the student groups that are important in access policy. The third section critically discusses the implications of the material covered in Parts I and II, with a specific emphasis on the analysis of the issues concerning organisation, management and implementation of learning and teaching, student retention, and lastly, the broader policy and theoretical questions which have been raised.

Part I provides the historical, policy and theoretical backdrop to access and WP in Ireland and contextualises this with reference to major international trends. Access and WP are phenomena that have a transnational dimension of which the Irish experience is part. Here, we contextualise access and WP within the expansion of HE more generally. Although the results of access and WP initiatives in Ireland have been mixed, it has, as a policy initiative, been embedded in Irish HE policy more generally, in particular, the areas of human

capital formation and the so-called knowledge economy agendas. It has also been a process marked by an array of what can be seen as unequal and contradictory discourses. Most notably are those about HE as a tool for social justice and inclusion on the one hand and on the other the discourse that gives priority to entrepreneurial, acquisitive, individualistic and competitive values as a route for national economic well-being. In the Irish context, it is the latter which has assumed the position of a discursive hegemony, despite a repeated rhetorical commitment to the issue of social justice by policy makers in Ireland and the EU. Thus, the expansion of HE and the discourse around it offer fascinating insights into the nature of politics, economy and society in Ireland.

However, paradoxically Irish public policy, political discourse and educational initiatives have been conducted without any explicit reference to the ideological context within which these activities are conducted. Although there is no explicitly articulated policy push by any government or state agency, the hidden (or not so hidden – just not named as such) agenda of HE policy, is informed by neoliberal axioms. As such, market mechanisms and the acceptance of its associated cultural norms are seen as being central to meet learning needs. The position of the author(s) highlights the extent to which Irish public policy is formulated within a not very explicit (but real) neoliberal framework.

Part II explores in five chapters the experiences of non-traditional students in Irish HE. Student experiences do tell in their narratives how the “demand-side” of HE is remarkably different to the perspective of the “supply-side”. This forms a critical thread in the text that details the supports and barriers encountered by each of the major access groups. Each chapter offers an up to date review of research available on each of the major non-traditional student groups (working class students, students with disabilities, mature and part-time students, women and ethnic groups whether travellers or migrants). This way of presenting the material reflects the ways that these groups have become the focal points of policy and research. We also argue that these categories are problematic because they overlap, misrepresent or assume too much or too little about group experiences. We want to problematise this by foregrounding empirical research and student voices in order to go beyond the familiar construction of these students as “deficit” groups and descriptions of access as simply a “numbers game”.

Part III critically discusses the implications of the material covered in Parts I and II with a specific emphasis on the analysis of the issues concerning learning and teaching as well as student retention and the broader

policy and theoretical questions in three chapters. The substantial and potentially far-reaching recent systemic changes which have been part of Irish HE since 2011 are only now being “felt” at an institutional level. In particular, there is the borrowing (from the Australian context) of the idea of state-institutional compacts as a steering device by “encouraging”, with financial inducements, HEIs to align themselves with national economic and social policy. For access and WP in particular, this has led to target setting at the individual institutional level as part of their negotiated compacts.

Chapter 2: Key Trends in Irish Higher Education

This chapter will offer a critical overview of the key changes that have taken place in Irish HE since the late 1960s and in particular the ways in which the state, the economy and HE have interacted. The modernisation of Ireland is closely linked to the development of HE and this connection is played out in the policy initiatives of lifelong learning and WP. The international contexts in which both Ireland and HE operate are to a significant degree, a neoliberal policy and economic environment. The state navigates between being compliant with the economy and being proactive in the access story. But the current dominant position of the economy and the current iteration of the neoliberal attempt to dictate to both the state and HE. In this critique, an oppositional vision is also presented that attempts to reclaim the social good as a value of concern for HE as well as the state and carve out an educational agenda that involves fairness, justice and democracy.

Chapter 3: Access and Widening Participation – Stories from the Policy Domain

Our intention in this chapter is to explore the access story through the way in which it has become instantiated through its many and varied policy instruments. Part morality tale and part soap opera, the access story in this form mediates the ever-changing relationship between the state and the HEIs. The multiplicity of documents tied together in distal and proximate ways, also form the state’s own redemption story; the array of national development plans, labour force projections, high-value infrastructure projects and the cheerfully entitled *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness: 2000–2003* (Department of the Taoiseach 2000) spoke of an

Ireland in which economic prowess was entwined with large dollops of social justice. The meta-narrative arraigned across all of these documents is of a state fulfilling its role as a conductor of exogenous instruments (legal, financial, political and so on) to create an environment in which communities and individuals can flourish. In short, the state merely creates the conditions for the good life and it is up to us to make use of this set of opportunities.

Chapter 4: Routes in: Access Categories, Mechanisms and Processes

Following on from [Chap. 3](#), we consider how the access and WP policy “words are made flesh” through the mechanisms and pathways into HE. It is through paying attention to the minutiae of the little stories that we can get a sense of how the capillaries of power shape and form the possibilities and horizons of access. As we will argue, there may well be equality of opportunity but there is most definitely not equality of access. The use of the so-called reserved places in HEIs for certain categories of non-traditional students reinforces and reproduces the very inequalities the access and WP policies are meant to ameliorate. The barriers we alluded to above can exert a powerful affect not only on how participation is experienced but also on the likelihood of participation per se. The financing of a student’s life (part-time or full-time) is for example (and unsurprisingly) unequally distributed. The burden falls most heavily on those underrepresented groups that the state aims to draw into HE, exacerbated by the economic downturn which saw grants and allowances disappear. As the Irish economy starts to recover and ironically austerity has become normalised, the debate once more turns to the issue of reintroduction of tuition fees along with some form of loan system. Locked within the irksome contest over the private versus public benefits of HE, the issue of “who pays” crystallises a fundamental neoliberal neurosis. On the one hand, there is the valorisation of the autocratic self and, on the other hand, the dominance of the community over the individual.

Chapter 5: The Purpose of Access: Equality, Social Mobility and the Knowledge Economy

[Chapter 5](#) explores the way the purpose of access is discussed in policy and in particular looks at how a certain conception of equality with a knowledge-based economy has shaped access. The chapter also explores how this has

affected the way much of the research on access has been conducted and concludes with an argument for the renewal of the sociological imagination in policy and research.

Chapter 6: The Working Class and Higher Education Participation

Class has dominated discussion of access. [Chapter 6](#) reviews the key literature on working class access to HE and draws on recent qualitative research on working class experiences of HE in order to outline a possible alternative way of thinking about class as well as exploring the implications of the findings for access in the future.

Chapter 7: Moving to Higher Education: Opportunities and Barriers Experienced by People with Disabilities

The international context and experience are important for understanding the progress of students with disabilities into and through the Irish system. National legislations on employment equality have been an important support for this cohort of students and these policy supports have encouraged institutions of HE to establish not only access routes but also Disability Offices in HE institutions. The Action Group on Access and the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) have been central to providing research, policy commentary and practical support. The routes from the secondary education system are crucial for disability sector and much effort has been invested in this to widen the participation of disabled students.

Chapter 8: Mature Students in Irish Higher Education

As part of the lifelong learning agenda, mature students were always considered to be an obvious group to draw more fully into HE as first-time entrants. It was long recognised that the Irish HE system has demonstrated an age-profile which has been heavily skewed towards what we have labelled the traditional student, i.e. school leavers aged between 18 and 22. Whilst focusing on this cohort during the early stages of massification and the state's aspiration to increase the proportion of this age group's presence in HE was logical enough, it has had uneven consequences for mature students. Although the absolute number of matures has increased overall, they are still relatively small vis-à-vis the "traditionals" and unevenly

distributed across the two sectors. In short, there are more matures in the IoTs than the universities and are more likely to be found on part-time programmes. In this chapter, state policy and wider socio-economic contexts of WP are critically considered in conjunction with empirical evidence exploring the implications of being a mature student.

Chapter 9: The Gender Experiences of Non-traditional Students in Irish Higher Education

One of the more inexplicable aspects of Irish access and WP policy has been the absence of gender as an equity concern. This chapter focuses on how gender is situated as part of enduring and deeply embedded inequalities in student access and participation to HE. This acknowledges how gender is shaped by the wider “social expectations women and men are subject to, institutional practices and culture which often reinforce persistent gendered inequalities and the commitment of institutional and national bodies towards the pursuit of gender equality”. In this chapter, their silence is critically explored in terms of firstly participation more generally and secondly from the perspective of the DARE (disadvantaged access route to education). At the heart of this analysis lies a concern with the experiences of non-traditional learners, as they engage with the culture and structures of HE.

Chapter 10: The Semi-visible: Part-Timers and Flexible Learners

One of the more intractable problems within the access and WP agenda has been the sloth like development of part-time and flexible learning within HE. The purpose of this chapter is to explore this process mainly from the perspective of policy. Although ostensibly straightforward categories, part-time and flexible learning are highly problematic within the Irish policy context. This is largely to do with nebulous and fluid definitions which offer little in the way of grasping how it can or does work in practice. This is also compounded by the problem that other than numerical data, there is little in the way of empirical work on the experiences of this group of participants in HE. This is a major gap, given what has been from the state’s perspective, a key policy instrument to increase participation since the late 1990s. Part-time and flexible provision are variable across the system, with the IoTs, as opposed to the universities, being at the forefront of this mode of teaching and

learning. Similar to the student experience, we also know very little about why HEIs offer or do not offer this form of provision.

Chapter 11: Learning and Teaching and Non-traditional Students

As part of the modernisation agenda for HE, not only did access and WP become part of the state's gaze, but also did the issue of teaching and learning (T&L). The advent of massification and a moral panic over the quality of T&L led to a number of initiatives which began in the mid-2000s. These were designed to instigate change not only in pedagogical practice, but also to convince academics (and particularly those in the research intensive HEIs) to take teaching seriously as an activity, rather than see as a contractual chore. The Bologna agreement, the National Qualifications Framework, modularisation and semesterisation, universal design, the embedding of academic developers (in HEIs and nationally) and, lastly, the fetish for student evaluations and a greater role for ICT have over the past 15 years considerably altered the T&L landscape. But buried within all of this structural and cultural "busi-ness" are the lives of academics and students woven together through pedagogical practice. The attention being paid to T&L is important, but whether it will benefit non-traditional students is a moot point, as it is commonly understood that T&L in adult education has a very different flavour to it. The extent to which these practices and underpinning philosophies are present in HE is also a moot point and one which we critically consider.

Chapter 12: Retention in Ireland's Higher Education Institutions

As students gain access, the story broadens to wonder how they might be best encouraged to complete the education journey. Since 1999 there has been a growing awareness that too many who at great financial and personal cost start the long journey to a qualification were not completing the task. Increasingly persistence is a key performance indicator of the success of WP and increasing access. This chapter identifies an important shift in the understanding of retention to a focus on encouraging success and measuring success rather than drop-out. It has also been identified as a social justice issue as it is perceived to be unfair if dreams are not realised and resources under-utilised. The

conclusion of much research is that the onus is on the institution to make more flexible provision to support the desire for success among non-traditional students.

Chapter 13: Conclusion

In this last chapter, we attempt to draw together the many policies, experiential and theoretical “threads” and “strands” which have been complicit in the access and WP story for the past two decades. In this text, we have attempted to problematise the relationship between the state, HEIs and the student. In particular, we have taken this relationship to be one which is layered and intersectional. Central to this is not only the very purpose to which access and WP have been informed by this relationship, but the theoretical and methodological axioms on which the so-called equity groups have been constructed. However, this (momentarily) notwithstanding, the access story is overlain with a metanarrative (no apologies to the postmodernists) which is about democratic participation within institutions which occupy a significant place in contemporary Irish society. This is not to merely suggest that they are significant because they only have a major bearing on an individual’s life chances through accreditation, but they are or should be, places and spaces whereby knowledge and the other institutions which use this knowledge, is open to meaningful critique and transformation.

NOTES

1. Academic research on HE in Ireland is a developing field, but there is a relatively limited number of book length studies on Irish HE in general. For a very thorough overview, see Clancy (2015a) and for a range of recent significant critical assessments of history, practices and pedagogy, see Loxley et al. (2014) and for a sharp polemic on the direction HE has taken, see Gallagher (2012) and for a major empirical study of management and governance, see Lynch et al. (2012) and also O’Malley (2012).
2. It is useful to note that Ireland, in comparison to other OECD countries, Ireland has one of the highest volumes of foreign direct investment (FDI). In 2013 (latest data), this was worth \$38,329 million or 23 percent of that of the US (\$166,411 million), the largest recipient of FDI. It is also useful to compare Ireland with France \$25,904 million or Norway \$16,665 million or Finland \$3,393 million or the UK \$45,945 million to get a sense of just how large the Irish economy is in terms of FDI (OECD 2014, p. 14). The

collection of Irish industries labelled by the OECD as “services” was worth in terms of FDI \$269,372 million in 2012 (in 2008 = \$137,463 million) in comparison to “manufacturing” which was \$68,876 million. However, we need to be careful not to get too ecstatic about these headline numbers due to the way in which Ireland is used as a “revenue clearing house” for many multinationals.

3. There is considerable dispute over the organisation of the state and market in Irish society (Allen 2007; Kirby 2002; O’Riain 2000). The most salient point to the present discussion is that despite the rhetoric of neoliberal ideologues it is not so much the rolling back of the state that has taken place but a distinctive shift in the political cultural logic which guides decision making and the specific arrangement of power between the state, the market and the transitional bodies (Crouch 2011; Harvey 2005).
4. This project was the outcome of a conference held in Parma (1992) under the auspices of the Council of Europe’s “Higher Education and Research Committee” and covered 44 countries.
5. This is a set of interlocking state and non-state agencies which exhibit varying degrees of autonomy which are held together with varying degrees of tightness and looseness via regulatory frameworks, negotiated arrangements, legal coercion and so on.
6. Alheit’s focus is on adult education in this article but the analysis holds for post compulsory education as a whole.
7. Gorard’s et al. (2006) review for the UK’s Higher Education Funding Council identified 1,200 papers (including empirical and non-empirical work, reports, evaluations) between 1997 and 2005 covering mainly the UK. Our cursory search of the ERIC database for just peer reviewed articles using the terms “access” and “higher education” generated roughly 3,000 papers (published between 1972 and 2015). Narrowing it to (the more recent term) “widening participation” and “higher education” produced 308 results for the period 1999–2015.

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Introduction: Trends, Policies, Processes and Practices of Access

As Ireland has engaged in a process of modernisation over the past 50 years, the education system has become a key component and contributor. The role of HE is built on developments in both the primary and secondary education sectors. This HE journey has been planned with national policy priorities set and re-set over these years. The entire story is coloured increasingly by the impact and incorporation of international directions especially from the OECD and EU. Together and progressively over the years as HE expanded to include an increasing number of school leavers or traditional students, the focus has broadened to include non-traditional learners.

The production of policy papers by the state and its agencies has been relentless, it seems, and continuous restructuring and re-setting of priorities, targets, programmes and practices makes for a constantly shifting terrain in the access field. As both increasing access and widening participation become policy priorities and as increasing numbers of non-traditional students arrive on campuses, the time is opportune to examine and clarify what lies behind the policies in order to make explicit tensions and contradictions. But most of all, we highlight the hidden and often not so hidden agenda that we identify as the economic imperatives informing these developments. These agendas emphasise the production of graduates who will contribute to the knowledge economy as well as the restructuring of the HE sector itself in the image of the business model. This is in order to not only increase accountability for state funding but also enhance the ability of the state to control the responsiveness of the sector to public policy requirements to support the knowledge economy and production of human capital.

This set of ideas in the Irish system sits uncomfortably with the widely acknowledged and widely supported view that HE is about increasing equality and social justice. It is an uncomfortable coalition as the view of social justice and equality is also filtered through the neoliberal lens. The knowledge economy and social capital agendas live side by side with this agenda.

Part I has four chapters that take four points of entry into this debate. They focus on the key trends, the history of the development of HE and how it has interacted with the state and the economy. The access story is then outlined in detail and placed in the conflicting terrain of labour force support and social justice through a critical examination of policy. In a more fine grained analysis, the third chapter identifies access routes and pathways and engages in a critical study of whether access delivers on its promise to address inequality. Financial and other barriers remain significant. The fourth chapter turns a critical lens on research and policy and explores how access is conceptualised in terms of equality and notions of the knowledge-based economy.

Key Trends in Irish Higher Education and the Emergence and Development of Access

Ted Fleming, Andrew Loxley, and Fergal Finnegan

INTRODUCTION

The story of the modernisation of Ireland is closely linked to, and in part depends on, the development and expansion of Ireland's third level sector. Since the 1960s, there has been a firm emphasis in social policy and political discourse on ensuring economic growth and making Ireland more equal through the expansion of the education system. Widening access to HE for under-represented student groups is an important part of this larger narrative. This chapter presents the broad historical, political and policy contexts of this access story. It will begin by placing the access story in historical perspective and in particular will trace the impact of a swathe of economic and social reforms in the 1960s and the influence of the EU and OECD on educational policy. Following this, we will review the achievements and limitations of access policies since the 1990s and discuss how neoliberalism, crisis and austerity have altered HE and the reconfigured access.

There are multiple tensions and contradictions in this story not least that HE has become far more tightly integrated in state planning and more strongly orientated to market imperatives. This chapter places the access story in this broader context and proposes to reclaim a vision of HE from the grasp of the markets and the state so education's possibilities can

be articulated in terms of individual growth and social development. This involves giving priority to education that supports a more just, fair and caring society – as well as highly skilled graduates contributing to the economy:

These expectations and requirements link equity in higher education to the fundamental ideals of democracy and human rights. At the same time, they connect equity with other basic values and aspirations of civilised society: high quality and efficiency in the advancement, dissemination and utilisation of knowledge and the fullest possible development of social and human capital. Equity is not a partisan affair, even if often driven by special interest groups; it is not incidental to the mission of higher education, but is integral to the intellectual and other virtues of academic life. (Skilbeck and Connell 2000, p. 3)

But there is a dearth of public discourse about the meaning and purpose of HE. There is no Newman and no Humboldt to articulate a coherent vision of university education beyond the functional, technical and utilitarian support for economic development. There is a scarcity of writing and debate about the value of HE for social and community development, for the support of citizenship and the creation of a free republic, a democracy or a vision of the emancipatory potential of learning – even in universities. Meaningful access policies will ultimately require a society-wide commitment to equality in all its various forms. These critical comments provide an implied vision of what HE ought to be and there is a requirement to articulate a vision of the possibilities and potential of HE. Paulo Freire, Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth prompt this critical theory inspired vision to which we return later and offer an alternative conception to the “corporate university”.

ACCESS AND HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

A HE that must attend to the needs of the state or elites is not unique or new. In the second half of the nineteenth century, for example university education was a constant and controversial subject of public debate in Ireland. The most important issue was whether to have secular or religious universities. To recast the debate somewhat, access was linked to confessional identities and allegiances. The University of Dublin was founded in 1592 as part of Tudor Anglicisation and religious expansion but Catholics

were barred as students were required to take oaths of allegiance and supremacy (Parkes 2010, p. 541). Even with a Catholic university at Maynooth, access for Catholics was not assured there, as Maynooth closed its gates to lay students (Parkes 2010, p. 542). The colonial power exercised its jurisdiction through stratified and restricted access to university education. Thomas Wyse (MP for Waterford 1835–1847) wrote a comprehensive plan for the education system and public funded universities were opened in Galway and Cork (Parkes 2010, p. 546). The Young Irelanders and the Irish bishops welcomed what others saw as “godless places” offering godless education (Parkes 2010, p. 546). Even the Pope (Pius IX) issued edicts and by 1854 a Catholic University was opened in Dublin. In 1873, the British Prime Minister Gladstone proposed a University of Dublin that would incorporate Trinity College, the three Queen’s Colleges and Maynooth. The failure of his Universities Bill (1873) in the Commons by three votes led directly to Gladstone’s resignation (Parkes 2010, p. 560). The link between public policy and HE is not new nor less controversial now as the ways in which the state and HE interact is a perennial issue. This historical note is intended to make a simple but important point: the preoccupation with access and the use of HE is not new and this necessarily involves the state and powerful social groups. What is noteworthy is that this has become a matter of direct importance to the majority of the population, since the turn towards “mass” HE began in the 1960s.

A Turning Point: Investment in Education

Coolahan (1980, p. 165) has identified *Investment in Education* (IG 1965), which was the first OECD supported survey of the Irish education system, as the most significant policy document of this crucial period. Patrick Hillery, Minister for Education, initiated the survey of the education system in order to address the need he perceived for skilled technical workers in the Irish economy (IG 1965). This was more than a Ministerial initiative and represented a government consensus in favour of investing in education as a vital element of Irish national economic development (Walsh 2008, p. 97). This was the beginning of a change in values and language (education was hereafter an investment) and a change of emphasis about the purposes of education that would inform public spending over the coming decades. The membership of the OECD Survey Team is important: it included such dominant players as Patrick Lynch, Chair of Aer Lingus and Professor of

Economics at UCD and Martin O'Donoghue, Economics Department at TCD, who later became a Government Minister (Hyland 2014, p. 124). In a recent special issue of *Irish Educational Studies* (Walsh et al. 2014, p. 120) that examined this policy initiative, the continuing intractability of inequality was highlighted. This OECD report was published around the same time that the Second Programme for Economic Expansion (IG 1963) proposed to double expenditure on education and the first Regional Technical College was announced which has evolved into the current binary system consisting of 14 IoTs and 7 universities as well as a number of other institutions.

International organisations have been important players in this drama. The European Union (EU) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) were always powerful economic drivers of Irish public policy (EC 2000b; OECD 2004). Both strongly supported a twin track interpretation of the importance of education to the economy and society as well as to lifelong learning.

Lifelong Learning

Irish education policy is specifically aligned to the lifelong learning paradigm (CEC 2000) which emphasises encouraging citizens to continuously engage in education and training in order to up-skill and contribute to the economy. State investment is expected to lead to increased productivity, innovation, employment growth and revenue returns. The Irish Government's current *National Development Plan 2007–2013* (IG 2007) strongly reflects this policy priority. Lifelong learning is most often seen as narrow and economic and the potential to respond to the learning needs of active citizens has been neglected (Fleming 2011). This is cemented in The World Bank suggestion that “lifelong learning is education for the knowledge economy” (The World Bank 2003, p. xiii). In a recent blog, John Field commented that:

The European Commission has a long record of interest in adult learning. Perhaps its most influential intervention was the European Year of Lifelong Learning, a largely symbolic gesture which nevertheless reached out to governments, providers and other actors such as trade unions and voluntary associations. Much of the excitement that surrounded the European Year has evaporated, as has the social democratic vision of Europe... In current circumstances, it probably shouldn't surprise us to find that the Commission's view of adult learning is an instrumental and impoverished one. (Field 2015)

Since the mid-1990s, lifelong learning has been a central idea for Irish education policymakers. Right at the heart of the dominant vision of lifelong learning stands the modern university, which is being remade into a productive, flexible, inclusive and vibrantly diverse place (Skilbeck 2001). Lifelong learning has been used to map out the future of HE and deployed to make sense of three of the most significant changes that have taken place in the sector since the 1980s; the rapid expansion of the number of places in HE; the diversification of institutions and academic disciplines; and the formalisation and extension of access initiatives designed to bring greater numbers of “non-traditional” students into HE. The argument is that in this great ferment of expansion and change there is a clear and, above all, a *progressive* logic at work. The repeated claim is made that education will pave the way to a creative, democratic society capable of endless innovation and learning (DES 2011; HEA 2010c).

This policy discourse draws deeply on our hopes for a more just and egalitarian way of living (Field and Schuller 1999; Fleming 2011). The fact that the state, backed by the OECD and the European Union (CEC 2000; OECD 2008), claims that by enhancing the store of “human capital” we can also improve economic competitiveness, makes these ideas seem at once visionary and pragmatic. So much of the public appeal, and ultimately the worth, of lifelong learning, and access policies, rest on the claim that we *can* tackle deeply rooted inequalities through education.

A CHANGED SYSTEM

Before we explore some of the limits of current educational policy, we do want to note the rapidity of change in Irish HE and acknowledge its success. Historically, participation in HE has increased from a mere 5 per cent of school leavers in the 1950s. In 1965, HE institutions had 15,400 full-time students which has increased to 77,491 by 2003/2004 and more than doubled to 151,300 undergraduates and 21,924 postgraduates in 2014–15. The government has been committed for some time (HEA 2008a) to further increasing participation in HE to 72 per cent of the relevant age cohort by 2020 and in this way address a range of social issues including disadvantage (HEA 2008a). Today 60 per cent of 18–20-year-olds are in HE¹. Ireland’s third level attainment for all 30–34-year-olds is 52 per cent – one of the highest in the EU where the average is 38 per cent (DG EAC 2015, p. 7). The number of non-traditional students has also

increased and a once elite system of third level education is now more diverse and far closer to something like a “mass” system.

We will review the evolution of access policy in detail in the next chapter, but here we will simply note some of the key facts and figures in relation to access. Since the 1990s the issue of educational inequality gained far more prominence. A National Office of Equity of Access was established in 2003 to oversee access policies (since 2014 called the National Access Policy Office) and access programmes were mainstreamed; there was an increase in grants and bursaries for students and a greater range of entry points into colleges and universities. Since then the participation of the “target groups” (people from working class backgrounds, students with disabilities and mature students, defined in the Republic of Ireland as entrants over 23 years of age) has increased. Gender equality in HE institutions has improved enormously and in many colleges there is parity or even a majority of female students, although this is still dependent on sector and discipline. The proportion of the student body coming from lower socio-economic groups has risen. The exception is the class of non-manual workers (HEA 2008b). Just over 25 per cent of new entrants to HE come from the non-manual, manual, semi-skilled and unskilled socio-economic groups (HEA 2015d). The percentage of mature students within the student body has grown significantly (from less than 5 per cent in 1998 to 13.6 per cent of full-time undergraduates in 2010 (HEA 2010c) and 13.1 per cent all of new entrants in 2014–15 (HEA 2016b). The percentage of students with disabilities in the undergraduate student body has surged from 0.65 per cent in 1993 to 3.2 per cent in 2006 (HEA 2008b) and this group comprised 6 per cent of all new entrants in 2010 (AHEAD 2016). Recent figures published by the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD 2016, p. 11) found that for the first time the number of students with a disability rose to 10,770 or 5.1 per cent of all students. However, the number on part-time courses was a much lower – 1.3 per cent (AHEAD 2016, p. 14). New targets set in 2014 (HEA 2014b, appendix 1) include an increase in disability entrants to 8 per cent of intake – up from 6 per cent. At present 10,000 students with a disability are registered in HE institutions. Sixteen per cent of undergraduates now study part-time.

Under the direction of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA), a structural reform agenda has been set out for Irish HE. The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (DES 2011) [also referred to as the “Hunt Report” after the committee chairperson] sets out a new vision for HE in Ireland involving a more

flexible system, with greater choice of provision and modes of learning. It also aims to increase the diversity of the student body; improve the quality of teaching and learning; increase the relevance of learning outcomes; ensure that HE addresses wider social and economic needs that translate into high value jobs and real benefits for society (DG EAC 2015, p. 7).

A new national plan for equity of access to HE (HEA 2015e) covering the period 2015–19 addresses a number of key issues, which include the following: developing a broader definition of the meaning of disadvantage; taking a system-wide approach to access; consideration of future options concerning part-time students and their fees; addressing financial barriers to accessing HE; strengthening links between HE institutions and disadvantaged communities; increase student voice in access measures and mainstreaming access measures across HE (DG EAC 2015, p. 8).

A Comparative Perspective on the Successes of Access

A recent comparative study by Patrick Clancy (2015a) drawing on over 30 years of data has underlined the progress that has been made through access and also argues that in comparative terms it can be deemed a qualified success. Similarly, the European Commission in a recent report (EC 2014) tracked the evolution of HE in the EU and examined policy and practice related to equity, employability and the student experience of HE across Europe. This was done through access (including admissions), progression and the transition from HE into the labour market. Information was gathered from Eurydice national units, from quality assurance agencies in 12 countries, and site visits to HE institutions in 8 countries.

Although European policy documents stress the priority of the social dimension of HE, and countries have made commitments in the Bologna Process to define measurable targets, only nine countries have actually defined attainment targets for non-traditional groups. There is therefore a long way to go before it is possible to obtain a convincing evidence-based, European-wide picture of whether widening participation or access is possible. It is noteworthy that Ireland has a most comprehensive set of targets related to under-represented groups. In addition to general participation targets, there are specific targets for mature students and for disadvantaged socio-economic groups where entry rates should reach at least 54 per cent by 2020. Moreover in 2006, Ireland also set a specific target to increase the number of students with disabilities. However, only Ireland and the UK have

established a system where funding is deliberately used as an incentive to HE institutions to widen participation (EC 2014, p. 24). The European Union has set a target that “the share of 30–34-year-olds with tertiary educational attainment or equivalent should be at least 40 percent by 2020” (EC 2014, p. 29). The European Commission (EC 2014) highlights the patchwork nature of collecting data across Europe and the “hit or miss” nature of linking funding with set targets that may or may not be met in most countries. As we shall see though in the next chapter, target setting in itself may not be as significant as the EU claims.

The same research also highlighted a number of other issues that are relevant to framing the access story in Ireland. At the national level, it appears that a number of issues that are a major part of the discussion of under-representation in Ireland’s HE, are not frequently monitored across Europe. Migrant status data are captured in 13 systems and data on ethnicity of students and staff in only 8 countries. In a number of countries where alternative entry routes have been developed as one of the measures to help widen access, there is no official monitoring of the numbers of students actually entering via the different possible routes. In the countries where monitoring does exist, there is very commonly a pattern of one route dominating as the primary means of entering HE. Both bridging programmes and recognition of prior learning are an access feature in only half of European HE systems. The evidence from quality assurance agencies suggests that their role in increasing access is extremely limited, and that a focus on access and admissions is far from being the norm. While quality assurance agencies may examine some issues related to admissions systems, they generally do not do so from a perspective of ensuring that the system is fit for the purpose of widening access.

CHANGED UTTERLY?

But a more troubling picture lies behind these ambitions and successes. Economic inequality continues to have an enormous influence on participation rates and students of all ages from disadvantaged and lower socio-economic backgrounds face considerable obstacles to attending third level education (HEA 2014b). The continuing low level of take up by non-manual and semi-skilled workers is worrying (HEA 2014b, appendix 2). In fact, according to the HEA (2014a) the number of young people from semi- and unskilled families going on to college has fallen since 2004. It showed that the proportion fell from 10.8 per cent (3,730) to 8 per cent

(3,212) over this period (HEA 2008a). Postal districts are also good indicators of progression to HE in Dublin where the Dublin 4 (84 per cent), Dublin 6 (99 per cent), Dublin 6W (82 per cent) and Dublin 16 (79 per cent) are in contrast to Dublin postal districts 1, 2, 10, 17 all of which have participation rates of below 25 per cent, e.g. Dublin 17 has 15 per cent (HEA 2014a). Gender, social class and regional (and in Dublin, postal districts) continue to be powerful predictors of who will attend HE in Ireland (HEA 2014b).

According to the DES (2016), 24 per cent of students who completed the second year of senior cycle in designated disadvantaged schools (DEIS) go on to HE, which is less than half the national average. However, this is below the HEA targets and all of these groups remain under-represented and it appears that widening access for *the most disadvantaged groups* of non-traditional students such as working class and travellers has met with very uneven results (HEA 2014a). The Irish Higher Education Authority has acknowledged that this process has been slower and more difficult than they anticipated (HEA 2008a) and research has indicated that educational disadvantage is difficult to tackle and is in many circumstances even maintained though HE (Fleming and Murphy 2002).

THE NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITY: INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL DIMENSIONS

Global forces impact on HE in a number of ways. The language used is influenced by the audit culture that attempts to measure everything and prioritises only what can be measured; an emphasis on disciplines that impact on job creation; internationalisation and marketing for foreign students who pay high fees and investment in league tables that are of dubious value. Policy is heavily informed by the conventional thinking of the EU and OECD as can be seen in Ireland's *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (DES 2011) and *International Strategy for Higher Education* (DES 2010). This provides the broader setting for this text, and to a significant degree, even if context is not everything, it certainly accounts for a great deal. Access policy and practice operate within these contexts and one could argue that in many ways these contexts, while encouraging wider participation and access, also operate as barriers to this progress.

Access also depends on social and institutional arrangements especially the relationship between the market and the state. With the rise of

neoliberalism and the unravelling of social democracy internationally, the organisation of the state/market in nation states has changed and so has the relationship with transnational corporations and other international bodies. As a recent iteration and intensification of capitalism, which has evolved and changes in highly varied ways, neoliberalism has become the dominant ideology in Ireland and the EU. According to Harvey (2005), neoliberalism is:

A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. (Harvey 2005, p. 2)

Watson (2015) argues that neoliberalism is a capitalist class project which has increased inequalities and consolidated elite power (see also Harvey 2005; Sayer 2015). As part of this process, the state is restructured to reflect the interests of business and drives privatisation and marketisation. The state dismantles the welfare system and supports the growth of financialisation.

The Irish state in neglecting the social good has defined the pursuit of equality in remarkably narrow terms. Economic growth, based on competitiveness and flexibility, will modernise society and bring about equality. As one Taoiseach put it, Ireland is “a great little country in which to do business” (Cantillon 2014). Over recent decades, Ireland has introduced this neoliberal system including light touch regulation of financial and other commercial institutions. There has been an increase in inequality and the real income of those in the top 1 per cent of earners has increased from €90,000 in 1975 to €450,000 in 2007 (Mercille and Murphy 2015, p. 3).

Education too has for a long time been guided by neoliberal policies. The EU has played a key role in this process of neoliberalisation of HE in Ireland through the Bologna process that legitimises neoliberal policies as solutions to EU problems of cohesion and integration (Brenner et al. 2010). The task of the EU Bologna process (European Ministers of Education 1999) is to make European HE compatible with and comparable across the EU and globally. This is to be done through the introduction of quality assurance, increased mobility of students and staff and degree standardisation. Universities have become key components of EU economic strategy. The OECD Examiners’ Report on

Irish Higher Education (OECD 2004) encouraged the diversification of revenues, the increase in staff pay flexibility and working conditions and increase entrepreneurship (as a revenue generating process). This had already commenced in 1980.

AUSTERITY, CRISIS AND THE REFORM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Things have taken a drastic turn since the economic collapse of 2008 with the subsequent introduction of austerity as the state attempted to rescue the banks. The rules of the neoliberal game are about making sure that if conflicts arise between collective well-being and saving feral banks, the banks are saved (McCabe 2011; see also Mellor 2011; Sayer 2015). The social good is secondary to the economic good. Austerity requires that we do more with less and manage with scarce resources as a result of deep cuts in public expenditure. Austerity is first and foremost a transfer of wealth from the lower and middle classes to the classes above them.

The access story too has been distorted by this scenario, where state supported access has reduced the immense personal and social possibilities of HE to a concern with graduate employability. In this environment, education is tasked with producing resources for the workplace and through a leaner system of education it is required to meet the needs of the economy for skilled workers. It also attempts to re-focus the educational curriculum to be more business friendly and produce graduates who are more “work-ready” (Finnegan and O’Neill 2015). In addition, it is the knowledge economy that demands higher learning. The preoccupations with the economy and with jobs and with defining society as a workforce lead to a misreading of the importance of education, the way in which students perceive their educational benefit and also misread the nature of governance and of community and society. The Irish government’s bailout programme for the banks required the system to find in the region of €67.56 billion and in the process required reforms of HE that involved a range of changes including: less dependence on the state; become more responsive to the demands of the commercial sector; deliver graduates who are “work ready”; install management systems more in line with business models; see students as customers and learning as a product. According to Mercille and Murphy (2015, p. 2), HE has become more commercialised, privatised, service oriented, providing research services to industry and the private sector, increased reliance on philanthropy and donations, reintroduced fees as well as new forms of management and administration.

Accountability and funding are linked to performance indicators and HE has become more output driven.

It is important to note that the recent Hunt Report (DES 2011) is the current and dominant policy document for HE in Ireland. Hunt deals with the fault lines between the accountability of HE and its autonomy and the report restructures these tensions. Hunt, who comes from a business background, naturally looks to business as a source of solutions and proposes mergers, consolidations (pp. 15, 19, 23, 49, 69, 72, 90, 96, 97, 99, 101, 102, 104), restructuring and clusters. The changes proposed are underpinned by performance-based (pp. 11, 12, 14) financial compacts, to ensure HE complies with public policy priorities and targets by linking outcomes with funding (p. 14). HE is a partnership between the state as major funder, the administrators of HE who act as managers and the academic staff who act both as teachers and researchers. In addition, all the partners including academics operate under a legal framework (IG 1997) that confers tenure and academic freedom. But only the state and managers were included in the discussions. Membership of the Strategic Group that drew up the report was weighed in favour of those with business interests, with senior management and higher-level civil servants. Excluded groups included staff and students!

The economic collapse of more recent years has impacted heavily on state support for HE. There has been a 19 per cent drop in the recurrent grant and 11 per cent drop in staff numbers from 2008 to 2012 (HEA 2015a). This has led to increased financial pressure on non-traditional students.² Government cuts in funding for HE are to continue according to the latest *Report of the Expert Group on Funding for Higher Education* (HEA 2015b). These cuts are in contrast to an increase in student numbers by more than 31,000 from 2008 to 2014. Reductions in staff numbers and an increase in the number of staff (including full-time researchers) who are employed on temporary or insecure contracts compounds the problem of staff/student ratios.

FEES, FUNDING AND EDUCATION AS A PUBLIC GOOD

Current HE policy in Ireland is very preoccupied with fees or more accurately with funding. Few disagree that there is a funding crisis in Irish HE and one statistic highlights this: The two billion Euro now required to fund HE must rise by one billion Euro over the coming decade. Spending on HE in

Ireland is low compared to developed world and funding is behind Finland, United States, Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark (HEA 2015b, p. 20). Tuition fees were abolished in 1996 (HEA 2015b, p. 13) but there are “registration fees” that in all respects function as tuition fees. At present, each student pays €3,000 apart from the 50 per cent who qualify for grants. The state is withdrawing from funding HE in favour of fees, foreign recruitment of students (especially from China), philanthropy and research contracts. The number of foreign students is expected to increase from 7 to 13 per cent by 2016 (HEA 2015b, p. 15). Universities had 80 per cent of their costs paid by the state in 2008 and this decreased to 65 per cent in 2014 (HEA 2015a, p. 12) and is expected to fall to a target of 51 per cent in 2016. With cumulative expenditure per student at below the OECD average (OECD 2014, p. 216) and significantly below the leading OECD countries (US, Finland, Sweden and Denmark), this is really a move towards making students pay their own fees. The long-term effects of this shift are unclear and whether graduates will be able to repay loans will be an unanswered question for some time and the experience of student loans schemes in the UK is not encouraging (McGettigan 2013). Increasingly, in other countries, students are graduating in debt. This issue of debt has prompted a debate and protests about the nature and purpose of education as a public good in a wide range of countries (most notably in South Africa, Chile, the US and in Quebec). Moreover, judging by experiences elsewhere much of this debt is unlikely to be paid back but it does nevertheless lead to students and institutions seeing education very differently. Austerity has meant debt and education as a public good are now a live issue in Ireland. In the recent government draft report on funding by an expert group, it is suggested that students on €26,000 annual salary after graduation would repay the state €25 per week over 15 years – a gross repayment of under €20,000 (HEA 2015b). While research has reached the conclusion that free university fees has not significantly reduced inequality in education (Denny 2010), the undermining of the idea of education as a public good and making graduates carry the burden of individualised debt does have implications for access. Less wealthy and more precarious students will be forced to take less “risky” choices.

Public spending on education has been reduced from a high of 5 per cent of total government expenditure in 2009 to 4.1 per cent in 2014 (DG EAC 2015, p. 3) and this has had, according to the EU Director General for Education and Culture (DG EAC), a “negative impact on specific measures” including education for travellers (DG EAC 2015, p. 3). But stronger links

have been forged between education and the needs of the labour market and the DG EAC report also highlights limited access to costly childcare as a persistent barrier to widening participation. Inequality continues to resist interventions; this is partly because there is an expectation that inequality within society can be solely addressed by increasing access to and widening participation in HE.

In addition, as a result of the austerity programme the staff/student ratio has increased from 1:15.6 in 2007 to 1:19 in 2015 and is now one of the highest in the OECD (HEA 2015a, p. 21). More specifically, for the universities this is 1:25.7 and in the IoTs 1:20.2 (Loxley et al. 2016a). A fewer staff are now teaching more students, engaging in increased administration and the question at least has to be asked whether this allied with an increase in casualisation of staff, and fewer tenured staff, leads to a diluted service from staff engaged in a heavier work load. The implications are serious for the quality of teaching as well as for the much sought after international university rankings (HEA 2015a, p. 22). The HEA itself identifies a number of difficulties as a result of the reduction in state funding: falling resources (staff student ratios, reduced funding from public sources), over-crowding, demographic changes (increased population up to 29 per cent by 2028), increased fees, increased demand for postgraduate education and increased demands for lifelong learning (HEA 2015b, p. 7). We will explore the impact on pedagogy in more detail in the final section of the book.

The timeframe in which the “outcomes” of education are being judged is also open to question. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) study (Kelly et al. 2015) has reviewed the activation programmes aimed at assisting social welfare recipients to progress into employment expenditure. Participants on these programmes rose by 48 per cent between 2007 and 2012. These programmes include Community Employment, JobBridge, Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) and Back to Work Enterprise Allowance. Spending on the BTEA scheme more than trebled, increasing from €64.1 million to €199.5 million, while the number of recipients quadrupled, from approximately 6,000 to almost 25,000. This is the second largest activation measure in Ireland since its establishment in 1998 (Kelly et al. 2015, p. vii). The report found that the BTEA was not effective in assisting participants to find employment. The research used two groups: a control group and an unfortunately named “treatment” group that was given BTEA supports (Kelly et al. 2015, p. 59). Those who commenced the BTEA (treatment) option in September/October 2008 were 38 percentage points less likely to be in employment in June 2012 and 30 percentage

points less likely by June 2014, relative to a control group. However, the years 2012 to 2014 were particularly difficult periods in the Irish labour market (p. 62). There is evidence that the BTEA scheme was successful in redirecting participants to further study or training. The evaluation does not contain any qualitative information that may cast light on the individual experiences or processes that would contribute to the observed result, nor does it assess the quality of the employment outcomes for those jobseekers supported under the BTEA scheme (Kelly et al. 2015, p. x).

There is also a drop in new entrants of mature students throughout HE from 11 per cent to 9 per cent of all entrants (HEA 2014b). This, one could assume, is a consequence of the more challenging economic situation of adults and this will make the target of 20 per cent more difficult to achieve. A later chapter addresses the kinds of disciplines and courses that are made accessible to non-traditional students, which leads to new forms of stratification within an academy (HEA 2014b). For example, mature students study a predictable range of subjects with 30 per cent in health/welfare, 18 per cent in social science, business and law and a further 18 per cent in humanities (HEA 2014b). The high-status professions are dominated by the wealthy socio-economic groups and so forth. Bigger, deeper and wider does not always lead to equal access across departments and programmes and so access to work in the knowledge economy is also, by implication, highly stratified.

AN ALTERNATIVE VISION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

In such a diverse and seemingly contradictory and complex arena how can a vision of HE emerge? What key ideas ought to drive this third level sector? Who might our allies be for this part of the story? There is a noble history of ideals for university learning and teaching. In previous times, John Henry Newman and Humboldt were key contributors in articulating an agenda and mission for universities. Kant (2003) in his *Letters on Pedagogy* was clear about these goals and stated that democratic governments and education had the shared task of delivering for citizens support for their move from childhood dependence to adult autonomy. According to Kant democratic governments and education presuppose each other (Kant 2003):

There are two inventions of men (sic) which may be regarded as the most difficult of all, namely, the art of government and the art of education; and people are still divided as to their true idea. (Kant 2003, p. 346)

In addition, Kant made important distinctions between being trained and being enlightened with all the resonances that brings to current discussions. But democratic ideals of social justice and fairness take second place to those of the market economy. One would hope that the rationale for this preoccupation may be a deep concern for the devastating impact of poverty and emigration. The political emphasis is largely on creating employment, regulating a market economy rather than building a society. More recently, the critical theories of Paulo Freire, Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth are useful for articulating this purpose. In these differing perspectives, one can come to understand a vision of learning (Horton and Freire 1990) that as Chap. 4 explains, is not discussed in the public policy discourse. What is offered to non-traditional students as that to which they gain access is rarely the learning as such, but always an increased social capital and economic progress in the knowledge economy – and an increasingly stratified set of qualifications and other options.

According to Giroux, we are witnessing the breakdown of democracy, the disappearance of critical intellectuals and, quoting Mills, he argues that there is a “collapse of those public spheres which offer a sense of critical agency and social imagination” (Mills 2008, p. 200). Any view of a vibrant public sphere is missing from neoliberal market societies. It is taken for granted in the market-driven social and educational systems that it is common sense to strip education of its public values, critical content and civic responsibilities as part of its broader goal of creating new subjects trained for consumerism, jobs and the disappearance of the social state in the name of the individual and their expanded choices. The question of what kind of education is needed in order for students to be active citizens is rarely asked (Aronowitz 2008, p. xii). Rather than enlarge the moral imagination and critical capacities of students, too many universities are now encouraged to produce modes of education that promote a “technically trained docility” (Nussbaum 2010, p. 142). Increasingly pedagogy is in danger of becoming a mechanistic enterprise disconnected from understanding teaching as a moral and intellectual practice central to the creation of critical and engaged citizens. Though HE was probably never an idealised democratic and open experience or even truly liberal, the current pressure for change appears to be of a different order of intensity to any that has previously been attempted.

Habermas prompts us to see the university as a community of discursive reason or communicative praxis and we are most rational when we participate in communities characterised by free and unconstrained discourse,

i.e. democratic discourse. Critical reflection about assumptions and practices in various disciplines is central to this. If it does its work of critique, the university can create the very conditions necessary for a democratic society. The university according to Habermas carries out the functions of socialization, critical transmission of culture, political consciousness and social integration.

What might such a communicative university look like? There would be less emphasis on hierarchical authority and more on participatory decision-making; more dialogue than dictat; the elimination of corporate culture and the nourishing of self-government and a clear priority given to social justice and human rights. Pedagogy too would match this with social analysis, critical reflection and reconstructing the teacher–student relationship where both become co-investigators of reality. Students would be involved in all aspects of college life. And above all education would be redefined as an exercise in democracy that teaches democracy and aims to reproduce more democracy in classrooms, society and the work places.

Paulo Freire advocated that educators ought to work on the basis that their task is to assist students to know theoretically and critically what they know already – in other words to become aware of the assumptions they make as a result of being schooled and packed full of knowledge already from living, from experience and from the enculturation of their lives. To know in this way is to become a creator of the world, a creator of the society in which one lives. Universities have a role in this as they are places in which knowledge is both created and passed on to students, though not as passive recipients of knowledge (objects) but as active, creative and critical makers of knowledge (subjects) (Horton and Freire 1990, pp. 150–151). He was also aware of the broader contexts in which “education is no longer understood as formative but simply as training” (Freire 2007, p. 4). He asserted that:

The trickery of neoliberal economic discourses which affirm realities of homelessness and poverty as inevitable, the opportunities for change become invisible and our role in fostering change becomes absent. (Freire 2007, p. 4)

Axel Honneth is the most famous proponent of the third generation of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and he adds two important and educationally relevant points to the discussion. The first of these concerns the way in which the highly rational activity of critical reflection as articulated by Freire, Mezirow and indeed Habermas rests entirely

on an intersubjective base (Honneth 1995). The second concerns a reconfiguration of the concept of emancipation by his reworking of Hegel (Honneth 2014).

Without moments of recognition by parents of their children and by society of its members as citizens who bear rights (the right to free speech, or access to schooling), the possibility of critical reflection evaporates. The interpersonal recognition on which all teaching rests is a requirement of critical reflection. They mutually require each other. In an EU funded research project (RANLHE 2010), it was found that non-traditional students in Ireland to a great degree seek these experiences of recognition through HE. This is a far cry from the dominant language of the policy discourses in general and an affirmation that policy makers and end-users (students) may not be on the same page so to speak when it comes to designing access for non-traditional students to HE.

The second implication of the work of Honneth emerges from his rethinking of some of the important work of Hegel – not a person one is likely to run into in the policy corridors of power (Honneth 2014). Without reconfiguring Hegel here suffice it to say that freedom (that is such a key purpose for education) is achieved in a framework that includes the three areas of interpersonal relationships, work and the economy and democratic public spaces (Honneth 2014, p. 345).

Free market participants, self-aware democratic citizens and emancipated family members – all of whom correspond to the ideals institutionalised in our society – “mutually influence each other, because the properties of one cannot be realised without those of the other two” (Honneth 2014, pp. 330–331). A working democracy requires all sectors (family, work and democratic public sphere) to work in collaboration.

From the first sentence of *Freedom's Right*, Honneth (2014) states that freedom is the key value of modern life:

Of all the ethical values prevailing and competing for dominance in modern society, only one has been capable of leaving a truly lasting impression on our institutional order: freedom, i.e. the autonomy of the individual... all modern ethical ideals have been placed under the spell of freedom. (Honneth 2014, p. 15)

Freedom involves inhabiting a space where social life can be better. It involves the ability to realise one's own desires, intentions and values in the social environment of roles and obligations. As one might anticipate,

individual and social freedom are connected – and not in some vague or superficial way but essentially. In addition, he asserts that markets, interpersonal relationships and the spaces of public politics are best understood as places of potential social freedom. Places such as work, friendships, family, laws are all justified only if they promote, support and bring about a free society for all. But according to Honneth democratic possibilities in these spheres are being undermined by the pathologies of capitalism. These institutions can be evaluated as successful to the extent that they encourage and bring into being social freedom and a better life. Education and the right to education (though not referred to by Honneth 2014) may be seen as part of that emancipatory project. HE for emancipation is what is proposed.

Freedom of this kind is inherently social as it cannot be realised unless one is involved in the “we” of democratic will formation where the same weight is afforded to all the contributions of citizens (Honneth 2014, p. 261). This is reminiscent of Dewey’s affirmation that “democracy is a name for a way of life of free and enriching communication” (Dewey 1966, p. 148). It is also built on the *Theory of Communicative Action* of Habermas (1987). In this scheme, interpersonal relations, the markets, work and democratic relations provide the social conditions needed to improve social and living conditions (Honneth 2014, p. 274). A new vision of HE would involve supporting through tuition, seminars, its entire pedagogy and indeed management a new collaborative environment that supports and teaches and indeed learns how to be democratic in this way and support emancipation (Fleming, in print).

The critical role of education is to work in solidarity with workers and citizens to insert democratic imperatives into the system world. People may well have exchanged an active participatory role in the market place and in politics for greater comfort and occupational security offered by capitalism’s knowledge economy, which legitimates the social order in this way. This leads to a form of socially constructed silence and what is needed is a new ideology critique addressing this systematically distorted communication (Welton 1995, p. 153). That the political and economic elite believe that these issues are beyond the understanding of citizens and workers is part of the process that requires silence. The loss of dialogue changes and this silence is close to Freire’s “culture of silence” (1970, p. 16).

The very foundation of democracy is under threat from the monopoly of technical reason in our society. The forces of technical control

must be made subject to the consensus of acting citizens who in dialogue redeem the power of reflection. Educators have found in Habermas a social critique with which to analyse the dominance in education of technique and instrumental rationality. The preoccupation, as a result of such critique, shifts from prioritising how to get things done to realising genuine democracy and freedom. The psychologisation of education as an individual subjective learning process is a danger and the reliance on Habermas is mostly about securing a theoretical base for concepts such as adult learning that are intersubjective, political and social.

Rather than seeing the university as a collection of disparate departments and faculties and schools and centres, there is a unifying theme suggested by Habermas as a lifeworld. The university according to Habermas carries out the functions of socialisation, critical transmission of culture, political consciousness and social integration. As Ostovich summarises that “the university is a rational society, then, where reason is understood as communicative praxis and society is understood as lifeworld” (Ostovich 1995, p. 476). The role of the university is to be a community of communicative action, a community of communicative praxis. The danger is that too many courses focus on the utilitarian, that there are too many vocational courses to the detriment of courses and programmes that may be of benefit to one self and society rather than the economy. Too often courses focus on instrumental learning rather than communicative praxis. Too much emphasis is on career and the knowledge economy and not enough on one’s role in society. It is in danger of becoming training rather than education.

The aim of the university is to develop and respond to the needs of a democratic society. The university ought to attempt to create a community of reason – critical reason at that. This reason is communicative praxis and is discursive, and we are most rational as we participate in communities characterised by free and unconstrained democratic discourse (Ostovich 1995, p. 467). For Habermas, the university is a lifeworld, colonised now by the economy and state, in need of decolonisation by having particular kinds of free, critical conversations. The Strategic Plan of the University would be infused by the vision, ideals and political actions of critical reflection on unquestioned assumptions. Such a university would create a democracy and in the process teach democracy and create a democratic society. It would in the process redefine lifelong learning (Fleming 2006, p. 19).

CONCLUSION

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 participation 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 relationship. It 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 world-views. The university might then become a location for transformative rather than formative learning (Mezirow 1995). All may yet be redefined by adult education and non-traditional learners.

NOTES

1. This should be seen in the context of a 92 per cent staying on rate in post-primary schools (DES 2016).
2. The seven universities saw a 28 per cent decrease in state funding from €723 million in 2008 to €522 million in 2014. For the 14 IoTs, this was 33 per cent from €525 million to €354 million (Clarke et al. 2015).

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Access and Widening Participation – Stories from the Policy Domain

Andrew Loxley, Fergal Finnegan, and Ted Fleming

INTRODUCTION

In following on from [Chap. 2](#) our intention here is to critically explore the dimension of widening participation mainly through the prism of “access” in two main regards: (1) participants and (2) processes. As we will return to a more detailed discussion of the different equity groups in Part II, our purpose here is to structure the Irish access story so far, around four broad but interlocking themes which will be explored in this and the next chapter: (1) the way access has been defined, (2) the evolution of the legislation and policy related to access (including significant departure points and shifts in emphasis in this story), (2) participation patterns, (3) access programmes and pathways and (4) the vexed issue of funding. As such we will focus our attention on the policy and practices concerning access and widening participation (WP), which has been typified over the past 20 years by a continually shifting topography. As we alluded to in [Chap. 2](#), access can be seen as a policy space (to continue the metaphor), where a number of more generic tensions are crystallised between the state, HEIs, academics and students vis-à-vis the role and purpose of HE more generally. The access story we are telling is based on both the experiences of students as well as other empirical quantitative findings. In this chapter the statistics that tell their own tale are foregrounded.

As we also argued in [Chap. 2](#), the rapid expansion in HE participation during the early 1990s, from what Trow (1973) would characterise as an “elite” to a “mass plus elite” system, began to raise some uncomfortable policy questions around *who* was participating as students. As we will discuss below, the enlargement of the system largely benefited those social groups who already possessed the requisite “college knowledge” and material resources to enable their participation (Fleming and Murphy 2002; Lynch 1995; Whelan and Hannan 1999). The abolition of tuition fees in 1996 for full-time undergraduates, in conjunction with changes in the demographic in the traditional age-cohort (the 18–22-year-olds), second-level retention rates,¹ shifts in occupational structures (and aspirations), forecasts around human capital requirements, as well as the notion that HE should become more socially inclusive, provided both a rationale, as well as explanations for growth. This upward trajectory in HE enrolments from 1980s onwards can be seen quite clearly in [Fig. 3.1](#).

The issue of “who” participates was empirically not an unexplored territory prior to the 1990s. The work undertaken by Clancy (1982, 1988, 1995) on social class certainly pre-dates the expansionist agenda of the 1990s, and Lynch’s (1995) research on mature students signalled that the system had a distinctive profile. In short it was a system dominated by 18–22-year-olds and the “higher professional”, “lower professional” and “employers and managers” socio economic groups (SEG). The distribution by SEG as per Clancy’s surveys can be seen on [Table 3.1](#). However, the transliteration of these findings from being a sociological “curio” to that of a “national problem” seemed to have occurred in the early to mid-1990s.² The Irish state began to recognise that as part of its modernisation agenda for HE, a fair degree of intervention (and not just within HE but also across the compulsory education sector) was necessary as a tool for re-engineering class, cultural and personal horizons vis-à-vis under-representation (DES 1992, 1995a, 1995b, 1999, 2000). In short, participation in the Irish system, which not unlike other European countries (Woodrow 1996; EC 2000a, b), was also (and still is to a large extent) vertically and horizontally differentiated across an array of dimensions: in terms of institutions, SEG, age, gender, ethnicity, disability, programme choice (or lack of), modes of entry and geographical location to name but a few. To a certain extent, expansion of the system merely led to a deepening of participation by those

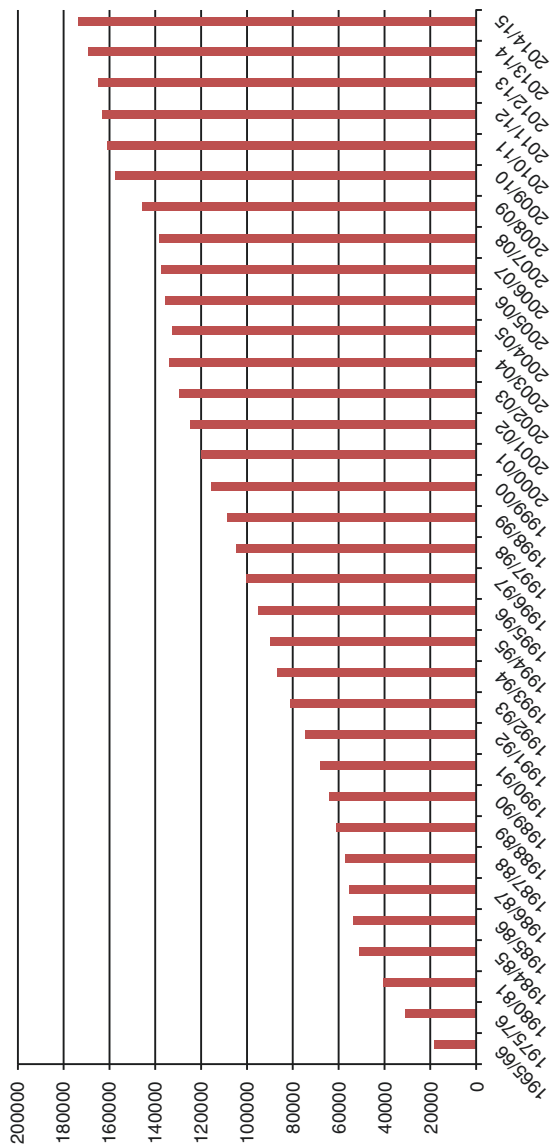


Fig. 3.1 Expansion in undergraduate participation: 1965 to 2013 (HEA 2015)

Table 3.1 Summary of Patrick Clancy’s surveys of new entrants to higher education by SEG (%)

	1980	1986	1998	2004
A. Employers and managers	19.5	18.2 (15.8)	21.6	20.5
B. Higher professional	11.8	12.0	10.1	9.8
C. Lower professional	7.1	9.2	10.1	10.3
D. Non-manual	11.1	–	9.4	7.9
E. Manual skilled	10.9	12.9	13.6	12.0
F. Semi-skilled	12.7	2.5	7.4	5.1
G. Unskilled	1.2	1.3	3.1	4.5
H. Own account workers	–	–	7.2	7.3
I. Farmers	21.1	20.8	16.6	11.3
J. Agricultural workers	0.9	1.4	0.7	0.3
All other gainfully employed	–	–	–	11.0

Source: Clancy (1982, 1988) Clancy and Wall (2000), O’Connell et al. (2006).

groups who had traditionally “availed of the facilities”, rather than a widening; that is, drawing in of those who had not (HEA 2006; McCoy and Smyth 2011; McCoy et al. 2010; Loxley and Kearns 2012). However, the problematic “who” in this context was mostly framed by policy makers in terms of the “equity groups”.

NAMING OF THE PARTS: WHAT IS ACCESS AND EXACTLY HOW WIDE IS IT?

One of the more problematic aspects of access is constructing a working definition which allows for a reasonable degree of conceptual and explanatory “grip”. In the elastic world of educational policy, it becomes a very free floating signified and even more floaty, when it is paired up with other problematic and contested terms such as “equity”, “equality” and “widening participation”. Whilst there is a relationship between these conceptual categories, it is neither necessary nor sufficient. How they are defined and instantiated in policy and practice is a convergence of the technical-rational and the ideological. The former being concerned with *how* access is undertaken and the latter with the values which not only shape the “subject”, but also set the limits to *what* is technically possible or desirable.

A Continuum of Access?

Analytically, it is useful to see access as operating on a continuum ranging from relatively simple mechanisms and routes into HE, such as alternative matriculation criteria and foundation programmes, to the other end, which encompasses comprehensive and integrated systemic change both inside *and* outside of HE. Needless to say there are many different shades and configurations along the way. Coming from the more commodious end of the continuum, there is for example Skilbeck and Connell's (2000) vertiginous and panoramic liberal (and meritocratic) definition. In their usage (which is vociferously echoed in the influential 2001 *Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education*),³ access becomes a grand label for processes which enable students to get in, stay in and successfully get out of HE. Seeing access as a subsidiary concept of "equity" they argue that:

access – fair conditions in preparation for admission to higher education and full participation in its benefits; attentiveness to the factors that might or do affect performance and progress of all students; and positive steps in staff recruitment and progression to ensure that careers are equally open to all talents. (Skilbeck and Connell 2000, p. 7)

This definition of access requires systemic and institutional self-reflexivity to guarantee a harmonious fit between student and HEI. However, by shifting the gaze onto the HEI, this raises a fundamental question of *what* do we do with those students who are not part of the traditional milieu? Essentially Skilbeck and Connell are discussing the processes within HEIs that are clustered around teaching and learning, and the array of cognate support structures. In its ideal state, this would lead to an environment which by *default* is inclusive across a range of dimensions (e.g. curricular, pedagogical, social and cultural) and capable of critical and reflexive interrogation of its own practice and through that, amenable to dialectical change. In this latter conceptualisation, the idea of access as a distinct category almost becomes redundant, as normative practices negate the need to differentiate across students, at least in terms of equity groups as they are currently construed. However, this notion of access which Skilbeck and Connell (2000) offer is one that is commonplace within the literature on inclusion in compulsory

education (see Thomas and Loxley 2007). The notion of “mainstreaming” (which is used in the HEA’s most recent access action plan) was a popular epithet used by pro-inclusion researchers and activists in compulsory education in the 1980s. In educational terms this impetus towards greater inclusivity is not at all new, but one which, if taken seriously, brings into question issues around the distribution and legitimisation of power in terms of pedagogical and curricula formations, modes of governance and accountability.⁴ However, the proposed changes in funding regimes (see HEA 2015a, 2016d), which increasingly shifts the financial responsibility onto the individual student (and their families), could very well undermine this intent, as it, consciously or not, reconstructs the “student as consumer”, as opposed to “student as educative partner” as we discussed in Chap. 2.

At the other end of the continuum, we can conceptualise access as a set of relatively unproblematic mechanisms that focus on enabling non-traditional students to literally gain entry into what already exists in curricular and pedagogical terms. In other words, access is about ensuring the student fits pre-existing structures and practices.⁵ This deficit model of access as argued above is built around a plethora of assumptions regarding the need to socialise (or re-socialise) potential students into a mode of being which makes them not only academically but also existentially and culturally prepared for HE. The moral panic over the transition by traditional students from post-primary settings into HE more generally is also seen as being part of this problematic (HEA 2013a, 2014c).

LET THE PRESSES ROLL: A REVIEW OF ACCESS POLICY PUBLICATIONS

For a small country, the Irish state seems to have acquired a habit over the past two decades of producing a large corpus of policy and policy related documents concerning HE and more specifically access and WP. Table 3.2 offers an overview of the core set of documents related to access and widening participation and as can be seen, they are also connected and interspersed with other texts concerning aspirations around economic development and social transformation. This opulent ensemble of interpolated policy texts weaves, like a Gogol novel, a rich narrative around social

Table 3.2 Key documents and legislative moments in Irish access and WP (1959–2016)

<i>Title</i>	<i>Date of publication</i>
The First Programme for Economic Expansion	1959
The Second Programme for Economic Expansion	1963
Investment in education: Report of the survey team	1965
The HEA Act	1971
Adult Education in Ireland: A Report of a Committee appointed by the Minister for Education (The Murphy Report)	1973
Report of the Commission on Adult Education (The Kenny Report)	1983
Education for a Changing World: Green paper on education	1992
Charting our Education Futures: White paper on education	1995
Report of the Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education	1995
Report of the steering committee on the future development of HE: Based on a study of needs to the year 2015	1995
The Universities Act	1997
The Education Act	1998
Green Paper on Adult Education: Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning	1998
Report of the Review Committee on Post-Secondary Education and Training Places	1999
Qualifications (Education and Training) Act	1999
National Development Plan 2000–2006	1999
Commission on the points system: Final report and recommendations	1999
Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education	2000
Access and equity in HE: An international perspective on issues and strategies (Skilbeck and Connell Report)	2000
Programme for Prosperity and Fairness	2000
University Challenged (Skilbeck Report)	2001
Report of Expert Group	2001
An evaluation of the targeted initiative on access of mature students in Ireland	2001
Achieving equity of access to HE in Ireland: Action plan 2005–2007	2004
Report of the High Level Group on University Equality Policies	2004
Towards a national strategy: Initial review of HEA targeted initiatives to widen access to HE	2004
OECD Country Report: Ireland	2004/2006

(continued)

Table 3.2 (continued)

<i>Title</i>	<i>Date of publication</i>
Achieving equity of access to HE in Ireland, Action plan 2005–2007	2004
The Institutes of Technology Act	2006
Progressing the action plan: Funding to achieve equity of access to HE	2005
Towards the best education for all: An evaluation of access programmes in HE in Ireland	2006
National Development Plan 2007–2013	2007
National plan for equity of access to HE 2008–2013	2008
Open and flexible learning: HEA position paper	2009
National plan for equity of access to HE 2008–2013: Mid-term review	2010
National Recovery Plan 2011–2014	2011
National Academy for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning: Consultation document	2011
National Strategy for Higher Education 2013–2030 (The Hunt Report)	2011
Towards a HE landscape	2011
Part-time and flexible HE in Ireland: Policy, practice and recommendations for the future	2012
HE system performance institutional and sectoral profiles 2012–2013	2014
Consultation paper: Towards the development of a new national plan for equality of access to HE.	2014
Expert group on future funding for HE: Funding Irish HE: A constructive and realistic discussion paper	2015
National plan for equity of access to HE 2015–2019	2015
Irish survey of student engagement	2015
Working group on student engagement in Irish HE institutions	2016
Investing in Ambition: A strategy for funding HE (The Cassells Report)	2016

inclusion and human capital development, which for some of the authors are conceptually, morally and politically indistinguishable. However, it seems that over a 10-year period between the mid-1990s through to the mid-2000s, there was an intense flurry of activity around HE and access. More recent policy interventions such *The National Strategy for Higher Education 2013–2030* (DES 2011), its related spin-off documents the “landscape” and “strategic dialogue” (HEA 2012b) documents,⁶

and the instigation of a so-called expert group on HE funding in 2014, are no less preoccupied with access. If anything quite the opposite has occurred, as access has become more, rather than less, embedded in HE policy.

It is possibly with some irony that the hive of activity around access is bookended by two recovery plans: the 1987 *Programme for National Recovery* and the 2011 *National Recovery Plan*. Both documents are quite apocalyptic in their stories of economic collapse, but nonetheless offer a lead role for education in the restoration narrative which they both articulate. Separated by 24 years, their refrains are an echo of each other in that the “Government recognize[s] the importance of the educational system in the promotion of equity in society” (IG 1987, p. 14) and the “importance to society of widespread and equitable opportunities for access to higher education” (IG 2011, p. 78). As can be seen from Table 3.2, the system was awash with policy position papers, commentaries, action plans and evaluations from the early 1990s up until the final gasps of the Celtic Tiger in the late 2000s. In the post-2009 context a very different modality is discernible in those documents. Far from treating access and WP as a social policy luxury item, it has, as with HE more generally, been bounced centre stage to be an integral part of the strategy for national economic renewal.

Making It Legal

Before discussing the specific documents, it is useful to mention what can be seen as an important marker of the seriousness with which the state has taken access through embedding it within HE legislation, a measure which was prefigured by the 1995 White Paper (DES 1995a).⁷ Whilst this legislation does not overtly determine the shape and form of how access would be constructed or co-constructed by institutions and their respective partners, it established at least legally, the necessity for HEIs to build it into their strategic and operational planning. As the notion of institutional “quality reviews” (conducted by groups internal and external to HEI) were also part of legislative framework, access and equality policy and processes would also be open to evaluation.⁸

The notion of access as being a legal duty for a named organisation emerged in the late 1990s within the 1997 Universities Act, the 1998 Education Act, the 1999 Qualifications (Education and Training) Act

(which established the National Qualifications Authority NQA)⁹ and finally with the Institutes of Technology Act 2006 after the sector became part of the HEA's administrative and funding framework.¹⁰ More specifically, the duties laid upon HEIs (and the then NQA) are quite explicit. As per Part Three Section 14 of the Universities Act, an institution shall:

be entitled to regulate its affairs in accordance with its independent ethos and traditions and the traditional principles of academic freedom, and in doing so it shall have regard to the promotion and preservation of equality of opportunity and access.

In Section 18, the Act is more specific and directs them to:

(b) have regard to the attainment of gender balance and equality of opportunity among the students and employees of the university and shall, in particular, promote access to the university and to university education by economically or socially disadvantaged people and by people from sections of society significantly under-represented in the student body.

To cement this even further, Section 33 instructed institutions to publish “statements and policies” not less than 12 months after the Act. Additionally and as part of the HEA's statutory requirements to monitor and evaluate the universities, a review was undertaken in 2003 of HEI equality policies. The report, published by the HEA in 2004 (HEA 2004d), made a number of observations and recommendations regarding the universities which although generally positive, found problems in key areas such as poor data and monitoring systems which to date has continued to be a reoccurring issue. Indeed, it can be argued that without any robust, sustainable and methodologically sound procedures (numerical and non-numerical), making any coherent evaluations of access plans would undermine any efforts to generate change or at least convince, one way or the other, of the merits of a national equity policy. However, one of the common refrains concerning the generation of such data is that its status and use can be ambiguous. On one hand it can function as a mode of formative assessment of an institution to support planning, but on the other,

indicators can be used in a more negative and punitive manner (Foucault 1979; Power 1999).

Identical legal directives can be found in Part 2 Sections 18 and 22 of the IoT Act (IG 2006), which signals an attempt to create an element of legislative standardisation across the two different sectors. In some respects the legislation was a crystallisation of the prevailing zeitgeist, rather than a progenitor, but nonetheless it can be seen to set down a marker in terms of commitment by the state to social inclusion, at least in the context of HE participation. Hence, access was not to be seen as a voluntary commitment to be made by individual HEIs, but one which should be a legally enforceable duty. However, as a measure of respect to HEI autonomy, at this juncture, institutions were left to develop their own practices. Though a more cynical view would suggest that the state was taking a “watch and wait” approach before adopting a more robust mode of intervention which appeared to be the case post-Hunt report with the use of the first generation of HEA-HEI compacts.

Once upon a Time?

If we have to identify a concrete and substantive starting point for the “access story” as a national policy initiative which began to set out a framework and pull together a range of initiatives, unrealised recommendations and future aspirations, then the *Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education* (DES 2001) is as good a place as any. The group was set up as part of one of the numerous recommendations stemming from the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* (Department of the Taoiseach 2000) report. This latter report was quite emphatic concerning the role of education under the section entitled “Framework IV for Successful Adaptation to Continuing Change” and mapped out a key strategic role from the early years through to late adulthood. The nine paragraphs on post-secondary schooling (numbers 23–31) outline the necessity for change around access into HE for mature and disadvantaged students and, in particular, the need for “adult friendly policies” and “flexible entry, delivery and accreditation” (p. 111). The *Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education*, which reported in May 2001, was an extensive 120-page document in which the authors put forward 78 recommendations¹¹ covering an expansive range of issues.

In distilling the 78 recommendations into their core elements, they comprise of (1) the setting up of the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education (NOEAHE), (2) the construction of the equity groups as official categories deemed in need of support, (3) target setting, (4) financing access and post-access and lastly (5) developing and providing a support infrastructure both pre- and post-access. To a large extent “3”, “4” and “5” represent generic issues and problems which amount to “how do you get them in and how do you keep them in?” Issue “2” is as much political as it is methodological, as the choice, conceptualisation and “measurement” of the groups are value laden and contested. Recommendation “1” was an obvious direction to take at this moment given the proliferation of pathways that were already emerging and priorities placed on different activities at different “levels” (e.g. HEIs, DES, Area Partnerships, post-primary schools) which folded into the access agenda (see Osborne and Leith 2000; Kogan et al. 2001, HEA 2004c). The need for some degree of national oversight seemed inevitable at this juncture as a means to co-ordinate (even if it was quite minimalist at this stage) and evaluate access work across the sector.

Moving Targets?

A common overarching narrative which emerged from out of the early documents was the need to set numerical targets for each of the groups. As a preliminary set of observations (and methodological and logistical issues notwithstanding), as policy instruments, the quantification of “need” works at a number of levels. Firstly, the targets function as a form of indexicality, as they link to groups or phenomena, which are deemed to be societally problematic. In this sense, targets are inherently concerned with a “deficiency” relative to norms regarding the distribution of, for example, social goods or life chances. Secondly, the interventions designed to increase participation can be viewed as a form of distributive (or re-distributive) justice. Thirdly, the targets represent a set of value judgements, which are being made not only about specific groups, but their relationship with others and the context(s) in which these relations are instantiated. The unequal and differential participation rates by SEG are a good example. Not only is it measured between groups, but also within groups. The concern around the under-participation rates by the “unskilled” SEG orientates policy measures

to increase their representation until parity is attained vis-à-vis other SEGs. Hence, the setting of one target for the “unskilled” only makes sense when related to other groups. Though ironically, measures are not taken to manage over-representation. The targets also function as political totems by which to mobilise action, as by their very nature they are prescriptive and intended to say something about an imagined future state. As such they can be used as metaphorical sticks or carrots within different discursive strategies to valorise or demonise HEIs, contingent upon the extent to which targets are met or missed. But how action is taken to expedite this future is highly contingent upon the broader HE regime (political, legal, financial, organisational and cultural) as well as the micro processes external and internal to HEIs. This in turn is also fundamental to the origin, as well as enforcement of the targets, which crucially pivots around the distribution and legitimation of power within the system. The discourse around the “audit society” vis-à-vis transparency and accountability, or Foucault’s notions of the capillaries of power, are useful insights into the way in which targets take on a normative function as they get embedded within a moral and symbolic order. And when viewed in the context of other indicators (such as census data) the targets take on a mimetic quality, a sliding scale as to the group’s presence or absence in absolute terms. Lastly, there is a social justice dimension to the use of categorisation and target setting which embroils them in a number of tensions relating to distribution of certain social goods, in this case HE and recognition, that these groups are or should be now equally valued as any other (see Fraser 1997).

The day-to-day implementation work was passed onto the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education (NOEAHE). Established in 2003, as part of the HEA, the NOEAHE has, as mentioned in Chap. 2, produced three action plans covering the periods “2005–07”, “2008–13” and “2015–19” (HEA 2004a, 2008a, 2015e). Discernible within the plans is an evolving narrative around the targets and in particular the fairly moderate ambitions of the first action plan published in 2004, to an extensive “Dear Santa” list of goals in the 2014 consultation and 2015–19 action plan. Also interspersed with the gradual ramping up of the target outcomes were the introduction of new objectives between 2005 and 2015. There are possibly two interconnected factors at work which have caused an intensification and extension to both policy objectives and target setting. The first is relatively prosaic and concerns the quality,

quantity and foci of data generation and collection. One of the refrains from the mid-1990 reports and the first action plan in particular has been the paucity of data to both set and evaluate targets.¹² As the data generation process has become more sophisticated in terms of not only procedures, but also projecting a sense of trustworthiness, so too has the range of indicators drawn into the access narrative. With the introduction of the “equal access survey” in 2007 in particular and the use of data from AHEAD, the DARE and HEAR schemes via the CAO, and more effective reporting by institutions themselves, much more is known (or at least is made publicly available) around HEI processes and activities. The current apogee of this comes in the form of the HEA’s (2015f) highly detailed “system performance” publication. As a document this seems to function as both an almanac and “score card”, offering a range of comparative indicators for each HEA supported HEI. Despite the large number of indicators, these are quite stark and bereft of context in which to interpret them. For instance the marked difference in research income between the IoTs and the universities, as well as staff profiles vis-à-vis doctoral qualifications, makes no mention of why this is the case vis-à-vis the different missions and genealogies.

The second factor is the changed relationship between HEIs and the state as mediated via the HEA. The negotiation of individual mission-based institutional compacts (see below) as part of the HEA’s much vaunted “strategic dialogue” (HEA 2012b) policy introduced a shift towards a more overt regulatory and evaluative regime. This needs to be seen as a departure from the state’s “steering at a moderate distance” approach, whereby state-level objectives would be set and coarsely monitored. In this environment, HEIs were largely left to set their own policies irrespective of the degree to which they actually “aligned” with national objectives. However, one of the consequences of this extension of control has not only been the emergence (circa mid-2000s) and expansion of an audit and compliance regime, but one which is constructed around entwined institutional objectives with stated national priorities (Walsh and Loxley 2015, see also Harkin and Hazelkorn 2015). The compacts, which were first introduced in 2014, represent a relatively new stage in the HEI–state relationship and have yet to be fully evaluated either in terms of content or intended affects. If anything, when stripped of the usual aspirational rhetoric, they are more indicative of an exploratory foray by the HEA into uncharted territory, rather than a full-scale invasion. In relation to access, an analysis of the

HEA-HEI 2014–16 compacts show a mix of key performance indicators (KPIs) regarding the equity groups; most refer to either increasing participation or maintaining current levels. Interestingly only one HEI (NUI Galway) has signed up to providing retention and completion indicators, though these are just for students with disabilities. However, this latter set of KPIs signals (for NUI Galway at least) a shift into, for want of a better phrase, the “process dimension” of participation, which has recently taken on the status of one of the latest HE moral panics for policy makers.¹³

What is absent at the moment is little discussion, at least in the public policy arena, in relation to constructing targets and indicators concerning “through-put” (e.g. progression and retention) and “outputs” (e.g. completion rates and postgraduation destinations) of the groups.¹⁴ This is an interesting omission given the recent focus on “employability” (i.e. embedding generic and transferable skills in and across under- and postgraduate programme) and graduate employment rates, as well as employer “satisfaction” surveys (EC 2014; HEA 2015g; IUA 2015). However, the third plan, as we will outline below, whilst in terms of headline targets represents no great departure from the first two, is qualitatively quite different. If anything it is emblematic of the regulatory state model which has emerged out of the processes which have followed the Hunt report of 2011.

ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION: THE NUMBERS GAME

In this section we shall briefly map out, in numerical terms, the patterns of participation and non-participation of various social groups and in particular those designated in policy vernacular as “equity groups”. Although we come back to these groups in much more detail in Part II, it is nonetheless useful at this juncture to see how they compare with the non-equity groups as well as each other. [Table 3.3](#) shows the distribution of the Irish population via SEGs and new entrants to HE from 1998 to 2015 (which is the latest available data).

[Table 3.3](#) offers a broad overview of firstly, what proportions of different SEGs make up the Irish population, and secondly their respective participation in HE via the percentage of new entrants from each of these groups. However, care does need to be taken when reading this data and in particular the new entrant participation rates, as it is

Table 3.3 % SEG Irish population and new entrants to higher education: As per 2011 census (CSO 2015) and HEA equal access surveys (2015)

	<i>1996 all population***</i>	<i>Per cent of population 1996***</i>	<i>2011 all population***</i>	<i>Per cent of population 2011***</i>	<i>Per cent HE new entrants 1998*</i>	<i>Per cent HE new entrants 2002*</i>	<i>Per cent HE new entrants 2011**</i>	<i>Per cent HE new entrants 2015**</i>
A. Employers and managers	412,516	11.38	705,132	15.37	21.6	23.1	18.7	16.9
B. Higher professional	160,801	4.43	295,586	6.44	10.1	11.1	10.7	10.5
C. Lower professional	290,373	8.01	556,587	12.13	11.1	11.5	9.3	8.6
D. Non-manual	613,285	16.91	931,068	20.29	9.4	8.9	9.3	10.0
E. Manual skilled	513,682	14.17	386,742	8.43	13.6	13.5	12	10.0
F. Semi-skilled	346,415	9.55	359,725	7.84	11.2	11.1	5.4	5.3
G. Unskilled	277,061	7.64	151,949	3.31			2.4	4.7
H. Own account workers	203,172	5.60	196,774	4.29	7.2	8.2	8.4	7.4
I. Farmers	309,102	8.52	166,231	3.62	16.2	21.7	7.7	6.8
J. Agricultural workers	76,296	2.10	23,504	0.51	-	-	0.8	0.4
Z. All others gainfully occupied and unknown	423,384	11.68	814,954	17.76	-	-	15	19.4
All socio-economic groups	3,626,087		4,588,252					

*From O'Connell et al. (2006) based on their new entrant surveys and Clancy (1998). **From HEA (2016c). ***CSO (2015). Note the % of new entrants² is calculated by using a numerator derived from the difference between the access survey respondents minus the non-respondents to the SEG question and not the actual number of new entrants.

generated from self-response questionnaires. This notwithstanding we can get a sense of which SEGs have, in their participation rates, shifted or not, over this 17-year period. One of the more significant changes over this relatively short duration is the change in proportions of SEG vis-à-vis the population as a whole. There is a significant increase in individuals being categorised in groups “A”, “B”, “C” and “D”; these have almost doubled in absolute terms. There has also been a corresponding decrease in those placed by the CSO (2016a) in the groups “E” to “J” (this is based on 2011 census data). This is of course essentially indicative of the larger changes within and across occupational structures that have been occurring over the past 30 years.¹⁵ What is noticeable is that HE participation as measured by “new entrants” has for some groups such as the “A” and “E”s remained fairly static – see also Table 3.1 for a point of comparison for other years – whereas for others (the “C”s, “F”s, “G”s and “I”s) there has been a dip and a sizable increase for the “B”s and less so for the “D”s. When placed in the context of HE participation as a proportion of a given SEG relative to its size vis-à-vis the population as a whole, a different pattern can be discerned. For instance the “B”s comprised of only 6.4 per cent of the population in 2011, but “sent” 14.1 per cent of its group into HE, also the manual-skilled group who have declined significantly since 1996, have increased their presence in HE. The same pattern is also noticeable for the “own account workers”. The “semi-skilled” and “unskilled” groups, although having declined in size relative to the others, have their participation rates in line with this. Table 3.4 shows the new entrants into HE in 2014–15 along with their estimated participation rates vis-à-vis the number of those in the age cohort between 17- and 19-year-olds.

Finally, Table 3.4 offers an historical perspective and sets out the distribution of socio-economic groups by highest educational level attained between 1981, 1996 and 2011 (CSO 1998, 2016a). This provides an overview of the way in which the “possession” of a given level of education is associated with each SEG, but again is more indicative of the change in occupational structures more generally. For example, the absolute number of those classified as “employers and managers” has increased by just over 100,000 people, the same volume as the “lower professionals”. Over the same period there has been a substantial decrease in “farmers” and “agricultural workers”. Again, care does need to be taken when interpreting this data, given

Table 3.4 1981, 1996 and 2011 SEG (in labour force) by reported highest level of education is a third-level qualification (by % and *n*)

	1981			1996			2011		
	Total	University	Total	Non-degree	Degree	Total	Non-degree	Degree	
A. Employers and managers	124,285	14.4	170,139	16.6	20.1	229,667	19.3	22.2	
B. Higher professional	81,866	61.7	80,007	12.4	83.2	97,269	20.8	61.5	
C. Lower professional	123,592	45.2	164,708	29.5	41.5	216,779	29.6	39.0	
D. Non-manual*	599,831	4.0	363,123	14.7	6.1	427,348	11.9	10.2	
E. Manual skilled	383,981	2.1	206,241	6.7	1.0	190,798	3.2	2.4	
F. Semi-skilled	135,285	0.7	166,999	6.0	1.5	192,652	5.4	4.0	
G. Unskilled	145,288	0.4	118,751	3.2	0.8	90,833	2.3	1.6	
H. Own account workers [^]	-	-	79,615	9.1	4.5	101,661	7.0	5.2	
I. Farmers	300,668	3.0	104,411	5.4	1.9	103,498	3.4	2.1	
J. Agricultural workers	69,037	8.4	35,326	8.7	1.9	14,277	4.2	3.2	
All other gainfully employed	-	-	44,644	3.3	3.6	311,338	3.7	3.2	
Total	1,963,833	61.7	1,533,964	12.1	13.3	2,008,774	11.0	13.5	

*For 1981, this is an aggregation of three CSO classifications for non-manual workers (“salaried employees”, “intermediate non-manual” and “other non-manual”), also “university” was the category used for that census year. [^]Was not used as a census category in 1981.

that SEG in some cases is a function of education, but nonetheless shows how the level of education attained has changed relative to each group, which in turn is mirrored in what are seen as occupational requirements.

Another perspective on differential participation can be seen via the category of schools from which students progress into HE. The most recent as well as reliable data for this comes from the DES (2013) school completion study. Table 3.5 shows the summary of their findings. As can be seen, 65 per cent of school leavers from fee-paying secondary schools headed off to HE, whereas for vocational schools this was 34.4 per cent and 47.2 per cent for non-fee paying secondary schools. In short, a student from a fee-paying school was nearly twice as likely to go onto HE than not and a student from a vocational school was almost twice as likely not to go onto HE. The progression rate into post-leaving certificate (PLC) programmes is even more pronounced. For fee-paying schools this was 6.8 per cent and vocational schools 23.7 per cent; though the latter is much in line with the other types of post-primary institution. What the study also reported was the disparities between the post-primary schools which participated in the “Delivering Equal of Opportunity in Schools” (DEIS) programme and those who did not.¹⁶ The progression rate from the DEIS schools into HE and PLCs was 24.2 per cent and 27.1 per cent,

Table 3.5 School leaver progression into higher education in 2010

<i>School type</i>	<i>All school completers</i>	<i>School completers who progressed onto HE</i>	<i>School completers who progressed onto PLC</i>	<i>% of School Type: HE</i>	<i>% of School Type: PLC</i>
Secondary fee paying	4,131	2,706	280	65.5	6.8
Secondary non-fee paying	27,908	13,161	5,335	47.2	19.1
Vocational	13,227	4,544	3,131	34.4	23.7
Community	8,155	3,118	1,834	38.2	22.5
Comprehensive	1,403	595	296	42.4	21.1
<i>DEIS</i>	<i>11,247</i>	<i>2,727</i>	<i>3,046</i>	<i>24.2</i>	<i>27.1</i>
<i>Non-DEIS</i>	<i>43,577</i>	<i>21,397</i>	<i>7,830</i>	<i>49.1</i>	<i>18.0</i>
Total	54,824	24,124	10,876		

Source: DES School Completers Study (DES 2013).

respectively, in comparison to the non-DEIS schools, which was 49.1 per cent and 18 per cent, respectively. In fairly blunt terms, a school leaver in a DEIS school was three times as likely not to go to HE, and more likely to go to a PLC than a non-DEIS student. However, we have little knowledge at this point in time about how PLC graduates, who are further education (FE) students, progress to HE.

Binary Divides

In looking only at the distribution of equity groups across the sector as a whole disguises what are a number of differences between the universities and the IoTs. In taking the spread of SEGs first, it can be seen on [Table 3.6](#)

Table 3.6 Distribution of SEG new entrants by sector, 2008 and 2014

	<i>University</i>		<i>IoT</i>		<i>Colleges</i>	
	<i>2008</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>2014</i>
A. Employers and managers	13.8	16.7	12.4	12.3	12.6	19.0
B. Higher professional	8.0	13.0	3.5	5.1	5.4	6.7
C. Lower professional	7.4	9.1	4.7	5.7	8.7	8.0
D. Non-manual	6.8	9.1	6.7	8.8	7.7	9.0
E. Manual skilled	7.7	7.6	11.5	11.1	9.7	7.1
F. Semi-skilled	4.4	4.0	5.5	6.0	4.6	3.6
G. Unskilled	1.9	3.3	4.1	5.6	2.4	2.9
H. Own account workers	5.1	6.4	5.5	7.1	4.3	5.9
I. Farmers	5.9	6.0	6.6	6.0	8.1	6.7
J. Agricultural workers	0.3	0.3	0.5	0.5	0.3	0.1
K. All others gainfully occupied and unknown	10.1	16.1	10.3	19.1	4.8	16.9
<i>% Non-response to SEG question</i>	<i>28.5</i>	<i>16.2</i>	<i>28.5</i>	<i>15.3</i>	<i>31.8</i>	<i>14.0</i>
<i>Total response to access survey</i>	<i>13,203</i>	<i>16,604</i>	<i>13,662</i>	<i>12,491</i>	<i>2,567</i>	<i>2,301</i>
<i>Total new entrants</i>	<i>18,521</i>	<i>20,241</i>	<i>18,521</i>	<i>17,779</i>	<i>2493</i>	<i>3,108</i>

Source: HEA (2016d) Equal Access Survey Data.

below that the universities appear to draw in a higher proportion of students from the “A”, “B” and “C”s than the IoTs. Whereas this is reversed with the “E”, “F” and the “G”s, the IoTs do better with the “D”s; the colleges roughly map onto the universities.¹⁷ The reasons for the differences in these patterns have yet to be explored empirically in much detail. Glib and simplistic recourse to “habitus” and “capital” or “rational choice theory”, whilst having some utility, cannot adequately capture the dynamics of choosing, as well as being chosen. So much of what we know about this distribution is rather patchy and speculative, but it is also important to note that programmatically the colleges, universities and Institutes of Technology are different.¹⁸ The IoTs do not offer much in the way of humanities and arts degrees, nor for professions such as law or medicine. Initial primary teacher education has also traditionally been the provenance of the colleges, which have become more embedded in the university sector since the DES’s acceptance of the “Sahlberg Report” on the provision of initial teacher education (DES 2012). Needless to say, geography, family income, school and cultural expectations, as well as the CAO points system all play a part in the reproduction of these patterns. Table 3.7 shows the distribution of mature and part-time students for the universities and IoTs from 2000, 2008 and 2015. Whereas the proportion of mature students as new entrants has increased across the IoTs since 2000 to 18.5 per cent in 2015, it has remained relatively static within the universities: 7.4 per cent in 2000 and 8.6 per cent in 2015. A similar pattern is also discernible for part-time students, with the IoTs expanding this mode of provision and the universities keeping it at much the same levels through the use of “reserved places”.

Disability

According to the last census undertaken in 2011 there were 595,335 people (or 13 per cent of the population) with a self-declared disability (CSO 2012); this was an increase of 201,550 from the 2006 census.¹⁹ More specifically in 2011, those between 15 and 19 years old accounted for 22,712 (or 8 per cent of that age group) and 21,080 (7.3 per cent) of 20–24-year-olds and 24,764 (6.9 per cent) of 25–29-year-olds with a self-declared disability. Very little is known about the distribution of different forms of disability vis-à-vis the Irish population as a whole and has generally made the process of target setting for the HEA highly problematic. However, as the access action plans have evolved

Table 3.7 Mature new entrants and part-time undergraduate enrolments by sector (%)

	<i>University</i>			<i>IoT</i>		
	<i>2000</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>2000*</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>2015</i>
<i>Matures: new entrants</i>	1,240 (7.4)	2,108 (10)	1,818 (8.6)	–	2,117 (13.4)	3,557 (18.5)
Males	–	844	863	–	1,069	2,133
Females	–	1,264	955	–	1048	1424
<i>Part-timers: all enrolments</i>	5,831 (8.8)	8,016 (10.2)	6,414 (7.6)	–	13,438 (21.2)	14,133 (17.8)
Males	2,161	2,904	2,390	–	6,769	8,354
Females	3,670	5,112	4,024	–	6,669	5,779

Source: HEA 2004a, 2012a, 2016c. *No data available.

(and with them data generation tools), they have moved away from the blanket designation “disability” to become more exacting in relation to the incorporation of students with specific disabilities (such as visual, physical and auditory) into HE. Whilst this is unproblematic from the perspective of inclusion in absolute terms, it is highly problematic when participation is “mapped back” onto the CSO data in the same way as SEGs are used as a form of benchmarking. The next problem is that data derived from the HEIs about students with disabilities comes in the form of AHEAD surveys and only include those who register with disability services. Although these surveys provide a relatively systematic insight into the distribution of students, it is nonetheless partial; needless to say not all students with a disability either wish to or see the need to register. In 2013–14 students with disabilities accounted for 9,964 or 4.7 per cent of all students; 925 were postgraduates and 8,769 undergraduates (AHEAD 2015).²⁰ New entrants registering with disability services in 2012–13 accounted for 2,337 or 5.6 per cent of all new entrants (AHEAD 2015); Fig. 3.2 shows the change in participation since 2008.

The Matures

The last equity group to consider are the “matures”. Similar to the SEGs, the matures have long been identified as a group whose absence from

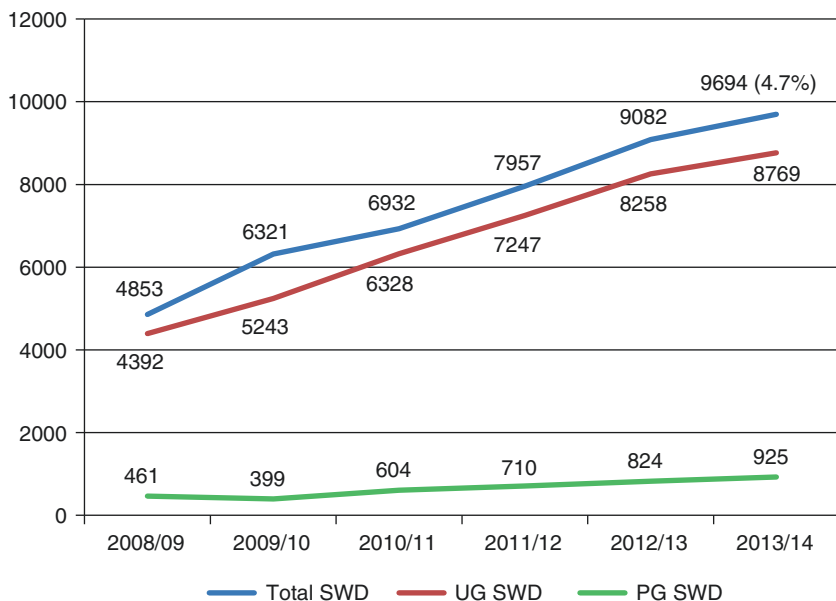


Fig. 3.2 Participation Rates by Students with Disabilities (SWD) 2008 to 2014
Source: Students in HE registered with Disability Services, Ahead participation report 2015.

HEIs is highly conspicuous either as full- or part-time students. [Table 3.7](#) shows the participation rates between 2000 and 2015 categorised by gender, mode of study and sector. What can be seen is that the IoTs seem to enrol more part-time and full-time students than the university sector, which is not surprising as the latter applies a “reserved” placed policy which seems to cap growth in numbers. There is also variability across the two sectors in relation to the number of part-time programmes being offered by HEIs.

REACHING THE TARGETS?

In summary, the first plan of 2004 set out the targets shown in [Table 3.8](#) below. Also included are the data from the 2006 annual review (HEA 2006), which reported the progress so far. By way of genealogy, the targets for SEGs were based on Clancy’s surveys and as recommend by the RAGATLE, they were specifically focused on those groups placed into

Table 3.8 New entrants: Targets and attainments

<i>Group</i>	<i>1998 baseline (%)</i>	<i>2006 target (%)</i>	<i>Outcome 2006 (%)</i>
Students with a disability	0.9	1.8	2.4 (2005)
Matures	4.5 (full-time) 22 (part-time)	10 (full-time) 30 (part-time)	9.4 (full-time)** 11.3 (full-time)***
Unskilled & Agricultural workers	16	27	33**
Traveller Community	Not provided	No target was set	–

2004 data; *as calculated by us using HEA (2007) data for 2006–07 new entrants. No data was provided for part-time enrolments.

the lower end of the SEG spectrum, that is, the “G” (unskilled) and “I” (agricultural workers) despite Clancy arguing that six out of the ten SEGs were also under-represented. The remaining four SEGs would also be focal points for intervention in later plans (as well as more extensive research commissioned by the HEA – see McCoy et al. 2010), but the bottom “two” would initially act as a starting point. The “mature” new entrants category was set at a baseline of 4.5 per cent (approximately 1,612 students). It is useful to note that the *Points Commission* (1999) recommended that mature undergraduate participation should reach 15 per cent by 2005 and 25 per cent by 2015 – we’ll see how that one worked out a bit later. The jauntily entitled *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* (Department of the Taoiseach 2000) argued that “colleges will aim to provide that, by 2005, 15 per cent of intake each year will comprise students age 23 or over”, a position reiterated by the RAGATLE authors. As shown below, these targets tended to be a little on the optimistic side.

The baseline data for students with disabilities were derived from a 1999 AHEAD survey undertaken on behalf of the HEA. As well as setting global targets for increasing participation, the RAGATLE argued that institutions also needed to be attentive to the different forms of impairment students may have. Though the report saw two major obstacles which consisted of (1) a lack of data concerning how many, as well as what type of disabilities there were and (2) concern over the monitoring and reporting procedures in HE. The category of “Travellers” and “Ethnic” minorities posed somewhat of a problem for the plan, as data were not available at the time to set any targets. The following comment made by the authors of the 2004 *Report of the High*

Level Group on University Equality Policies seemed to capture the zeitgeist:

The Team was struck by the relative lack of interest on the part of the university sector as a whole in this area, although several universities mentioned “a more diverse campus” as a stated aim. It appears that no effort has been made to keep figures, and there appears to be some confusion about the difference between nationality and ethnic background. (HEA 2004b, p. 44)

The first plan noted, however, that only 1.7 per cent ($n = 197$) of the Travelling community had completed HE in some form and in 1998 there were five people participating in HE; this expanded to 35 in 2012. It is worth noting that the overall number of adults holding third-level qualifications had fallen to 115 or 0.9 per cent of the Travelling community according to the 2011 census (CSO 2016b).

The second plan, published in 2008, was quite a different offering from the first. The relatively poor data generation procedures had begun to be addressed and the report seemed to be more confident in aligning itself with national targets and be more specific in its demands of institutions vis-à-vis not only the setting of targets, but also expanding the range of indicators. For instance, it discussed targets concerning national participation rates, flexible and part-time learning, non-standard entry routes and students with specific disabilities (e.g. visual impairments), along with the “lower” SEGs and matures in terms of both new entrants and total participation. A further addition was that targets were not specifically tied to equity groups categorised by the possession of “personal” characteristics such as disability, age or ethnicity, but also included modes of provision in the form of part-time and flexible learning.²¹ The latter is now referred to as “remote” learning, which is a more appropriate label, as due to historical reasons there has never been much flexibility in terms of programme provision in the system.²² Also included are targets within the vague category of “life-long learning”.²³ This became a feature of the second action plan and was bundled into the part-time and flexible learning objectives (p. 6). In summary, the second plan set itself a mix of long-term (to be attained by 2020) targets and more short-term (to be attained by 2013) targets. The former aimed for a national participation rate of 72 per cent of the relevant age cohort; according to the HEA in

2012, this reached 69 per cent (including mature students) though in the 2014 access consultation document (HEA 2014a) this was given as 52 per cent.²⁴ In terms of the SEGs, the report included the non-manual, and the semi-skilled, as well as the unskilled from the first plan; the agricultural workers were not included. All SEGs were expected to have an entry rate of “at least 54 per cent by 2020”; though the authors forgot to repeat what they had said on page 25, that four groups had passed this target in 2004.²⁵ However, it was the other four groups which remained an issue for the plan. In particular, the non-manual group with a participation rate of 27 per cent in 2004 was viewed as being a major issue and one which would persist into the 2014 consultation paper (HEA 2014a) which reported a fall to 23 per cent for the non-manual group in 2011–12. When set against the plan’s target of 37 per cent for 2010 and 42 per cent for 2013, either the targets were a little on the sanguine side or the HEIs and the associated pathways were not up to the job. A point we shall return to below.

The semi- and unskilled groups also suffered from a rush of over-enthusiasm on the part of the planners, with participation rates set at 41 per cent (2010) and 45 per cent (2013). These were also reduced to 30 per cent in the 2014 consultation paper as they too, as a combined group, had dropped from 33 per cent in 2004 to 26 per cent in 2011–12. For students with disabilities a more sophisticated approach was taken. Having what was seen as more fine-grained and robust data sets, the plan decided to set very specific targets for different sub-groups. For example, in 2003, those with a visual impairment numbered 76 and the authors set a target of 130 for 2013. For students with a physical or mobility impairment, the baseline was 175 (2003) and a target of 380 for 2013. Like the agricultural SEG, the category of “ethnic minorities” disappeared from the plan in terms of them being a distinct equity group or more specifically, being constructed as one. However, there was a recognition that the demographics of Ireland was undergoing a significant change in terms of inward migration and internationalisation and it was promised that “an assessment of trends in participation by ethnicity will be included in the mid-term review of this plan in 2010” (HEA 2008a, p. 37). Although the mid-term review did not report on participation, it did make reference to projects funded mainly through the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF), which had included attempts to diversify HEI intake vis-à-vis ethnic groups. The Travelling community was also discussed and similar to the first plan, no targets were set, but the

authors remained supportive of efforts to raise their profile in HE. Also added to plan was the broad category of “non-traditional entry routes” which would account for 30 per cent of new entrants by 2013. This included those who enter HE via the DARE and HEAR schemes and FE and access programmes. It is useful to note that the report did not disaggregate these different pathways into more specific targets; this was an anomaly rectified by the 2014 consultation paper and made “flesh” in the third action plan. Though according to Byrne et al. (2013), 5 per cent of new entrants had come via HEAR and for DARE it was 2 per cent. They also note in relation to DARE this indicator is also inadvertently part of the target for students with disabilities. Or more accurately, as one of the routes to achieving it, they note that the 2010 DARE eligible new entrants constitute 31 per cent of the all entrants with either a physical, visual or hearing impairment. The “matures” were set the targets of 20 per cent by 2013 for full-timers and a combined part-time and full-time new entrant rate of 27 per cent. It is worth noting that matures are the dominant group vis-à-vis non-matures in terms of participation on part-time programmes; in 2011, of the 1,600 new entrants, 88 per cent or 1,412 were matures (HEA 2013d).

Two final comments on the second action plan concern firstly, the issue of gender and secondly, regional inequalities. In relation to gender, this was absent in the first plan (despite forming part of the Action Group’s report), but was discussed in the second plan but only in context of the under-representation of males in HE (see pp. 37–38 of the plan). This seemed to be a missed opportunity to explore at a national level, the patterns of participation both pre- and post-entry to HE and in particular the relationship between gender, social class and labour force participation post graduation. The second issue, around differential participation rates in relation to location, that is, county and city, as well as rural and urban areas, were discussed in great detail in the RAGATLE. This was mainly undertaken in the context of enhancing and developing processes to support increased HE participation via local initiatives, for example, Area Partnerships, Community Groups, FE and HE based access schemes. Added to this were geographical issues relating to variable participation rates by county or region and lastly, alternative modes of entry such as FETAC Level 5 qualifications or HEI- and FE-based access programmes.

In summary this shopping list of concerns appeared to be structured around three broad categories: (1) membership of a particular group based on the possession of certain characteristics (age, impairment etc.), (2) spatial location and (3) programmatic features either as mode into (e.g. NFQ Level 6) or destination point (e.g. a part-time UG degree). Although this issue was to be acknowledged in the third action plan as an issue, the first two plans and all of the policy documentation ignored or were oblivious of the layered and intersectional nature of the debate more generally, and the multifaceted way in which being a non-traditional student is constructed, let alone experienced by them as individuals (see for example RAHNLE 2010). It is worth pointing out that [Table 3.8](#) shows the total extent of data to be found in the first plan, whereas [Table 3.9](#) below is positively baroque in comparison and demonstrates a newly found prowess in using and reporting data by the HEA. To save space, the data shown in [Table 3.9](#) are taken from second plan, the 2010 *Mid-term Review* of the plan (HEA 2010c) and the 2014 consultation, as well as other HEA-derived sources with some added re-calculations. Finally, the targets were also set within a broader frame of five “high level goals” (p. 40) which comprised of (1) Institution-wide approaches to access, (2) enhancing access through lifelong learning, (3) Investment in widening participation in HE, (4) modernisation of student supports and (5) widening participation in HE for people with disabilities. These were accompanied by no less than “34 action points”.

*This Way to the Future? The 2014 Consultation Paper
and the “Third Action Plan 2015–19”*

Prior to the publication of the third action plan in December 2015, in the 2014 “Consultation Paper: Towards the Development of a New National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education” (HEA 2014a), the authors in summing up developments since the first plan were somewhat guarded in their praise:

The system has made progress on increasing flexibility of provision and supporting access by students with disabilities but has fallen short on targets for under-represented socio-economic groups and full-time mature entrants. The report recommends these groups should be the particular focus of the next National Access Plan and work by

Table 3.9 Undergraduate new entrants data covering the period of the second “action plan”: Actuals (%) and targets (%)

<i>Group</i>	2007-8	2008-9	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2020
Mature: Full-time	10.9 (13)*	11	13.5	(15)	14	13	(20)	13	(16)
Mature: Full & part-time								19	(24)
Non-manual	10.8	9.5	9.6	9.7 (37)**	9.3	9.3	(42)**	23**	(30)**
Semi-skilled	6.7	6.6	5.2	5.3 (41)**	5.5	5.4	5.4	26**	(35)**
Unskilled	4.1	4.1	2.8	2.4	2.4	2.5	4.5		
Disabled [n]	(466) 4.2	4.7	6.0	(699) 6.4	5.5	6.4%	(932)	[740] 6	(8) (1,050)
Travellers [n]		0.12	0.1				0.1%	[35]	(80)
Flexible & [Part-time]	15 [p/t]	13.9 [p/t]	12.4	1.24 & [12.2] (13)	1.7 & [12.7]	1.7 & [12.9]	1.8 & [12.1] (17)	1.8 & [12]	(22)±
(This is for all UG enrolments)								6.6#	(10)#
Non-standard (FET, DARE, HEAR)				(27)			(30)		

*2006 Target; **refers to an increase in participation rates for the group only vis-à-vis 2011 census and not a proportion of all new entrants. The “plan” combines the semi- and unskilled groups into a single target category. § proportion of all part-time new entrants; 10% were “non-mature”. ± This now includes all UG and PG students and not just UG new entrants. #FE derived qualifications only.

regional clusters to develop more coherent pathways to higher education. (HEA 2014a, p. 6)

This “take home message” is largely repeated in the third “National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019” (HEA 2015e). Although the plan is in many respects a continuation of the first, with its focus on specific groups and enhancing pathways into HE, it does, as we argued above, represent post-Hunt, a more assertive set of state initiated interventions. In terms of targets (see Table 3.10), the groups have remained much the same as before, but with some adjustments.²⁶ Firstly, in addition to the usual groups, what represents a new development is a recognition of “subgroups that experience difficulties in participating...and require particular support... lone parents, teen parents and some people from ethnic minorities” (HEA 2015e, p. 14). The extent to which and how these groups will be “counted”, let alone “targeted”, will be interesting to see when the mid-term review is published in 2017. Secondly, the plan takes a more focused approach in dealing with under-representation vis-à-vis specific communities. Notably this was seen in relation to DEIS schools and anticipation of using the newly introduced postcode

Table 3.10 Equity group targets as per 2015 action plan (HEA 2015e)

<i>Equity group</i>	<i>2015 actual (%)</i>	<i>2019 target (%)</i>
Full-time mature entrants to HE (percentage of all new entrants)	13	16
Full and part-time/flexible (combined) mature entrants (percentage of all new entrants)	19	24
Non-manual worker group (percentage of 18–20 cohort)	23	30
Semi & unskilled manual worker group (percentage of 18–20 cohort)	26	35
Students with disabilities as a percentage of all new entrants to HE	6	8
Percentage of students studying on a part-time/flexible basis (all undergraduates and postgraduates)	19	22
Percentage of new entrants to HE whose basis for admission is a further education	6.6	10
Traveller community*	35	80

*n value

system (i.e. Eircode) to map out patterns of participation more precisely. Again this was an aspiration of the RAGATLE document, but largely unrealisable due to a paucity of background data. Thirdly, the “flexible and part-time” category has morphed into all participants both UG and PG and not just new entrants as previously set out. This is a curious melding of categories, as PG participation can be taken as a marker of successful progression and completion, but is now seen as an equity issue. Although concerns have been raised in the UK literature (Strike and Toyne 2015; Wakeling and Kyriacou 2010; Stuart et al. 2008) around differential PG participation mediated by SEG and type of institution attended as an UG, this has not yet emerged as an issue in the Irish policy. The plan is largely silent on why this group is included, as its fit within a lifelong learning agenda has historically been predicated on a very narrow human capital function (i.e. upskilling from NFQ level 8–9 or 10), rather than an access issue as framed by the debate since the mid-1990s. If anything, the expansion of PG, both master’s and doctoral, part- and full-time, has been one of the major successes of the Irish system (Walsh and Loxley 2015). There are problems, specifically around funding and fees, but this is largely seen as a distinctly different set of issues in relation to the world of UG education. Other than a vague reference to the Hunt report (which itself has very little to say on PGs), there is no discussion in terms of what kind of PG participation is seen as being either desirable or problematic. The same is also true of flexible learning, despite it being on the access menu for nearly a decade. The “non-standard” target disappeared to be replaced by a more specific one for students progressing into HE with FE qualifications. We will say more on this group below, but what is highly noticeable is that vis-à-vis the leaving certificate mode of matriculation, this cohort only made up 6.6 per cent (or 2,985) of the 42,464 new entrants (HEA 2015c).²⁷

As a final comment on the plan, although there is still a strong economic orientation in the text (see pp. 14–15), it is less bombastic in tone. The undercurrent of “its not what your country can do for you...” is tempered by a more democratic and inclusive sensibility more akin to the RAGATLE document. Only one of the eight “principles that inform the national access plan” (p. 15) makes reference to “skills” and this statement is largely devoid of the ironically inhuman human capital discourse which has come to dominate more recent policy proclamations nationally and internationally. The principles appear to be

aimed at generating a cultural, rather than a structural (i.e. mechanisms and processes),²⁸ shift in perceptions, aspirations and evaluations made of HEIs by the target groups and their communities. To some degree, the third plan has echoes of the RAGATLE, in that there is an imperative to nurture a change in practices within HE; that is, for them to become more attuned to the academic and non-academic needs of an increasingly heterogeneous set of students.

In addition to the “principles”, the plan also set out five “priority goals” (HEA 2015c, p. 23) with the first being “to mainstream the delivery of equity of access in HEIs” and the second “to assess the impact of current initiatives to support equity of access to higher education” (i.e. the money issue).²⁹ And accompanying each of the goals are a raft of 25 linked “objectives”, “actions”, and “key performance indicators”. Space precludes any detailed discussion of all “25”, but as an example with “goal one”, there are eight very specific objectives, some of which are institution focused such as mentoring post-entry, the mainstreaming of support services, ensuring goal alignment to the action plan which are embedded in their compacts, to more diffuse across the sector CPD objectives involving the National Forum for Teaching and Learning. This detailed setting of goals and objectives, including that of numerical indicators, goes far beyond the other two plans’ attempt to gently coax HEIs to develop their access agendas. To a large extent, this form of intervention is indicative of the shift by state over the past 8 years into its much stronger regulatory and evaluatory position, which we referred to above. The rhetorical, as well as structural, emphasis on the twin approach of meshing cross-sector strategic partnerships and alliances, with individual HEI autonomy, can be traced back to Hunt and prior to that the PRLTI and the SIF. The plan essentially sets out the broad sweep of this purportedly more integrated approach to access and its lack of specificity around the content of some of the targets, such as flexible learning, will be something which gets operationalised at the level of HEI-HEA compacts. Indeed, the latter, which is only mentioned in passing in the plan, will we suspect become a key tool through which access policy is pursued. This is important, as it provides the HEA with a capability to integrate its objectives not only across the sector, but also within individual HEIs in a much more forensic and fine-grained manner than previously. In turn this throws up a tension between academic freedom and HEI autonomy and the increasing and incremental shift into micromanagement of institutions.

Hunt, Landscapes, Dialogues and Compacts

As a final comment regarding the access policy landscape, it is essential to situate the last 5 years in the broader context of the National Strategy for Higher Education: 2013–2030 (DES 2011). Although a thoroughgoing review of HE was proposed in the 2007–2013 National Development Plan, and ostensibly dressed up as an attempt to future-proof the HE system, the report was primarily a response to the economic collapse of 2008 (see Walsh and Loxley (2015) for a policy-orientated critique). Taking nearly 2 years to complete, the report has dominated the system, not so much in its structural effects (though these should not be underestimated), but in its very strident and vigorous re-assertion of the human capital thesis.³⁰ Taking this as both its central motif and guiding axiom, the report comprises two-thirds corporate brochure speak for Ireland PLC and one-third self-admonishment. For a document that is largely centred around the pursuit of embodied knowledge in the form of the student, the authors had very little to say about them. Bounded by unsubstantiated platitudes concerning the (poor) quality of teaching and learning, the imperative to infuse some market discipline via (yet more) student and employer surveys into the system, the concept of access and WP is firmly embedded in their lumpen use of human capital discourse. However, what also came out of the report was the (borrowed from the UK 1997 “Dearing Report” which appeared to have borrowed from the 1988 “Dawkins Report”) notion of negotiating with individual HEI-HEA institutional compacts. The compacts, which we mentioned above, emerged out of the so-called strategic dialogue process engendered by the Hunt report, and can be seen in a counter-measure against what the authors saw as too much *laissez faire* activity in the system. Whilst on the one hand, the report articulated a normative vision of the HEI as being an exemplar of entrepreneurial values and practice spread across all its activities, from the purchasing of toilet paper to the commercialisation of basic research, on the other hand, these Ayn Rand impulses needed to be tempered. One of the key “take home messages” from the Hunt report was a view that there was a lack of alignment between individual HEIs and what the state needed in terms of labour market requirements and knowledge production priorities.³¹ The tempering has come in the form of the compacts, essentially contracts to manage what the authors of the report saw the principal-agent problem between HEIs and the state.

CONCLUSION? FROM BUST TO BOOM AND BUST (AGAIN)

Dear John?

In a letter dated May 2013 and addressed to the chairman of the HEA John Hennessy concerning the issue of the newly instigated performance review for HE, the then minister, Ruirí Quinn, placed number two, in his list of seven tasks for the system, the requirement “to promote access for disadvantaged groups and put into place coherent pathways [into HE]”.³² Number one was unsurprisingly “to meet Ireland’s human capital needs across the spectrum of skills by engaged institutions through a diverse mix of provision”. Nowhere in the list was any reference made to social justice, cultural enrichment, citizenship or the enhancement of democratic and civil participation. In just a little over a decade before the “Ruairi Letter”, we would argue that there was a different *zeitgeist* floating around Irish access and HE. The authors of the (highly extensive and influential) 2001 *Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education* in their introduction extolled the view that education contributes to the:

quality and well-being of Irish society . . . [through playing] a crucial role in the social, intellectual, cultural, economic and political life of the country. And that widening opportunity for and in higher education has many benefits in strengthening democracy, achieving economic and social progress, advancing human rights. (p. 13)

If their opening salvo was a panegyric swoop towards a future where participation in HE was an exhortation to societal renewal and progress, then Minister Quinn’s was a post-it-note message to remind *you* to stop in at your local university or IoT for 3 years on your way to job centre. Although the economic value attached to participation was, historically, never too far away in most state discourse (a random pick of any of the documents listed in [Table 3.1](#) should suffice), it was not, as appears to be at this moment, the only reason to pursue it as a policy objective. As Fleming and Murphy (2002) remind us, access has always tended to serve two broad aims: economic development and social inclusion.³³ And how these two are mixed together are contingent upon prevailing political orthodoxies and regimes.

It would seem that in less than half a generation, the constellation of enlightenment values underpinning access and widening participation have been left aside. What has remained is a seemingly one-sided social contract built around the axiom of labour market activation. As we will discuss below, this reorientation is not merely one of rhetorical mollification towards those “stakeholders” less infatuated with the idea of HE as a place of social, cultural and personal invigoration, but marks a structural, as well as socio-political shift away from the pluralistic possibilities of HE. This realignment is poignantly captured in the HEA’s 2014 consultation document in the following “call to arms”:

It has been common practice to situate the equity of access agenda in the context of the human right to personal development. This is still a driving force of policy. But added to it is a new imperative – Ireland needs more people with higher level skills and many of the more affluent socio-economic groups in Ireland already have participation levels at, or close to, saturation. We need urgently to tap into the deep reservoirs of disadvantage – for the good of the individuals concerned and sound economic reasons. (HEA 2014a, p. 7)

Needless to say, this statement contains the seeds of its own self-parody. This shift is also highly noticeable at the supranational level and most notably within (to give one example) the European Commission’s 2014 “Access, Retention and Employability” report (EC 2014). The social dimensions, whilst being acknowledged, are largely absent in any great detail. Again it also highlights the precariousness of competing values and priorities as economic crises tend to dominate the discourse. The current situation is not dissimilar to Offe’s (1984) observation concerning the state’s requirements to manage (yet another) legitimisation crisis around balancing the need to maintain its own status, as well as secure the conditions for capital accumulation. Irrespective of how shrunken the state becomes or globally fluid capital is, even the most strident neoliberals begrudgingly see the state as necessary for the maintenance and regulation of certain activities for which the market was not an entirely appropriate mechanism (see for example Smith 1776; Hayek 1944; Popper 1945; Freidman and Friedman 1980; Nozick 1975).

NOTES

1. It was predicted that with a fall-off in the number of available 18–22-year-olds due to a dip in the birth rate, this would free up capacity in the system for non-traditional students without the need for extra expenditure to accommodate them, at least in the short term. Also, the proportion of second-level students staying on post-16 was 82 per cent in 1995. In 1980, this was 50 per cent and in 1965, 20 per cent (DES 1995a). The number of students sitting the Leaving Certificate, the main matriculation route in to HE, was 38,336 in 1981, 53,843 in 1995 and 56,989 in 2014, which also pushed up demand for places. What is interesting to note is that for nearly two decades the number of students sitting the Leaving Certificate has remained fairly static despite the increase in post-16 participation. For instance, the Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational accounted for 25 per cent of the 155,480 students enrolled in senior cycle programme in 2015, with 52 per cent taking the Leaving Certificate and 25 per cent on a transition year course. An additional 33,000 students were enrolled on post-leaving certificate courses based in second-level institutions (DES 2016).
2. See Fleming and Murphy (2002) for a concise and well-argued overview of this period. Also Murphy (2009) and O'Reilly (2008) who have both provided interesting evaluations and commentaries on Irish access policies and programmes on this early period.
3. There are also tiny little squeaks of this in the third National Plan for Access to Higher Education 2015–19 (HEA 2015c) regarding what the authors refer to as “mainstreaming” access practices.
4. See the 2016a HEA document “Working Group on Student Engagement in Irish Higher Education Institutions” for an account on how some of these issues are being conceptualised in the Irish context and in particular the ten “principles of student engagement” (pp. 48–51) appear to be a well-meaning attempt to avoid the naked transactional disinterested nature of market relationships.
5. In the 1980s, the converse of “mainstreaming” was the epithet “maindumping” which referred to the practices of placing children with SEN into mainstream school with little or any commitment, support structures or mechanisms.
6. This document sets out in detail how the Hunt Report was going to be actualized. Within it the authors placed a very strong emphasis on the development of HEI regional alliances, proposed a rationalization of the IoT sector via (but not exclusively) the formation of a small number of technological universities (see Marginson 2011a; IG 2015) and the HEA-HEI compacts, which are meant to be the outcome of the “strategic dialogue” to ensure greater alignment between individual HEI missions and national economic

- and social priorities. This latter notion (though not in the form of compacts) was one of the recommendations made by the OECD (2004) review.
7. The White Paper advocated the drawing up of institutional specific policies to improve access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and geographical areas, the national abolition of tuition fees and an increase in maintenance grants (p. 107). It also recommended “reducing and abolishing fees for part-time students” (p. 107) which is still being discussed 21 years later. Interestingly, gender as an equity issue formed part of the paper and subsequent legislation (as well as Skilbeck and Connell’s 2000 report), but was never translated into an explicit equity group in any of the national access plans despite it being identified as an issue in the Expert Group’s Report (HEA 2001) and a persistent and enduring problem in relation to disciplinary choices made by students and particularly so in the STEM subjects.
 8. This comes under Section 35 of the 1997 Universities Act which places the responsibility for organising and conducting external institutional reviews on the sector itself.
 9. In 2012 the NQA was merged with FETAC and HETAC (also products of the 1998 Act) via the Quality Assurance Authority Ireland Act (2012) to become the “Qualifications and Quality Ireland” agency; the same reference to “access” remained in this new legislation as per the 1999 Act.
 10. It is useful to note that other than the 1933 VEC Act, HEA Act 1971, National Council for Educational Awards Act 1979 and the 1992 RTC Act, there was not much of a culture of legislation in relation to education. Also in relation to the 1998 Education Act, much of this legislation was focused on the compulsory sector but with occasional reference to post-compulsory settings (including HE) in the form of “centre of education”. The Institutes of Technology Act (2006) represented a transfer of responsibility and oversight from the then Department of Education and Science to the HEA. This brought all of the state-supported HEIs under one administrative unit. The Act itself is an echo of prior IoT acts (1992) affirming their role and function in the system, but also an endorsement of the 2004 OECD Country Report affirming and reinforcing the Irish binary system. It is also useful to note that access and participation were not features of the earlier IoT (or the then Regional Technical College) legislation.
 11. Including the chairperson, the 21 members of the group were a veritable rainbow coalition of partners ranging from students, employers, academics, access officers, community workers, educators and school principals.
 12. See for example the National Statistics Board reports *Developing Irish Social and Equality Statistics to meet Policy Needs* (2003a) and *National Strategy for Statistics* (2003b) both of which highlighted a range of shortcomings

across a range of state agencies and activities (housing, education, health, transport etc.) in terms of monitoring, evaluation and planning.

13. This has taken the form of monitoring and evaluating HEIs on the basis of student progression (HEA 2016b, 2013b, 2010a), as well as the newly introduced national student engagement survey (HEA 2015h) and attempts to re-engineer what are seen to be problematic transitions into HE for certain types of students. However, the former are fairly crude indicators and at best (and this is acknowledged by the reports' authors) provide only a partial insight into non-progression. The data generated are limited to characteristics such as age, field of study, SEG and institutional type; nothing is known in relation to subjective factors such as intention, motivation or situational factors which are commonly referred to in the student persistence literature as key variables.
14. See also Quinn's (2013) EU-wide study of retention and completion amongst "under-represented groups". Though as part of the UK's recent "National Strategy for Access and Student Success in Higher Education" (DBIS 2014), it is intended that output data, monitored by the Office for Fair Access, will become part of HEI's reporting requirements (see pp. 86 and 99).
15. This is even more marked with a fine-grained analysis of what the CSO refers to as "broad occupation groups". Even making a comparison between 1996 and 2011 data is problematic due to loss and emergence of new groups.
16. The DEIS programme which began in 2005 includes 315 or 20 per cent of all primary schools and 189 or 26 per cent of post-primary schools. The focus of the programme has been to provide additional supports mainly in the form of additional personnel to schools which are deemed to exhibit considerable social disadvantage across a range of indicators. See DES (2005) and Smyth et al. (2015) for further details and evaluations of the scheme.
17. As ever care needs to be taken when reading this data in Table 3.6 between the 2 years and across the sectors due to (1) the variable response rates and (2) the problems involved in translating the students' descriptions of their parents'/careers jobs into CSO categories.
18. Total enrolments in the "arts and humanities" in the IoTs for 2015 accounted for 11.8 per cent (7,719) of students, whereas for the university sector this was 23.1 per cent (17,950). For "business, administration and law" both sectors had similar levels of enrolments i.e. approximately 13,000 students each. Though the IoTs had a higher number of students in "Engineering, manufacturing and construction" (10,368) than the universities (6,352).
19. It is important to note that census respondents indicate what their disability is without the need for verification.
20. In 1998–99 there were 1,367 undergraduates and 42 postgraduates.

21. See MacKeogh and Orbanova's (2002) HEA sponsored study into the potential demand for HE participation by the "matures", that is, adults over the age of 23. The findings make interesting reading; from their national sample of 640 participants who completed their questionnaire, there was little demand for full-time (13 per cent) provision, a high demand for distance modes of study (48 per cent) and moderate interest in part-time participation (19 per cent). They also found that choice of programme was related more to "personal interest" than employment prospects.
22. For the HEA's first major foray into this policy arena see the 2009 Consultation document (HEA 2009) and the subsequent report "Part-time and flexible higher education in Ireland: Policy, practice and recommendations for the future" (HEA 2012a).
23. In comparison with other EU and OECD countries, Ireland's rate of participation in lifelong learning activities is relatively poor. According to the Expert Group for Future Skills' (2015) report based on 2013 data, "at 7.3 per cent on average for 2013, Ireland was below the EU average of 10.5 per cent; Ireland also lagged significantly behind the top performing countries such as Denmark (31.4 per cent), Sweden (28.1 per cent) and Finland (24.9 per cent)".
24. The calculation of age participation rates can be quite problematic as it is contingent upon the formula used and the source data. Though interestingly the proportion of any age group in HE is much lower. For example in the 2014 census there were 54,025 who sat the leaving certificate exam. Using CSO census data for 2011, this is approximately 95 per cent of that age group. In the same year, the HEA headcount for 2015 new entrants (age 18 on 1st January) of the same age was 13,956. This gives a participation rate of 24.5 per cent. For the data supplied in the 2014 consultation document (HEA 2014a)
25. Employers and Managers = 65 per cent, Lower Professional = 65 per cent, Own Account Workers = 65 per cent, Farmers = 89 per cent and Higher Professionals = 100 per cent.
26. (1) First time matures, (2) students with disabilities, (3) part-time and flexible learners, (4) FE award holders, (5) Irish Travellers and (6) under-represented SEGs.
27. In 2014, 17,460 Level 5 and 4,700 Level 6 programmes were awarded in the FE sector (this does not include non-state supported institutions). 15,958 award holders applied for a HEI (state supported). The total number of applicants for 45 HEIs via CAO was 78,402 with 35,428 acceptances for Level 7 and 8 programmes (CAO 2014).
28. Though there is a focus on the use of a wider range of NFQ Level 5 and 6 qualifications earned via FE routes, as well as interconnections and partnerships between FE and HE within regional clusters.

29. The other three goals are (1) “to gather accurate data”, (2) to foster “regional and community partnerships” and (3) to “build coherent pathways from FE”.
30. Though it is useful to note that the National Development Plan 2007–2013 (before it was superseded by the National Recovery Plan 2011–2014) discussed at length the need for a system level review.
31. Economists would refer to this as an example of the “principal-agent problem”, that the HEIs – the agent – are acting in their own interests which may be contrary to that of the principal; in this context the state.
32. Of the many post-mortems undertaken following the death of the Celtic Tiger, Irish HE was subject to a highly public evisceration. Like most of the public sector, HE was treated as one of the culprits for the downfall of the Irish economy and like the accused at a Salem witch trial, pronounced guilty of profligate behaviour even though all the evidence, including the governments’, was to the contrary (see Loxley 2014; St. Aubyn et al. 2009; DES 2011).
33. Though the latter has morphed (as per the Ruairi Letter) into the more morally and conceptually dubious notion, “social cohesion” replete with feudal overtones.

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Routes in: Access Categories, Mechanisms and Processes

Andrew Loxley, Fergal Finnegan, and Ted Fleming

GETTING ACCESS TO ACCESS

Our intention in this chapter is to map out the current routes into HE which are open to non-traditional students. Alongside this mapping exercise, we will also discuss some of the cognate issues around student finance which we touched on in [Chap. 3](#). Although student finance is but one component of being a student, it is highly significant and particularly so for those from the “lower” socio-economic groups (SEGs) whom the state wishes to draw into HE. The economic recession, which began in 2008, affected the resource environment of Irish HE considerably. The “we can do more with less” has become the refrain of the past 8 years. As we remarked in [Chap. 2](#), a diminished overall resource across the sector has led to increased staff–student ratios, an increase in student numbers and casualisation of teaching staff, a fall in research rankings (for those who worry about such things) and staff numbers (see also Clarke et al. [2015](#)). This continued resource squeeze is undeniably part of the movement by the state to wean HEIs off public money and force them to become more self-sufficient – again another avowed aim of the Hunt Report (DES [2011](#)) and reflected in the review of sector funding in light of this (HEA [2015b, c, 2016d](#)). As we have witnessed since 2008, it has been the most vulnerable and marginal who have paid, as Captain Aubrey would put it, the “butcher’s bill” for Ireland’s version of austerity politics.

While there is a fairly extensive body of policy work and educational scholarship examining HE as a system in terms of pedagogical processes, structures and practices, we know relatively little about access offices and access practitioners. We have detailed system-level descriptions of what access is supposed to do and research on student experience (Loxley and Kearns 2012; Finnegan 2012; Fleming et al. 2010; RANLHE 2010). This small but growing body of work indicates just how crucial and significant the work of access offices has been in creating space for some of the non-traditional students in HE. Repeatedly, students have suggested that the work of access offices helps them with academic confidence and is also important in the creation of peer networks in the first year. Sometimes students would describe their time on an access programme as the best part of their whole college experience and especially in terms of pedagogy. However, there is, and this reflects the politics of academic research, only a handful of studies which take access offices and practitioners as the primary focus (O'Neill and Fitzsimons *forthcoming*; O'Reilly 2008; Murphy 2009). In particular, O'Reilly pointed out the need to link post-entry supports and practices across undergraduate studies so they mesh with those experienced on access programmes. In short, it is not enough to just prepare students for HE and “let them go”, but there needs to be a seamless evolution into undergraduate life. The extension or “mainstreaming” of this culture of support and cognate structures into HE more generally, was seen by the last HEA access plan (HEA 2015e) as being highly desirable. However, as the old saying would have it “an ‘ought’ does not make an ‘is’”. This lack of a critical evidence base does not specifically apply to access programmes, but the extensive and intensive community outreach work as well. This has long been a part of the access terrain, but again little is known about the minutiae of this work in order to see how this mode of practice can be embedded (if deemed appropriate) into HE. We need to be mindful that what may well work in one context can not easily (if at all) be readily transposed to another without losing what is distinctive and unique. What we do know about access programmes is that these are numerically small in terms of student numbers and offer an intense pedagogical experience, which in a situation of deteriorating staff–student ratios in HE may well lead to an unrealisable promise in the push for “mainstreaming”. Looking at this from another perspective, there is also potential that “mainstreaming” may also lead to the colonisation of access. Specifically the “cherry picking” (as the cliché runs) of practices which appear to be the least problematic in relation to making them

fit “mainstream” HE which causes the least amount of disruption in terms of structures and resources. Or as we will discuss in [Chap. 11](#), mainstreaming may become a way of introducing counter-hegemonic pedagogical practices which work against the current neoliberal doxa.

LET THE RIGHT ONES IN?

Even the most seemingly mundane and neutral social action, such as the organisation and management of entry routes into HE, are ideologically inscribed. This becomes even more salient as entry onto access programmes (as well as into HE more generally) is mediated by a highly selective and competitive process, whose value position can be inferred from the criteria applied. Needless to say, these gatekeeping mechanisms are intricately bound up with technologies of social reproduction/change and exclusion/inclusion, which we discuss in [Chap. 5](#). The recent debate concerning the development of new modes of matriculation for traditional students other than the circumscribed use of Leaving Certificate “points” is a prime example (Humphreys 2015) and pivot around the quality–quantity debate in terms of *who* and *how many* will be allowed access via any entry process. In addition to this, there is the so-called reserved places system (i.e., quotas) used with both mature students and those with National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Level 5 and 6 qualifications gained in the Further Education (FE) sector. Needless to say, this can be viewed as the application of mechanisms to control not only access but also the student “mix” by some HEIs not to dilute, as the OECD would say, the “human stock” too much. In a broader sense, these filtering technologies are also entwined in the institutional application of symbolic violence (aka the conferment of accreditation) and the justifications through which these processes are legitimated as being “fair” and “transparent”.

Currently there are five main routes into Irish HE institutions which can be used by different “types” of applicants. This is not to exclude the network of “consciousness raising” (or for the more sceptical “marketing”) programmes, which link HEIs into both primary and post-primary schools and local communities (usually those designated “socially disadvantaged”), in order to generate awareness of HE as a meaningful and attainable horizon of possibility. But these routes (to stretch the metaphor) can either be bumpy and potholed like a rutted track or a silky smooth motorway; they are also highly

contingent upon which group you're "travelling with" (to drop the "educational journey" cliché into the mix). The modes of progression for non-traditional students into HE are:

- In-house access or foundation programmes operated and accredited by individual HEIs;
- Stand-alone access or foundation programmes outside of HEIs in the form of PLC courses run mainly in FE colleges with Level 5 on the NFQ;
- Direct access via HEAR and DARE through Leaving Certificate points for those under 23 years of age;
- Mature student entry routes; and, lastly,
- Progression via NFQ Level 5 or 6 qualifications, also referred to as the FET route.

Although not necessarily a direct form of progression as per the aforementioned list, it is important to weave into this process the more diffuse set of "outreach" activities. This mode of work was considered vital within most of the policy documents discussed in [Chap. 4](#) and most of the HEI providers have developed this work as part of their access agendas. However, given the broader neoliberal policy context (in which HEIs both operate and perpetuate) a more critical interpretation of this outreach work could see it as a form of direct marketing. The necessity to build corporate brand identity has for HEIs, become a key tool in their attempted management of the semiotics of HE.¹ By building links into local "disadvantaged" communities and in particular schools, this can become a way of fulfilling the social justice remit and entrepreneurial mission (i.e., fill the institutional coffers) all at the same time. A final mention also needs to be made in relation to post-entry supports and the contemporary emphasis on "mainstreaming", as advocated by the third access plan, which is meant to provide a relatively seamless transition into HE, as well as progression through to graduation and beyond. This is an empirically uncharted territory, so at best all we can do at this stage is speculate as to how it will unfold as an aspiration; this we consider in detail in [Chap. 12](#) in our discussion on student retention. As we argued in [Chap. 3](#), the discussion regarding the portals into HE can be seen as only one part of the narrative. However, even with our cursory overview these portals are not metaphorically (and literally) free from custodians and access rituals. Indeed, entry into HE is tightly policed and even more so

for “equity groups”, than the traditional participants. It can be seen as somewhat of an irony (or is it a paradox?) that those students who found their “first chance” problematic, can find their “second” peppered with obstacles. However, we shall return to the so-called student experience dimension of the access story in Parts II and III.

There are a number of ways in which this infrastructural diversity can be viewed. From a social democratic perspective, we can conceptualise these differential routes “in” as an attempt to create a more equitable set of pathways, which are designed to meet the learning needs of different groups of students. Whether we should see these as technical solutions (i.e., a functional mapping of routes to needs) and a nice example of welfare particularism at work (which is a partial solution and recognition of wider systemic and structural inequalities) is a moot point. Alternatively, they could be seen as a failure by the state to deal with deeply sedimented and ossified inequalities, which need to be addressed beyond that of educational institutions. We can argue that the very need for targeted access programmes is symbolic, as well as symptomatic, of more entrenched structural problems regarding the unequal distribution of educational life chances more generally. No matter how much tinkering at the margins is undertaken, these structural issues remain untouched. This is not to say that access has failed for those who have engaged in the process (students, lecturers and administrators) – indeed the result is quite the opposite – but that the weight of expectation placed upon it by policy makers as currently configured is unrealisable. This is a point we return to in [Chap. 5](#).

Access Programmes: First Chance, Second Chance, Third Chance?

The first two routes into HE can be classified as preparatory programmes for UG study and have been a feature of the access terrain since the mid-1990s (HEA 1995). These programmes were, as suggested by Murphy (2009), a consequence of the HEA’s Targeted Initiative Scheme, which began in 1996, and various Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) projects, which ran from 2005 to 2010. Murphy also differentiated between three types of HEI programme: (1) those which are wholly run by a single HEI; (2) those which are part of a consortium of geographically clustered HEIs, both universities and IoTs; and (3) partnerships between an HEI and an FE college. Murphy further differentiates the programmes in relation to their prospective target groups: mature or non-mature; people with impairments; physical location (campus based or off-site); and intended

student outcome and destinations such as direct entry into HE, eligible to apply for specific UG courses or a guaranteed place in HE. An important point to note about the access programmes is that as part of their own filtering mechanisms, they engage in a form of student profiling. Whilst low educational attainment is seen as a pre-requisite for participation, applicants also need to possess a particular kind of socio-cultural profile (marginal community, geographical location, parental education, low income, “difficult” family background, early school leaving, substantial caring role at an early age, DEIS school graduate etc.) and usually accompanied by a self-penned narrative as to how their biography has affected their educational careers. Contingent upon the HEI, for those students who successfully complete an access programme, they may or may not be guaranteed an undergraduate place. Hence, access programmes for some HEIs operate only as the first stage in equipping them with a set of skills by which to enter into another competitive process vis-à-vis non-access students or those within their quota group. The second stage is of course them taking potluck via the CAO. For those on programmes with non-guaranteed HE places, the irony is that they have to compete to get on an access programme and *then* compete to get into a HEI, whereas their traditional peers only need do so once.

Compensatory Mechanisms

The third route (DARE and HEAR) is aimed at two of the designated equity groups (students under the age of twenty-three with disabilities and those classified as “disadvantaged”). Both routes have the same function, which is to increase the likelihood of participation through HEIs by offering places via CAO “reduced points”. The reduction is seen as a mechanism to compensate for educational disadvantages (vis-à-vis their peers) as a consequence of either background characteristics or arising from certain physical or learning disabilities in the case of DARE applicants. DARE applicants are expected to include with their application: (1) evidence of their disability and (2) an “educational impact statement”, which also requires a supporting commentary from their school. It is important to note that both these routes are not universally adopted by the HEIs; DARE is currently used in eighteen institutions (all of the universities, four IoTs and seven colleges and HEAR in fifteen institutions (all the universities, seven colleges and one IoT). See Byrne et al. (2013) for a detailed evaluation of the scheme.

Routes for Mature Students

Apart from the DARE or HEAR routes, full-time mature applicants, defined as anyone over the age of twenty-three, can matriculate via all the pathways listed previously. However, apart from a few exceptions, all applicants to state-supported HEIs are now funnelled through the CAO system and those opting for a part-time programme are expected to apply directly to the HEIs. On their application forms potential students are expected to offer quite detailed biographical as well as educational information. HEIs also treat those students (mature and non-mature) who successfully complete their own in-house preparatory programmes in different ways. Some guarantee students an undergraduate place (such as Dublin Institute of Technology), whereas other HEIs (such as Trinity College Dublin) expect them to compete with other mature applicants for what are referred to as “reserved places”; a practice which goes back to the late 1990s. The proportion of places varies from HEI to HEI, as well as programme to programme and what was initially used as an instrument to facilitate greater participation at a time when it was very poor appears to be used as a device to maintain a particular institutional profile which privileges the non-traditional age cohort. In short, the quotas become an institutional tool for controlling access which may have little to do with academic quality and maintaining ratios between different groups. This is a peculiar and paradoxical situation, where on the one hand there are clearly professed intentions and indeed legal requirements to foster diversity and yet no desire to remove the reserved places as a very obvious form of institutional barrier to attaining this outcome. If anything, this position is reinforced through the HEI-HEA compacts, where no discernible challenge to this practice can be found.

Further Education and Training

The FET route is one of the more marginal as well as complicated pathways into HE. It is also one which is very under-researched in relation to the other routes, but has under the third action plan taken on greater significance. Part of this is inevitably to do with the wholesale re-organisation of the further education “sector” via Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS),² as well as a belated recognition that this is a group that is not progressing into HE in the numbers it should be. Similar to the “matures”, the universities and

some of the IoTs set quotas to the number of students they will allow in with FET qualifications. These students are also restricted to certain programmes, which are also subject to quotas.³ Within this, certain programmes also demand that students hold very specific Level 5 and/or 6 major awards as prerequisites for entry as per the Higher Education Links Scheme. This is intended to provide a more seamless transfer, at least in relation to content, from FE into HE. Here students undertake modules such as in information and communications technology or laboratory techniques, which function as prerequisites in regard to being accepted onto a computer science or science degree. One could argue that as a mode of entry, this may increase the likelihood of student retention due to a more focused progression from content at Level 5 to content at Level 6 (equivalent to first year of an UG programme). Needless to say there also needs to be a cognate emphasis on study skills as well to support the transition.

The way FET and HE are viewed in relation to each other from a human capital perspective is changing. Again, this is part of the fallout of the Great Recession and the funding crisis. Historically, a separate (both physically and systemically) FE sector never developed for two main reasons: (1) the emergence of the Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs), at least in terms of training for professional and technical occupations at sub-degree level and (2), the dominance of the vocational schools, which since the 1930s, were a significant provider of occupational training in areas such as “technical drawing”, shorthand and typing’, “mechanical engineering”, “telecommunications” and “business methods” for young adults either full-time or as part-time (see Walsh 2009; Cooke 2009; see also DES “Annual Reports” from 1931 to 2000, which provide a good insight into the changing nature of vocational and technical education). The morphing of RTCs into IoTs and changes in occupational accreditation (regarding the moving up the value chain to degree-level status), along with the shifting nature of vocational training in schools from the mid-1990s, created a vacuum which was never properly filled. The policy-makers’ presumption being that the HE route (which would include Level 6 programmes in the IoTs), would be more than adequate to meet demand. The logic being that as attainment by school leavers vis-à-vis the Leaving Certificate increased, the greater is the eligibility for participation in HE. However, more and more frequently the argument (Sweeney 2013) is now being made that we cannot expect expansion to continue and that FET is better placed than HE to offer the unemployed and disadvantaged a modicum of social mobility; according to the DES,

in 2013, 28 per cent of school leavers take up a place on a PLC programme, 52 per cent entered HE, 7 per cent were in employed and 7 per cent “social welfare activity” (DES 2016). It is speculative but it seems likely this rethinking of post compulsory education as a whole will impact on how access is described in social policy more generally (see also Murray et al. 2014).

THE MONEY QUESTION: ACCESS, FUNDING AND STUDENT SUPPORTS

One of the more labyrinthine dimensions of the access story concerns the issue of funding, which is worth a chapter in its own right. However, due to the limitations of space we shall focus briefly only some of the key issues and critical policy moments. Although it is probably a self-evident truth that if the aspirations of policy makers were to have any momentum beyond the rhetorical, it has always required concomitant financial resources. Reflecting on the past twenty years there have been fluctuations in not only the amounts of funding allocated for access but also the mechanisms through which it is disbursed.⁴ Needless to say, this has also been intimately tied to the shifting value position of the state vis-à-vis access, WP and HE more generally. Also needless to say, it is subject to the relationship between the state and its broader economic imperatives. The economic downturn of 2008–2013 precipitated a significant evaluation across all aspects of state expenditure, which included HE and in particular student finance. For the latter, the outcome was a consolidation of the student maintenance grant system and another review of the free tuition fees scheme.⁵

The way in which funding is operationalised has always been one of the key instruments through which policy is actualised and obviously enough, used to direct and influence behaviour in both coarse and fine-grained ways. In conceptualising these financial mechanisms within the context of access, we would argue that they operate on three distinct, but interconnected, levels: (1) the individual student (2), the programme and (3) the institution. The interconnections between them are not entirely isomorphic, as different funding streams (per capita, block or volume and performance related) will be based on different activities, priorities and goals. But nonetheless, the overall objective is to use these financial “levers” to increase student participation and progression at the aggregate level. For example, an

individual student with a disability can avail of additional monies via a specific fund, undergraduate programmes receive an additional weighting for enrolling this student, which is then intended to support their additional needs, and lastly, an HEI may have, as part of their Key Performance Indicators, an aspiration to increase in participation from specific equity groups which in turn carry a financial “reward” or “penalty”.

The Student

Although we alluded to other impediments and/or influences on participation, one of the most visceral concerns the use of direct financial transfers to students. As indicated by the Eurostudent surveys (HEA 2008b; Harmon and Foubert 2011, 2013) and McCoy et al. (2009), we need to be mindful not to presume that financial needs, as well as access to resources (both state and non-state), are homogeneous across students. As we will briefly discuss later, this adds a further layer of complexity to this aspect of access. It essentially foregrounds the fundamental issues of universalism and particularism in relation to not only the level of support given and to whom, but the criteria and mechanisms through which it is disbursed. The post-2008 situation has seen vigorous attempts by the state to control costs through either the management of the system per se or more piecemeal tactics through the abolition and reduction of specific allowances. The free fees initiative notwithstanding (and entrée to this is also subject to conditions), financial support is stringently means-tested, which can be disbursed in three main ways. Firstly, via self-funding, which for part-timers is the norm. Despite repeated calls for fee remission on part-time access routes, as well as undergraduate programmes giving funding parity with their full-time peers, this has never been matched by a political commitment, despite this category of student being designated a key target group.

The second mechanism is via the Student Universal Support Ireland (aka SUSI). A product of the 2011 Student Support Act, SUSI was intended to create a single agency to process and distribute student grants which was previously done through sixty-four separate local bodies. The system is means-tested (i.e., assessed on family or individual income and number of dependents) and split between three forms of award: (1) maintenance grants, (2) student programme fees and (3) student contribution. These different awards can be combined in various configurations and, contingent upon assessment, are disbursed in packets of 100 per cent,

75 per cent, 50 per cent and 25 per cent, relative to the full grant amount. They are aimed at full-time students who are registered on “approved” programmes and institutions which can be offered in either FE or HE. For students on access programmes in particular, this provides them with a financial mechanism to support their studies.

In terms of scale and scope, in 2015 SUSI dealt with 102,343 applications and issued 75,202 awards at a cost of €240 million to the state. Beyond these headline numbers, there is a more interesting narrative to be woven when looked at in relation to the distribution of awards by type and institutions. This appears to reinforce the differential patterns of participation by SEG which we discussed in Chap. 2. The full maintenance grant in 2015 was worth €3,025 and the smallest was €725, or 25 per cent of the maximum amount (for full details please refer to Schedule 1 of Statutory Instrument SI 215). Free tuition fees are usually automatic for most UGs (though there are exceptions) and the student contribution is subject to the 100 per cent, 75 per cent, 50 per cent and 25 per cent sliding scale and also contingent upon assessment. There is also an additional category of the “special rate”, which is for those students whose reckonable annual family income is less than €22,703; these students are entitled to a maximum of €5,915 per year. For undergraduate new entrants in 2013–2014, 46 per cent ($n = 19,246$) were in receipt of some form of grant. Of this group, 20 per cent ($n = 3,849$) had a full maintenance grant and 12 per cent ($n = 2,309$) were categorised as “special”. More specifically, 36 per cent ($n = 7,471$) of newly registered students in the university sector, and 52 per cent ($n = 10,593$) in the IoTs, were awarded a grant of some description. For those new entrants in the universities, 18 per cent ($n = 1,344$) were in receipt of a full grant, slightly less than the 23 per cent ($n = 2,431$) in the IoTs and the 21 per cent ($n = 189$) in the colleges. In contrast, the “specials” comprised of 8 per cent ($n = 597$) of students in the universities, 15 per cent ($n = 1,586$) in the IoTs and 8 per cent ($n = 72$) within the colleges. This variable distribution is also noticeable in terms of geography. As part of the analysis undertaken by the HEA (2015i) on the new entrants for 2013–14, they found that 67 per cent of new entrants in receipt of a grant came from Donegal in comparison to 35 per cent from Dublin. The study also reported on individual institutions, with TCD, at 24 per cent having the lowest proportion of new entrants claiming a student grant and NUI Maynooth on 49 per cent, followed closely by Limerick (48 per cent) and NUI Galway (48 per cent). For the IoTs, Letterkenny was 71 per cent of new entrants with the lowest

rate reported by the Institute of Art and Design on 43 per cent; though the HEA do not specify whether these are full or partial grants.

The third route, which sits alongside maintenance grants and free tuition fees is the “back to education allowance” (BTEA). Established in 1998 and administered by the Department of Social Protection it is classified as a mode of employment support. Although intended to provide financial support for people in receipt of welfare payments who wish to pursue second or third level education, its:

objective is to raise educational and skills levels to enable them to better access to emerging labour market needs in line with the Government’s activation strategy set out in Pathways to Work. (Kelly et al. 2015)

As the educational plank within the state’s current 13 support schemes for labour market activation, the BETA also comprises of two other components: (1) the “part-time education option” and (2) the “education, training and development option”. These latter two are for those taking short courses, that is, less than 10 weeks or education programmes. The BTEA functions as a way for full-time students to retain their welfare payments and provide a supplement whilst being engaged in full-time study. Like all such allowances, the rules for eligibility are quite exacting and have become more stringent since 2008, despite a very significant expansion in the use of this programme more generally to manage the rise in unemployment which grew from 4.4 per cent (2004) to a peak of 14.7 per cent (2012) and has dropped back to 8.6 per cent (March 2016). The product of two earlier initiatives (the “third level allowance” set up in 1990 and the “second level allowance” from 1997), in 1998 the BTEA accounted for 6.7 per cent (3,758) of people receiving some form of employment support and constituted 10.1 per cent of the £123,399 million allocated by the state for this purpose. In 2014, it accounted for €162 million (or 15.6 per cent) from a budget of €1.03 billion and 27 per cent (22,714) of the 84,238 people enrolled on 13 labour activation schemes (DSP 1998, 2014). More specifically, the BTEA is intended for people who are: (1) over the age of 21, (2) registered as a full-time student on the first year of a course, (3) pursuing an approved programme which is deemed to be one NFQ level higher than their current standing and (4) be in receipt of a qualified payment (e.g., “Jobseeker’s Allowance”, ‘Farm Assist’, ‘Jobseeker’s Benefit’). What is important to note is that (from 2010) BTEA students are not eligible for maintenance grants; from 2013, any

money received is means-tested vis-à-vis other welfare payments, not paid during summer vacations and, from 2015, ceases when other benefits expire. At 2015 rates, students aged between 18 and 24 get €260 per week and those over 25 get €284. Prior to 2013, after which it was abolished for new recipients, students were also given an “annual cost of education allowance” worth €127 in 1996, €500 in 2008 and €300 in 2012 (DSP 2014).

The BTEA is differentiated between the “second level option” (students who pursue NFQ level 5 or 6, an access or foundation programme) and the “third level option” (which covers diploma, undergraduate and postgraduate study). In relation to scale and scope, in 2009 and 2010, 50 per cent (10,573) of recipients took the second-level option and 50 per cent (10,573) the third-level option. Of the former, 2.7 per cent (approximately 285) of the people in 2014 were registered in an “access or foundation” course, the latter 37 per cent (approximately 3,912) in undergraduate programmes and 2 per cent (approximately 211) in postgraduate diplomas. When set against the number of full-time enrolments in HE, those who are supported via the BTEA constitute approximately 6.8 per cent of undergraduates. Although, the third level option is one of many labour activation schemes, it seems to be an under utilised route into HE. The lack of a part-time HE option (though this exists for basic adult education via the “back to education initiative” and short courses i.e., less than 10 weeks) again highlights a disjunction between aspiration and practice.

There are also two further student-related supports in the form of the Student Assistance Fund (SFA), set up in 1994, (HEA 2005) and the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD). Both of these funds are disbursed by the HEA to individual HEIs, who then allocate them accordingly and usually on a case-by-case basis. A third source of funding for individual students came in the form of the now-defunct Millennium Fund. A victim of the economic crash, the fund was set up in 2000; the Area Development Management Ltd. managed the fund and disbursement of money. For example, in 2005, €1.89m was distributed to 57 community groups and partnerships. The money was intended to support the retention and progression for individual students in FE and HE, but was discontinued in 2010 due to the economic crash (see Phillips and Eustace 2005 for review of this programme).

Woven into the aforementioned are a range of cognate factors around participation and retention. Put bluntly, there are costs associated with being a student that can affect the extent to which they are able to engage in

institutional life both academically and non-academically. As shown by the Irish Eurostudent surveys and McCoy et al. (2009), this is quite variable and refracted by the student's family background (as measured by parental levels of education, estimated SEG and household income) and personal characteristics. For instance, students aged over 30 and not living with their parents, report a monthly spend of €1,275, and those between 25 and 30 report €1,235 (Eurostudent 2016). Worryingly, 57 per cent of those aged over 30 reported "serious" or "very serious" monetary problems and 58 per cent of those between 25 and 30. Unsurprisingly, this was reported by those students who had the lowest median monthly income (€862 and €753, respectively), in comparison to those who reported no problems (€1,150). Additionally, for 68 per cent who are classified as being "dependent on public support" reported "serious" or "very serious" monetary problems. The question concerning the source of their income (for those not living with their parents) shows a high level of support provided by "family/partner" (46 per cent or €479), with 30 per cent (€312) derived from "employment". Only 6 per cent (€70) of their monthly income came from "public sources". For those aged 30 or over, 26 per cent (€286) came from the "family/partner", 4.1 per cent (€44) from "public sources" and 43 per cent (€465) from "employment". Needless to say, this also varies by socio-economic background. Using the response category of whether or not parents had a HE qualification as a proxy indicator for SEG, the report noted that those "family/partners with HE" contribute 55 per cent (€627), while those "without HE" contribute 39 per cent (€385). The results for those in receipt of funds from "public sources" are reserve: 8.5 per cent for those "with HE" and 4.8 per cent for the "without HE" group. According the OECD (2015), the per-capita cost per year is €9,102. If we take the Eurostudent average of €1,096 per month, multiply it by 10 (an academic year running from September to June), this gives annual total of €10,096, or €13,132 if we use a calendar year. What these data suggest are that much of the costs of participation, apart from fees, are underwritten by the student and/or their family. As well as exploring general living costs such accommodation, utility costs, food and drink, there are also the associated costs (which are not covered by the maintenance grant or other allowances), of being a student on certain types of programme. This was brought up by Clancy (2001) and reiterated by the HEA (2005) report on funding and access: that students from lower income backgrounds may not opt for programmes such as "art and design, architecture, dentistry [which] require high cost equipment and materials...[or] engineering or teacher education [which] feature

mandatory fieldwork and periods of unpaid professional practice” (HEA 2005; McCoy et al. 2009). Although there is some empirical work in the form of the Eurostudent surveys (Eurostudent 2016; Harmon and Foubert 2013) and McCoy et al. (2009, 2010) who report on differential cost patterns for certain categories of student (e.g., mature, those with dependents, geographical situation, i.e., travel and accommodation costs, capacity to engage in paid part-time work and so on), as well as some specific programme-related activities. However, beyond this headline and rather static data, we know little about the day-to-day experiences of how non-traditional students financially manage during their time in HE, as well what impact it may have on their capacity to undertake degree level study.

The Institution

The dispersal of funds to HEIs from the state (a task delegated to the HEA) comes in the form of Recurrent Grant Allocation Model. In use since 2006, this is a process that distributes the annual grant, which itself is made up of three separate components. The first is the recurrent or core grant, which is based on undergraduate and postgraduate student numbers and weighted by subject area, as it is recognised that certain disciplines, such as medicine or the sciences are more expensive to operate than others.⁶ The second component refers to funding based on institutional performance vis-à-vis targets set for various activities such as research.⁷ A revised version of the model in 2014 (HEA 2014c) expected that 10 per cent of an HEI’s budget would constitute the performance-related component. The final funding stream is made up of money distributed to HEIs in the form of “target or strategic funding”; effectively resources linked to state sponsored initiatives but acquired via a competitive process.

In relation to access and WP, HEIs are given an additional weighting of thirty-three per cent “to reflect the costs to the institutions of attracting and supporting students who come from non-traditional backgrounds” (HEA 2014c, p. 3). More specifically, the non-traditional element is based on designates equity groups: the SEGs (target groups and Travellers), mature students and those students with a disability. Even more specifically, the SEG funding is based on data derived from the equal access survey. This, as we know, is highly problematic in three main ways: (1) SEG is based on student self-reporting and then translated into CSO SEG categories by the HEA, (2) non-response to the SEG question (see Table 3.6 in Chap. 3 for this data) and (3)

participation in the survey is voluntary. At best this indicator is problematic, and at worst downright flaky to use as a basis for institutional funding. Mature students are relatively easy to count and like the SEG component it is an indicator based on two years worth of data in order to manage fluctuations in participation. Students with disabilities are only counted if they are in receipt of money from the Fund for Students with Disabilities and not registered with a disability service. Again, this is based on two years of data. The three groups get added together and then weighted by 0.33. As with the core grant, HEIs are free to use these funds as they see fit vis-à-vis organisational aims and objectives; this appears to be reflected in the range of access activities that HEIs undertake. However, we know very little about either why HEIs choose to configure their access and WP work as they do or the internal financial mechanisms and models to support these activities.

The Strategic Innovation Fund

Although another victim of the 2008 economic crash, the ambitious Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) was meant to function as an analogue to the *Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions* (PRTLTI 1998–2013). Coming mainly out of the OECD (2006) review and the 2007–2013 NDP, the SIF was announced in 2005 (HEA 2013c) and was intended to provide a not insignificant cache of funding (€550 million) to be made available on a competitive basis, for the modernisation of mainly non-research aspects of HEIs. This included teaching and learning, graduate education, fostering and sustaining collaboration between HEIs, academic and institutional management and, lastly, access. Like the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTLTI) the SIF was to be “rolled out” over a number of cycles (cycle 1 = 2006–2007 and cycle 2 = 2008), but with the collapse of the economy in 2008 so too went the SIF. Of the €144 million allocated between 2006 and 2008, this was shared between 101 projects. In cycle 1, the bids tendered had a value of €100 million and chased €42 million in available funding. In cycle 2, there were bids worth €200 million for a pot of €101 million (HEA 2013c; Davis 2010). It is important to note that the SIF did not form part of an HEIs core funding but was awarded via a competitive process and had to be 50 per cent match-funded by an HEI, whether singularly or as part of a consortium.⁸ The SIF as a project was wound up in 2011 and very probably will never to see the light of day again.⁹

However, for our purposes, the WP and access element of the initiative was assigned €18 million over the two cycles and covered twenty projects. These included the reform of DARE and HEAR, which was labelled the Irish Universities Association (IUA) “equity of access” project, the “Shannon Regional Learning Gateway” led by University of Limerick (UL) and “Access 21” made up of seven HEIs and led by NUIG. In Davies’s (2010) evaluation of these projects, whilst being complementary of most of the access initiatives, he was concerned over: (1) the lack of critical mass to sustain them and recommend mergers and (2) the need for much better alignment with national priorities. In particular, he was of the view that “institutional access strategies needed to be closely aligned with national labour market activation policies” (p. 26). Although the SIF became extinct in 2010, what makes it interesting from an access policy perspective is the use of competition as a mechanism to develop procedures and practices in the context of an agenda, which has, since the 1990s, been accorded such high national priority. The issue of mainstreaming the projects post-SIF notwithstanding, what this seems to have generated is a very uneven and fragmented set of projects, which have had (according to Davis) variable impact. As an initiative it also seemed at odds with the aims of the national office, which was to direct and co-ordinate access initiatives to deal precisely with the problem of fragmentation and disparity, which was emerging pre-2003. A more generous reading of the policy would be to see it as about enabling a more grassroots response to local conditions, rather than the imposition of “top-down” bureau-professional solutions. In this scenario, HEIs can adapt and create programmes which are a reflection of their own priorities. Competition would function as the optimal way to distribute finite resources to the “best” proposed as well as on-going projects. However, the use of competition to disburse funds can be seen as erratic and an inefficient way to develop practice across the whole system, as it excludes (for whatever reason) other institutions and alternative modes of provision which do not fit the prevailing notions of what is worthy of being funded. This seems to be a strange hybrid of Schumpeter’s creative destruction and Herbert Spencer’s social Darwinism.

Conclusion: So What Have We Learnt?

In looking at the pathways into HE we are presented with a set of processes which are ostensibly designed to cater for the different equity groups. There is, as the marketing people might say, “a little something

for everyone". The various pathways, whilst affording conditional equality of opportunity (e.g., all matures follow the same procedures, so too do those from FET backgrounds and so on), are at the same time collectively subject to differential treatment in the way in which HEIs manage transition into HE. Most glaringly is the use of quotas in the allocation of places based on the possession of certain characteristics (age, disability, being poor etc.) as determined by the defined equity groups and reinforced by externally set numerical targets. Although all HE programmes are "capped" in terms of student numbers, as most places are allocated by the supply and demand of the "points system", it is ostensibly a "blind" process. However, for the non-traditional student in order to establish their "otherness" vis-à-vis their target group requires taking on a social identity, which is in part a construct of the pathway. We wouldn't necessarily infer a crude deterministic leap that the pathway produces *in toto* the "low-socio-economic student", the "FET student", they are nonetheless labels which can reinforce a particular status, whether wanted or not. The range of pathways themselves are a curious mix of HEI "in-house" and "out-of-house" access programmes which can lead to accreditation. This can be used either as a medium of matriculation or as "travel warrant", which allows the graduate to compete with his/her peers to gain an undergraduate place in an HEI. The DARE and HEAR routes are no less competitive but are constructed around the notion of compensation and are only aimed at traditional age students. For mature students, the route into HE (as well as onto an access programme) is based on narrating a detailed biography as well as offering a statement of intent. Lastly and most definitely, the poor relations in all of this are those from FET backgrounds. Not only do they suffer from capped points, which automatically excludes them from many programmes offered by the universities and a small number offered by the IoTs, but are severely restricted in relation to what they can apply for. The financial dimensions are as ever complicated and highly politicised. The reduction in and abolition of allowances for non-traditional students is not unsurprising given the post-economic recession context. The protracted debate about the re-introduction of fees in conjunction with income-contingent loans is also unsurprising. The cheerleaders for loans and fees, such as the OECD, see HE participation as mainly a private matter, but with an acceptance of the social and economic affects which emerge from this. The evidence we have does suggest that for students the financial aspects of participation is variable

but nonetheless a significant factor. We would argue that attention needs to be paid to this by policymakers in the form of detailed research work. Ironically, the vogueish focus on “student satisfaction” surveys make no mention of the financial dimensions of student life.

NOTES

1. For example, the very public playing out of Trinity College’s private troubles over its attempt to construct a new identity, as a way to increase its appeal to overseas students, ran into significant opposition from staff and students (see, for example, Humphreys 2014). University College Dublin have re-labeled themselves twice over the past 10 years: from “Ireland’s Education Capital” to the now more modest claim to be ‘Ireland’s Global University’, and NUI Maynooth has become Maynooth University.
2. SOLAS is the state agency responsible for training and further education, which was formed in 2013 under the Further Education and Training Act 2013.
3. For example, TCD only accept FET qualifications on 1 science and 5 nursing degree programmes (17 places in total), NUIG on 7 programmes, UCD 12 programmes (or 124 places), UL on 20 programmes and NUI Maynooth (168 places) (Source: HEI websites).
4. For a detailed review of the different funding mechanisms pre-2005, see HEA (2005), ‘Progressing the Action Plan: Funding to achieve equity of access to higher education’.
5. In 2015, the total state allocation to HE was €1.4 billion, of which €614 million (or 44 percent) comprised of €283 million for the free fees scheme and €331 million for student supports such as maintenance grants; for the latter this was a decrease of €38 million from €369 million compared to 2014.
6. For example, dentistry is weighted at ‘4’, laboratory based areas (engineering, chemistry, physics etc.) at ‘1.7’, ‘1.3’ for fieldwork (education, geography, languages) and “1” for most of the arts, humanities.
7. It is useful to note that in regards to research, five percent is top sliced off the core grant and distributed via performance indicators such as research degrees completed, research income per academic staff member.
8. It is useful to note that “in the competitive process for both cycles of the SIF, 25 percent of the marks were allocated to inter- institutional collaboration and 25 percent to the alignment of the proposal with institutional strategies and national priorities” (HEA 2013c, p. 7).
9. Though a scintilla of money (€2.5 million) which was left over in the SIF budget has been according to the HEA (2013c), been disbursed to select consortia which they deemed were in alignment with the priorities set out under the Hunt Report (DES 2011).

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The Purpose of Access: Equality, Social Mobility and the Knowledge Economy

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THE PURPOSE OF ACCESS

Building on from the groundwork done in [Chaps. 3](#) and [4](#), our intention here is to look at how the purpose of widening participation for non-traditional students is discussed in policy with a particular emphasis on the way equality and economic modernisation are viewed in relation to each other. Access policies – like social policy more generally – are not a unified set of ideas with a clear and defined purpose. It is far more accurate to describe access policies in Ireland as an evolving constellation of guidelines, proposals, assessment techniques and normative aspirations which has resulted in a relatively stable “access agenda” which now underpins major aspects of Higher Education Authority (HEA) policy and informs managerial strategies in HE. While this agenda is stable, it is subject to revision and contestation. Events – such as the financial crisis – and international trends inside and outside HE – notably increased levels of marketisation and managerialism – have certainly altered the meaning of access in significant ways over the past two decades. As we said in the introduction, it is also a mistake to see the elaboration of access as just a “top-down” process: various forms of local institutional innovation across a very varied and complex sector have also contributed to changes in the way access is envisaged and approached. Societal changes, the complexity of the sector itself and the inevitable vagaries and contingencies that shape policymaking

mean that access policy has acquired layers upon layers of aims and is now tasked with achieving a startling range of economic, social and cultural objectives. Consequently, the claims made for HE and access policy can often seem both excessive and ill defined.

Nevertheless, if we step back from the plethora of stated aims and review the key documents (see [Table 3.2](#) p. 51), the two most enduring and consistent themes are very clear – access will guarantee economic competitiveness and strengthen social equality. It is crucial that these two objectives are held to be wholly commensurable with each other in a knowledge-based economy (KBE). It is argued that increasing access to education will help drive economic innovation and growth and that the subsequent restructuring of the labour market will create upward social mobility and longstanding social inequalities will be eroded. In this way, access policy appears to combine hard-headed economic pragmatism and generous social aspirations tied to a belief in equality.

The precise way this is described within policy deserves close attention. Raymond Williams (1988, p. 15) highlighted the power of “significant, binding words” and what we can learn by tracing continuities and shifts in the meanings of “keywords” (see also Moran 2015). This chapter will focus in one of the “keywords” in HE policy – equality. We will begin by tracing the way equality has been explicitly conceptualised in key policy documents and legislation. In the second part, we will explore how the relationship between equality and economic growth is understood and framed as part of the move towards a knowledge economy. Following this, we will discuss how social scientific research has informed how progress is assessed and measured and also shaped the way we think about equality in access policy. Thus, the primary aim of the chapter is to critically review how the state and most academic research have chosen to frame access and equality. By working through the conceptual definitions of equality and the socio-economic framing of this aspiration and by exploring how the system measures progress towards access objectives, we will outline a critical realist critique of policy (Bhaskar 1979; Sayer 1992). After clearing the ground in this manner, the chapter will conclude by making a case for a renewal of the sociological imagination in our discussions of access based on relational, rather than a categorical approach to equality which is sensitive to the complex, deeply rooted and intersectional nature of inequalities that access is meant to address.

The chapter is structured around the argument that the way equality is framed within access policy and mainstream social science has encouraged us to imagine HE as a frictionless space of transition which facilitates upward social mobility. This has contributed to a specific type of socio-educational imaginary linked to a vision of the KBE which has effectively mobilised a range of institutional actors and serves to orientate social policy but systematically ignores contradictions and difficulties in its own claims about education and society. The relationship between HE and the economy, and especially social mobility and employment, and the relationship between these things and greater social equality are only partially explained, or even misdescribed and mystified, if we rely solely on the established terms and familiar co-ordinates associated with this imaginary.

This argument is premised on the belief that HE policy feeds into a socio-educational imaginary which is an integral part of wider economic imaginary. The term imaginary is being used here in the sense that Sum and Jessop (2013, p. 26) use it to denote how the evolution of structures, institutions and social relations relate to the “semiotic systems that shape lived experience in a complex world”. We require such imaginaries to make sense of things and act as individuals, groups and institutions. Thus in choosing this term the intention is not to suggest that this imaginary is fantastical or is disconnected from the way things “really” function. On the contrary, we want to underline the importance of the cultural and symbolic dimensions of social practice in the constitution of everyday life and economic organisation (Moran 2015; Williams 1961). The dominant economic imaginary binds the way we view, feel and make sense of the world but as Sum and Jessop (2013, p. 265) argue that this is not complete or uncontested:

Different entry-points and standpoints lead to different economic imaginaries that identify different subsets of economic actions and relations as objects of observation, calculation, regulation, governance or transformation. While all social agents (individuals, groups, organizations, movements etc.) are forced to engage in such simplifications as a condition of “going on”, not all simplifications are created equal. There is wide variation in economic imaginaries. This poses the question of the performative force of economic imaginaries in shaping economic orders and the manner of their embedding in wider ensembles of social relations (or social formations), that is, that they may involve not only construal but also construction. It also highlights the need

to explore the discursive and material factors and forces that shape the selection and retention of hegemonic, sub-hegemonic, counter-hegemonic, or marginal accounts of the economy, its dynamic and its conditions of existence. Each imaginary depicts the economic world in its own way (albeit with scope for overlap, articulation and hybridization), and those that become hegemonic or sub-hegemonic help to shape economic orders and embed them in wider ensembles of social relations.

Taking a cultural materialist approach to HE policy generally and access policy specifically entails an analysis of how descriptions and discourses within a defined field of activity affect how that field evolves within a broader set of social relations (Bourdieu 1985; Castoriadis 1987; Williams 1961, 1977). Specifically, the claim advanced here is that the dominant understanding of HE and access is enmeshed within a broader economic imaginary tightly bound to a notion of KBE. In fact, HE policy is shaped by, and contributes to, the dominant KBE imaginary. However, when we explore the meaning of equality in and through HE some of the limits and contradictions of this imaginary become clear.

AN OVERVIEW OF EQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY AND LEGISLATION

As stated in earlier chapters, a commitment to achieving equality in and through HE dates back to the publication in 1965 of *Investment in Education* (Walsh et al. 2014) and was reaffirmed in the 1971 *Higher Education Authority Act* (O'Reilly 2008). This was part of a major paradigm shift in social planning and policy which moved education centre stage in state governance. Modernising the economy demanded investment, reform and the expansion of the education system. Simultaneously liberalising the economy and reforming education would, it was claimed, also help tackle enduring social and educational inequalities. This “modernisation and equality” agenda affected every part of the education system and its most immediate effect at third level was a very significant growth in technical education in the 1970s. However, despite all the heady rhetoric, the pace of change was initially quite slow in Irish universities and the equality agenda remained largely irrelevant to the workings of these institutions until the 1980s when Irish HE as a whole went through a dramatic expansion (Walsh et al. 2014).

In order to get a clear idea of what is meant by equality, we turn to a selection of key policy documents and look at how equality is understood in them, mostly dated from the 1990s and early 2000s with a significant cluster of pertinent material appearing at the turn of the millennium. Of particular importance in the development of an egalitarian emphasis in access policy are the Department of Education's White Paper *Charting our Educational Future* (1995), the *Report of the Steering Group on the Future of Higher Education* (1995), the *Action Group on Access Report* (DES 2001), the report *Supporting Equity in Higher Education* (DES 2003), the HEA's most detailed and substantive (2004c, 2008a) reviews of access policy and Skilbeck and Connell's (2000) *Access and Equity in Higher Education: an international perspective on issues and strategies* (see also Osborne and Leith 2000). In terms of legislation, the *Regional Technical College Act* of 1992 and the 1997 *University Act*¹ included statutory obligations to improve equality and this was buttressed by the passing of the *Equal Status Act* in 1999 which included a section (7) which deals with discrimination in any other third-level or higher-level institution of education. It is worth reiterating that this legislative and policy commitment to equality in HE is of course linked to wider social policy objectives. The aspiration to tackle inequality reflects the consensual and populist nature of mainstream politics and the residual power of Catholic social teaching and was a familiar refrain in government anti-poverty policies, partnership agreements, National Economic and Social Council (NESC) reports, Programmes for Government and National Development Plans from the late 1980s until the Great Recession.

THE QUALITY OF MERCY: NOTIONS OF EQUALITY AND EQUITY

In 1992, the Green Paper *Education for a Changing World* was published. The 1980s had been dominated by recession, unemployment and emigration, but the economy stabilised towards the end of the 1980s and a new social partnership agreement was brokered in 1987. Unsurprisingly, given the general utilitarian orientation of Irish educational policy and the prevailing economic conditions, the main message in the Green Paper was that education needed to be directed towards building a more stable and dynamic economy. This was explicitly linked to the achievement of greater levels of equality; it is the State's responsibility "to provide the opportunity for all to develop their educational potential to the full" (DES 1992, p. 6) through

targeted measures aimed at socially excluded groups. It is also significant that *equality* is discussed as a broad aspiration, which in a pluralist, complex society is best conceptualised and acted upon in terms of the idea of *equity*. This reflected, albeit in a rather muffled fashion, debates in philosophy and social sciences about what exactly was being aspired to in discussions of equality be that in outcomes, treatment or opportunities (Baker et al. 2009; Rawls 1999; Sen 1999; Walzer 1983). Of more immediate relevance is that the EC and the OECD published research on equity and equality in education in the late 1990s (OECD 2008, 2010, 2012; see also Castelli et al. 2012; Hutmacher et al. 2001; Marginson 2011b) in which there was critique of simplistic notions of equality as part of an attempt to develop a framework, terms and indicators which could be used for comparative research on national educational systems.

In the 1995 White Paper (DES 1995a), we find similar emphases but perhaps as a consequence of a change in government and better macro-economic conditions, equality is accorded even greater importance in this document. Here, the ideal of equality is treated as a conceptual keystone: “A sustaining philosophy should seek to promote equality of access, participation and benefit for all in accordance with their needs and abilities” (DES 1995b, p. 8).

The late 1990s was a period of unprecedented economic boom and increased educational spending in which funding streams were created specifically aimed at tackling educational inequality. This was a crucial period in the “access story” in terms of the commissioning of studies and reports. During this period, the shifting back and forth between equality and equity continued but equity was increasingly used as the preferred operative term. Of particular note in this regard is the report of Skilbeck and Connell (2000, p. 14) which offers an unusually comprehensive definition of equity and access as:

policies and procedures for enabling and encouraging groups in society at present underrepresented as students in higher education institutions and programmes or study areas, to gain access to and demonstrate successful performance in higher education, and transition to the labour market (as well as equity amongst HE staff).

This work fed directly² into the work of State’s Action Group on Access and the establishment of *National Office of Equity of Access to Higher Education*. At this point, the meaning of equality in and through access

appears to become quite stable and the emphasis was put on co-ordinating and directing the roll out of access policies across the sector. In this process, the concern with staff equity and graduate destinations was largely dropped and access became defined as greater fairness in access to HE.

A triad of co-ordinates began to define the meaning of equality in access policy – a commitment to the principle of fairness, a stress on equality of opportunity and the identification of specific disadvantaged/excluded/under-represented groups who should be targeted through widening participation initiatives. This triad of co-ordinates (equity-opportunity-target group) remains fundamental to the way access is conceptualised today (DES 2015; HEA 2010a, 2011b). As the White Paper, HEA reports (2004a, 2008a *inter alia*) and general social policy documents also make clear a swathe of social and educational interventions across sectors and the lifespan is required to advance equality. In some iterations (see especially DES 2001; HEA 2008a), the structured and complex nature of inequality is given some attention but ultimately, as one might expect given the wider political scene, the conception of equality is philosophically liberal and tied into a vision of education that draws on a mixture of attenuated social democratic ideas and free market thinking. Put bluntly, access is seen as part of an attempt to minimise disadvantage or exclusion rather than one strand in a wider programme to effect substantive change in conditions and outcomes. This became even more apparent if we pay attention to the way change and temporality are discussed in relation to equity and access in policy. Repeatedly the documents stress the incremental and on-going nature of these efforts and working “towards” or “contributing to” equality. Achieving greater equality is, *has* to be, a slow process, which is more or less understood as a greater degree of fairness and widening opportunities for participation.

A RUGGED SOCIO-ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE AND A DISTANT EGALITARIAN HORIZON

Thus equality is viewed as a normative goal on the distant horizon, which can be fruitfully used to help define the social purpose of HE in “the here and now”. Of course, a great deal then pivots on the precise way the “here and now” is explained – and as we have discussed already in Irish educational policy this is nearly always framed in relation to macroeconomic

imperatives. This is crucial to understanding what exactly is meant by equity in HE policy and grasping how greater equality is supposed to be achieved in the future through equity measures. Two aspects of this are particularly germane: (1) the role widening access is given as a “subsystem” in the reform of HE as a whole; and (2) the way this is linked to patterns of social change in an era of competitive KBEs.

On a national (DES 1995a, 2001, 2011) and European level (Eurydice 2014), the access agenda is regularly described as a necessary part of a wider reform agenda for HE. The aim is to make HEIs in Ireland and the European Higher Education Area as whole, more responsive, more accountable, more vibrant, more dynamic and more open to the needs of the market and society. While there is no shortage of faith, even zeal, amongst policymakers about the potential of HE, there is considerable concern about their current fitness and readiness to do “more”. The key message is that the old fashioned university is no longer fit for purpose: institutions that are strongly bounded, burdened with out-dated notions of knowledge and sit in splendid scholastic isolation will end up, and it is implied deserve to be put, on the junk heap of history. Access is in this way used to justify the push to “modernise” HE so that it becomes more integrated and a more responsive set of learning spaces. This of course suggests that barriers to equality is located in HEIs rather than in social relations more generally. This pairing of equity and quality and of equality and accountability in envisioning a future for HE rearticulates, albeit in a modified form, the “equality + modernisation” thesis discussed above, and we will argue below that it does so in a way that sits very comfortably indeed with the objectives of neoliberal managerialism.

In making these arguments, policymakers never fail to invite us to cast an eye over the wider social terrain. And it is a dramatic, challenging and striking landscape of shining peaks and hidden treacherous valleys. Without exception all the aforementioned policy documents link the achievement of greater levels of equality to the need to grapple with the challenges, and grasp the opportunities, thrown up by a global economy which is increasingly based on knowledge. In this Irish policy follows a clear international trend in which “globalization”, “competitiveness” and “the knowledge economy” have become leading ideas in social and economic policy over the past 30 years (Sum and Jessop 2013) and is of course central to EU policy (EC 1993, 2000a, 2000b, 2011, 2014) and OECD thinking (1996). The unquestioned assumption is unless we can react flexibly to these demands we will be left behind.

That said Irish policy documents (DES 1992, 1995a; IG 2007a, 2008) are not always very precise about the particular characteristics and specific dynamics of KBEs or what fruitfully meeting the challenges of competition and globalisation should involve on a more detailed level. These are described as gigantic forces beyond our direct control but whose effects we have to adapt to survive (Livingstone and Guile 2012). But the basic assumptions underpinning the arguments are very clear and it is stating that they have been consistently used as the basis for policy despite changes in government and socio-economic conditions (IG 2007a, 2008, 2011b). These can be summarised in the form of three interlocking propositions: knowledge is now a key factor in production and therefore education, properly harnessed, can propel economic growth in a KBE; education and training are indispensable to flexible and timely responses to global economic changes and to maintaining a competitive edge; and finally that the upskilling required by a KBE will lead to occupational restructuring and upgrading of the labour market and that this in turn will facilitate upward social mobility.

Translating socio-economic thinking about KBE into educational policy often results in a type of optimistic, breathless futurology. This is as true in Ireland as elsewhere but nevertheless these ideas have real force and purchase. Arguably, for reasons that are outlined below, Irish policymakers and many citizens might be especially inclined to take the rhetorical claims about KBE at face value. At the very least, we can say with some confidence that arguments about KBE in an Irish context have been lent considerable cultural and political weight due to the fact they build and extend two pre-existing and intertwined discourses in social and educational policy – the liberal modernisation thesis and human capital theory.

THE ONLY WAY IS UP: THE PROMISE OF PROGRESS AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

For historical reasons linked to a subordinate and semi-peripheral position of Ireland in the world system, Ireland has often been seen as culturally and economically backward. Thus, the value of overcoming the past and sloughing off the muck of ages has become recurrent and remarkably powerful idea in modern Ireland. Certainly, the most common way of depicting the changes that took place in the Irish economy from the late 1950s onwards is as a “belated dash for growth” (Garvin 2004, p. 198).

Similarly, the Celtic Tiger was often described as part of a process of economic “convergence”, becoming more like our European neighbours and taking our rightful place at the table of developed and advanced countries (Mac Sharry and White 2000). This way of thinking about history and progress characterised by the belief that we can somehow finally “catch up” with modernity may be unduly simplistic and highly ideological (Cleary 2007; Deane 1997), but it remains a powerful and even dominant story Irish society. Not least because it does offer a readily understood explanation of the rapid process of socio-economic change that has taken place since the 1950s in Ireland.

As a consequence of economic liberalisation, Ireland has become far more reliant on international capital and multinationals for investment and less dependent on trade and commerce with the UK. Export-led growth in a country famous for its “light touch” regulation of business has resulted in a spectacular cycle of economic growth and recession (Kirby 2002, 2010; McCabe 2011; O’Hearn 2001). Dramatic expansions and explosive contractions in the economy have been accompanied by wholesale restructuring of the labour market. The move away from agriculture as the mainstay of the economy, the growth of technical, managerial, professional and routine service jobs, the diminution of manual work and the growing influence of multinationals – including torch bearing KBE industries such as pharmaceuticals and software – and the full integration of the economy into the global flows of financialised capital have all occurred over the past 50 years. This short and rapid cycle of transformation *has* increased social fluidity and has contributed to profound cultural changes including in popular perceptions and expectations of the education system (Coulter and Coleman 2003; Jacobson et al. 2006; Nolan et al. 2000; O’Hearn 1998; O’Riain 2000). Such major changes in social structures and lifecourse expectations, including in terms of the value and necessity of educational qualifications, all of which in historical terms has been very recent, combined with the impact of long term uneven development and the fear that Ireland is “lagging behind” has made appeals to liberal modernisation both credible and appealing.

Rising standards of living, occupational upgrading and a massive expansion of the education system also confirm, at least superficially, the main precepts of human capital theory, which is ultimately a version of liberal modernisation theory. According to human capital theorists such as Becker (1993), investment in education and training in individuals will

yield gains in social cohesion by adding to the “stock” of human capital. Becker (2007) holds that:

Apparently, the opportunities provided by a modern economy, along with extensive government and charitable support of education, enable the majority of those who come from lower-income backgrounds to do reasonably well in the labor market. The same opportunities that foster upward mobility for the poor create an equal amount of downward mobility for those higher up on the income ladder.

Thus, Becker sees education as central to the economy and the gateway to a fully functioning meritocracy.

This framing of the socio-economic context in human capital terms affects in a very profound how we imagine greater equality might be achieved. Access to this education at all levels combined with industrialisation, market liberalisation and the new dynamics of KBE will result, *as a matter of course*, in greater equity. It is important to say that we do not believe that such aspirations are being used as ideological cover: this is far too crude an interpretation. A commitment to equality, linked to deeply rooted notions of progress and human freedom, is integral to the version of KBE that animates contemporary social policy and makes them appealing. These ideas also fit neatly in established discourses and narratives which give the impression that they have a great deal of explanatory power as well. But ultimately this is a very thin and in most respects, a very traditional liberal conception of equality (Honneth 2014; Losurdo 2014) in which enduring social and educational inequalities are largely treated as a historical legacy rather than a structural characteristic of contemporary society. There is a great deal of evidence from mainstream and critical social science that suggests that this rather smooth, seamless notion of modernisation and this analysis of social mobility are deeply flawed. But before we outline the findings of some these empirical studies in further detail, something should be said about the role of social scientific research in the making of access policy.

ARE WE THERE YET? SOCIAL SCIENCE AND ACCESS POLICY

One of the least remarked upon aspects of the evolution of access policies has been the way quantitative data and the categories used for interpreting this data have shaped and even changed the meaning of access and how we

tend to think about equality (see Bernard 2006; Finnegan 2012, 2015). But as we argued in the previous chapters, the identification of “equity groups” through quantitative surveys and the monitoring of continuities and changes in the participation rates of equity groups has been a vital element of the access story. These statistics have become the key measure of success for access policies and a portion of state funding to individual HEIs is now allocated on the basis of performance and progress towards pre-set targets. The major reports of the HEA (DES 2001; HEA 2004a, 2010c, 2014a) on the topic now assess access through participation rates as a matter of course. Enormous effort has been given to enhance the ability of the sector and institutions to quantify the participation rates of “non-traditional” students. Yet for some potential target groups, no data are collected by the HEIs or when data are collected it is not clear what is done with the data that are collected. This has also affected the way research by academics and NGOs has been conducted over the past 20 years. Access is about increasing the participation of non-traditional students and progress towards equality depends on more of students in named target groups in attending HEIs.

This approach to access has a social scientific prehistory. The embedding of the access agenda and formation of access categories in Ireland builds on the work of social scientists in universities and the ESRI.³ Large-scale studies of stratification and social mobility became a mainstay of Irish social science from the 1980s onwards (Breen and Rottman 1995; Breen 2004; Whelan and Hannan 1999). Repeatedly they have found evidence of durable and stark inequalities in income, health, employment and life conditions in Irish society. This is reflected in, and mediated by, inequalities in participation and outcomes in education (Hout 1989, 2004; Layte and Whelan 1999; Raftery and Hout 1985, 1993) and argue that the cumulative effect of economic and educational privilege is enormous. This work was also used in international comparative research on origins and destinations and is linked to some of the most significant efforts of social scientific projects such as the Nuffield study and CASMIN (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). Inevitably, given the scale and duration of this research, the key findings of these studies on social mobility have helped to inform educational debates and State policy.

However, it is Patrick Clancy’s quantitative studies of the participation rates of various socio-economic groups which has had the most direct impact on access policies. Well in advance of the development of system wide access policies, Clancy had meticulously documented the persistence of class inequality in Irish HE (Clancy 1982, 1988, 1995, 2001; Clancy and Wall 2000;

see also O’Connell 2005; Finnegan 2009, 2014a). The key finding of these studies, most of which were commissioned by the HEA, was that people from higher professional, managerial and farming families and entrants from a higher professional background were benefitting disproportionately from the expansion of HE (Clancy and Wall 2000; O’Connell 2005).

The influence of these studies cannot be underestimated. In a very thoughtful review of Clancy’s work, Bernard (2006) notes:

Clancy’s research on representation by socioeconomic groups was utilised in all policy documents which made recommendations about access, many of which were implemented, and in access practice in identifying socio-economically disadvantaged students. It is fair to say that Clancy’s work, in providing a justification and framework, played a very significant role in promoting access for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Bernard (2006, p. 25)

Bernard is right that Clancy’s work which has been invaluable for mapping out the broad trends in participation. In fact Clancy is cited as often as the OECD and other key policy bodies and far more frequently than other social scientists by Irish policymakers. In the *Report of the Action Group on Access* (2001) in which the main equity groups were identified Clancy’s work directly informed the discussion of socio-economic disadvantage. It also appears, and this is speculation based on a review of the content and structure of this and other reports, that the discussion of this “equity group”, working class students, provided a template for how to think about access and equality more generally. Not coincidentally in Clancy’s work, we also encounter a version of the triad of co-ordinates that has been so crucial to access policy (see p. 113).

The point here is not to criticise Clancy who has been extraordinary figure in research on Irish HE. Rather the aim is to ask if we have leaned too heavily on a single way of thinking about access and equality? Ideally Clancy’s research would have served as a departure point for further research using a variety of conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches on (in)equality in HE but instead it has determined meaning of access and equality in a very specific way. Something akin to a research “monoculture” has taken root in access research where quantitative and “categorical approaches are viewed as the only approach with which to conceptualise the relationship between disadvantage... and access to higher education” (Bernard 2006, p. 32). This methodological and conceptual orientation is

deeply problematic from a critical realist perspective. Quantitative data are of course necessary to understand social trends and vital to creating a reflexive, integrated strategy for understanding and directing change in a complex system. But as Scott (2010) notes:

quantitative modeling . . . has its limitations. It has a tendency to reduce and therefore trivialise both what is complicated and what is perceived to be complicated by participants in a social setting. Thus the picture that is received is both incomplete and in some senses a distortion (lacking wholeness) of the ontic state(s). Furthermore, a distortion also occurs if it turns out that the object of investigation lacks scalable dimensions. Quantitative modeling is so constituted that the associations which it readily generates cannot easily be mapped into causal narratives; though of course all too easily associations and causal relations are conflated cannot easily be mapped into causal narratives; though of course all too easily associations and causal relations are conflated. (Scott 2010, p. 21)

Political arithmetic's dominance in research on access and participation has meant that progress towards equality is now understood solely in terms of meeting participation targets for predefined access groups. This has meant that theoretical and political questions about access and equality have been sidestepped and discussions have circled around progress or lack of progress using similar points of reference and concepts. Equity, thinly conceived and loosely contextualised except in relation to the need to the imperatives of the global KBE, is reduced to a performance measure. This has set the terms for how we imagine and understand equality in third level education: if higher numbers of people from under-represented target groups attend HE, we can assume that the system is becoming more equitable and vice versa. One can make the case that part of the problem is the way social science has been "translated" into social policy but the predominance of numerical and categorical approach to access also reflects the shape of policy and politics more broadly.

EQUALITY AND ACCESS IN THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL IMAGINARY: THE NEOLIBERAL KBE

We are now in a position to assess how these various strands of policy discourse and social science research fit together as a whole and how this is linked to the dominant economic imaginary. Over the past 50 years, the

linked phenomena of occupational restructuring and the expansion of HE under the banner of economic modernisation have transformed the role of tertiary education in Irish society. It is now a highly visible set of social institutions which draws on significant public investment and resources. Consequently, the State has become far more directly involved in HE governance and strategy (Walsh et al. 2014; Loxley 2014). HE is now viewed as crucial to future economic development and as the pre-eminent space for enhancing “human capital” and ensuring that Ireland remains a highly competitive knowledge economy. We want to suggest that this broad vision of the future animated by the promise of equality – however distant – has been an important feature of educational policy since the 1960s. It is an even more central conceit in human capital and KBE thinking and this lends access policies legitimacy and allows a wide range of actors, with different interests, to be mobilised around a long-term project involving the modernisation of HE in order to build and maintain a knowledge economy.

The evolution of access has also been shaped by the way the field is envisaged and progress towards equity in education is measured through quantitative data. In policy this has become disconnected from the broader research field and wider changes in socio-political conditions. While Clancy’s political arithmetic and the social mobility studies of the ESRI are a type of social science that emerged from, and reflects the values and assumptions of, social democracy but this orientation to quantitative and categorical thinking becomes something quite different in a neoliberal era. The dominant reform project of HE with its focus on enhancing employability and equity and advancing the integration of HEIs in the “real” world of business and commerce is now very clearly linked to the politics of measurement and assessment (Allais 2014). It is characterised by both the extension of commodity logic *and* the concomitant development of managerial techniques and practices for assessing performance. Accountability, quality assurance and flexibility are not merely the new watchwords of management; they are concepts which are linked to, and help define practices and even dispositions in the field of HE (Lynch et al. 2012; Slaughter and Leslie 1997). Ball argues, in one of the most closely researched argument books on this phenomenon, that “the means/end logic of education for economic competitiveness is transforming what were complex, interpersonal processes of teaching, learning and research into a set of standardised and measurable products” (2007, p. 186). Equity becomes a readily measurable *product* of access.

All these various elements have created a distinct socio-educational imaginary in which liberal modernisation, educational expansion, the emergence of the KBE and the slow, endless march towards equality are constitutive reference points. This imaginary invites us to envisage the relationship between education and the economy as a central one in contemporary society. These are seen as complementary and interlocking systems of activity and the line between HE, business and labour markets are increasingly blurred. Movement into, across and through these spaces of work and learning needs to be made more easy and fluid and this will facilitate social mobility and erode inequalities. For working class people, people with disabilities, mature students and ethnic minorities, education will overcome barriers and obstacles. This is a hypermodern version of a notion of progress which can be traced back to Adam Smith (1776) that maintains democratisation and marketisation are interrelated processes. The reconfiguration of these spheres of activity is viewed as inherently progressive and time's arrow points towards a bright future. The responsibility of the state and the sector is therefore quite tidily defined: the task is to ensure that increasing numbers of people have the opportunity to enter post-compulsory education through the provision of new pathways and more places. Assessing progress depends on how many non-traditional students avail of opportunities to enter an educational space in a KBE which will result in upward social mobility.

THE LIMITS OF THE DOMINANT IMAGINARY: TOWARDS A DIFFERENT RESEARCH AGENDA?

When we summarise these arguments like this in a propositional manner, some of the obvious difficulties with them become apparent: equality will come through economic growth and access will ensure that we are competitive. This is all rather circular and vague. Moreover according to Simon Marginson (2011b) when we examine the historical record of such policies internationally, we are making a long-term commitment to being disappointed. As we have already indicated, we believe that this particular way of imagining HE in a KBE is deeply flawed. But it has also radically oversimplified the tasks of policy and research. In fact we would argue that it can only offer a partial and misleading idea about what is happening and what is not happening in HE. Without a clearer sense of what we mean by equality and a more detailed structural analysis of the social context as well as a deeper knowledge of what people do in and after HE, it is more or less

impossible to devise access policies which might genuinely contribute to equality. Ironically, the empirical data collected by the State and HEA supports this analysis: there is abundant evidence that there are severe structural limits to widening participation for non-traditional students which a categorical approach and a thin conception of equity cannot explain or, it seems, overcome.

There are five problems we want to highlight in the policy and research which has been shaped by this perspective: it has systematically skewed the emphasis onto entry into HE rather than on student experience in HE and post graduation destinations; it provides no way of explaining the interplay of agency and structure within HE and treats it as a mysterious “black box” (Lynch and O’Riordan 1998) in which both human agency and the specificities of formal learning are ignored; it says little about the causes of inequality in the first place and in using a minimal and static notion of inequality it cannot account for intersectionality between inequalities; it overlooks what the empirical evidence on social mobility, education and equality tells us; and changes in the morphology of inequality both inside and outside HE. Each of these issues will be taken up in various ways in the forthcoming chapters so here we will only offer a brief outline of these issues.

WHERE NEXT?

The first issue is perhaps the most surprising given the concern with accountability and employability in HE policy. Access policy and to an extent research is largely concerned with people up to the point where they gain entry. Of course Skilbeck (2001) and others have stressed the importance of a more holistic view of access from pre-entry to graduation but there is very little data and research available on destinations of access students and it is uneven or non-existent (Fleming et al. 2010; Finnegan and O’Neill 2015). This is not to claim that access programmes do support students through college but that what is valued and measured are broad patterns of participation which mean differences in post graduation outcomes are either invisible or unexplained.

A GHOST IN THE MACHINE

There is a dearth of material which examines HE from the perspective of students themselves and explores how they view and value HE (Finnegan et al. 2014; Fleming et al. 2010; Fleming and Murphy 1998; Keane 2009;

Lynch and O’Riordan 1996, 1998; Martin and O’Neill 1996; McMahon 1997; McCoy and Byrne (2011); see also O’Brien and O’Faithigh 2007; Slowey and Schuëtze 2000). In the 20 years that access has been a recurrent theme in policy discussion, we can identify less than 20 pieces of research that use qualitative or mixed methods to explore access students’ perspectives of HE and perhaps as few as six studies which offer detailed accounts of students’ experiences. This means that the “access story” remains obviously incomplete and overly quantified. What motivates students, the barriers they encounter, the supports they use and how they view and value education – these obvious yet vital topics remain largely unexplored. This is changing as mixed methods have gained far more traction both in the academy amongst doctoral researchers (Giblin 2015; Kearns 2016), EU funded research project and significantly also in the ESRI. But most of these studies have been at the margins of policy discussion. Unless we make how students view access to HE, the university will remain a type of black box in which human capital is mysteriously accrued (Lynch and O’Riordan 1998).⁴

There is an added difficulty here due to the complex nature of inequality itself. Without extensive qualitative research, the access student is bound to remain a highly idealised figure: *the* mature student, *the* working class student etc. defined by one or several categorical criteria. However, research in Europe and the UK (Finnegan et al. 2014; Hinton-Smith 2012) suggests that often exclusions and disadvantage associated with age, race, gender, disability and class interact in complex ways. As feminists have argued (Anthias 2005; Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991) a more realistic account of social experience requires the multi-dimensional matrix of inequality. In addition, the intersectionality of inequality (which will be discussed again in Chaps. 6 and 9) shows how multiple inequalities have an cumulative impact.

We think it would be mistaken to see this dearth of material on lived experience and multidimensional nature of inequality simply as an empirical gap or just an oversight. *Rather the structure of the research field reflects the way HE is envisaged in policy through the lens of human capital and KBE theory.* Put crudely, HE is meant to do something to students: this is held to be socially and economically valuable but this is perceived to not need much exploration or explication as it will happen regardless by crossing the threshold. The experience of being in a college, or the type of learning that occurs in HE, do not have to be delved into in any detail. Nothing needs to be said about student agency or about how their

individual biographies or identities are (re)-constructed in the experience of HE (Barnett 2007). This of course renders students mute but also means that in a very profound sense we simply do not know enough about what is actually happening to them in HE and through the access experience. As Simon Marginson asserts (2011b), it also ignores the extent to which students are enabled or constrained as agents of equality themselves.

This emphasis on just procedures and systems, not the contents of justice or power of human agents, parallels the dominant liberal notion of freedom, that of negative freedom, whereby freedom is understood primarily in terms of procedural conditions rather than the self-determining power of human agents able to achieve their objectives.

The fostering of the capacities of human agents, particularly of victims of injustice, has a key role to play in the advance of justice. (In relation to the present discussion, this approach to justice suggests emphasis on the role of higher education – not so much as a place where perfectly just arrangements should be devised, as a place where human agents should be included, and their capacities developed, including the capacity for public reason). (Marginson 2011b, p. 10)

CUT OFF FROM THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION: SOMETHING OLD

Furthermore the KBE imaginary is built on a double simplification. Just as the internal life of HEIs and the students and staff that populate these places are seen as epiphenomenal there is also a bracketing out of what we have learnt from the vast amount of international and national research on social mobility and on equality. For example, John Goldthorpe (1996), one of the most pre-eminent sociologists of social mobility, has noted in a review of models of educational expansion and inequality that liberal modernisation theory faces some real explanatory difficulties in the face of the empirical evidence. Large-scale international social mobility studies have repeatedly highlighted the persistence of class inequality (Breen and Rottman 1995; Breen 2004; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992);⁵ Goldthorpe has argued that “the general withering away of class exclusion is... a historical outcome, that often scheduled, is yet to be observed” (1996, p. 483). Similar findings to Goldthorpe were made in a 13 country comparative study of educational participation and equality based on

large-scale, quantitative research (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993). This international research group discovered strong patterns of intergenerational class inequality in education in 10 of the 13 countries and decreasing inequality in only 2 (Sweden and the Netherlands). In Ireland, there is similar evidence of enduring inequalities in levels of social mobility (Breen 2004; Breen and Whelan 1996; Breen et al. 1990; Hout 1989; Whelan and Maitre 2008). These studies all suggest that expanding education on its own does not ensure upward social mobility for excluded social groups and that educational expansion can in fact result in the copper fastening of social inequalities (Brown and Lauder 2011).

CUT OFF FROM SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION: SOMETHING NEW

It is not enough to note the existence of enduring inequalities as there is also some evidence of changes in the morphology of inequalities. As suggested earlier, the unravelling of social democracy and the rise of neoliberalism is crucial for making sense of changes both within and outside HE in terms of inequality (Finnegan 2008). Within HE, the numbers of wealthy students attending universities and colleges have steadily increased and in some countries, including in Ireland, elite social class participation has reached the point of “saturation”. One recent study of participation and inequality in 15 countries has led to a reformulation of the “maximally maintained inequality” thesis and the authors argue that expansion has begun to have some positive impact on inequality (Shavit et al. 2007). The key here is to pay attention to “branching points” in social trajectories and educational careers; the issue is no longer solely about access but rather access to what? This new situation requires a double focus – on the absolute participation rates of different social classes but also an awareness of which social groups dominate prestigious institutions and courses and tend to accrue the most highly valued credentials. Attewell and Newman (2010) argue that “the elaborated sequence [has] become: exclusion, saturation, expanded access via institutional differentiation, inclusion primarily through diversion to lower status institutions, [and] movement among the elite to yet higher levels of qualification” (p. 17).⁶ The international tendency towards differentiation and diversification within HE adds another layer to the access and widening participation debates especially in terms of the relative value of credentials in terms of status and economic returns (Aronowitz 2000). Differentiation across HE throws up major issues for achieving egalitarian outcomes through education.

At the same time income and wealth inequality has increased in most of the developed world (Harvey 2005; Sayer 2015; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). This has been facilitated by the increased mobility and financialisation of capital, which has led to a massive redistribution of wealth upwards and further undermined the capacity for democratic decision-making from “below” (Harvey 2005; Mellor 2011). Weakened trade unions and the erosion of social welfare guarantees paved the way for new forms of marginalisation for the poor and working class and increased precarity more generally including amongst the middle class (Standing 2009; Wacquant 2009). These new lines of power and social division impacts on how we might think about social mobility and the project of achieving equality through HE.

In an Irish context, research suggests that there has been a steady diminution in the social wage, as measured through wages, pensions and social welfare, and a concomitant increase in the level of private profit (Allen 2000, 2007; Kirby 2002, 2010; O’Hearn 1998; Taft 2013). Allen calculates the adjusted wage share for employees dropped from 71 per cent of GDP in the 1980s to 54 per cent between 2001 and 2007 (2011, p. 26). While this is partially due to the increase in the number of self-employed workers in the economy, to changes in the type of manufacturing taking place in Ireland, and is affected by how output and profit are calculated for tax purposes by multinationals, it also demonstrates that the tax system increasingly favoured the wealthy (Allen 2007; CORI 2007).

Breathnach’s (2002, 2007) research on the changing nature of occupational structure and new occupational polarisation is also pertinent. He argues that there has been considerable occupational upgrading and growth in the number of employers, managers and technical workers in the Irish labour market since the 1980s. But one of the most noteworthy aspects of Breathnach’s research is that he recoded the occupational data gathered by the CSO. By doing this Breathnach identifies a pattern that had hitherto attracted little comment; he discerns two poles of growth in the labour market; there are more people in professional and technical work but there has been an increase in routine unskilled work. There has also been a steady contraction in moderately well paid “blue collar” industrial and administrative work.⁷ On this basis, Breathnach concluded that the CSO has underestimated the growth of routine and poorly paid work in retail and personal services in the past decade. This raises important questions concerning the wider social contexts in which the quest of social equality and equity in HE is situated.

CONCLUSION

The dominant KBE imaginary offers a neat framework for making sense of a complex field of activity and it explains in a parsimonious and partially convincing way how social changes, economic challenges and educational needs might be interrelated. In this sense, HE policy contributes to the KBE imaginary more generally. It also draws on established policy discourses and social narratives in Ireland about the nature of social progress and modernity. Past, present and future have their place in this imaginary of frictionless movement and economic development wedded to a breathless future orientated, marketised notion of modernity. It is both a national and international moment in policy part of what Stephen Ball (cited in Fejes 2006) has the development of a “new planetspeak” in education policy across the world.

Significantly this socio-educational imaginary *relies* on egalitarian aspirations but the way equality is defined and articulated makes this rather hollow. In the development of access policy equality has become increasingly reified; the aim should be to accommodate an increased number of access students in the system. Sundered from a wider sociological imagination, the relationship between participation in HE and wider trends in social equality, and the changing nature of credentials in the labour market or even what needs to change in the culture and structure of HE are left out of the discussion.

The suggestion here is that we need to seek new terms in the debates if we wish to develop a genuinely egalitarian imaginary for education and society. The start of this is to problematise the dominant imaginary but going beyond this requires a thicker notion of equality in education and a research agenda orientated to questions of agency and actors rather than systems and targets. This demands a broader socio-historical perspective and a keener awareness of how greater levels of equality have been achieved in the past. What we know is that skill shortages in booms can create greater income equality and access can have some impact on equality. We know that progressive taxation can create greater equality in various ways – especially when it is linked to expansive welfare regimes predicated on certain relationship between the state and the market in a society and market regulation. We can also point to the record of progressive social movements which have brought about greater equality in power, wealth, resources, respect and education. If access is part of a university which is a critical and reflexive space which fosters agency, then access can strengthen equality, but this means finding terms of reference beyond the numbers game.

NOTES

1. This builds on the Education Act, 1998 where educational disadvantage is defined as “the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools”.
2. The emphasis on graduate destinations and the equity agenda for staff recedes was quietly left aside.
3. The Economic and Social Research Institute was founded in 1961 as an independent organisation, which is nevertheless supported by the state. It has been very influential in policy circles and is the most visible social scientific research body in Ireland.
4. Of course collecting data on “student experience” in individual HEIs is now very common but this is not disaggregated and is essentially a type of ‘customer feedback’ mechanism.
5. Social mobility scholars argue that there is a relatively high level of social fluidity within developed societies but that class *structures* have remained stable.
6. See Fleming et al. (2010).
7. Fahey et al. (2007) suggest that wage inequality in this period lessened because “traditional” working class jobs such as construction, to which there are few educational barriers to entry, fetched high wages due to a general labour shortage (see also Layte and Whelan 2000). But sectoral and/or a short-term decreases in wage inequality do not invalidate the polarisation thesis.

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Research and Policy on Access Students: Experiences, Intersections and Gaps

In continuing to tell the widening participation and access story, we now turn to the “equity groups” in relation to research, policy and practice. In particular, where possible, we explore the ways these various groups of students experience higher education (HE) in Ireland. For political, pedagogical and empirical reasons, we believe it is important that students’ voices become more central to debates on access (Finnegan et al. 2014; see also Couldry 2010 for reflections on politics of voice in general). We wish to actively resist ways of approaching non-traditional students which see them as deficits or focus solely on “the numbers game”, though statistics have their own relevance and tell one part of the story. The task undertaken here is to problematise taken for granted knowledge and where possible peel back layers of the hidden realities of the experiences of these groups. A key theme in this section of the book is that the categories we currently use to discuss access students are limited not least because many students fit into more than one category (for example working class mature students). Whilst unidimensional categories are useful for administration, student heterogeneity and the intersection of various aspects of social identity mean that these categories fail to capture what is occurring in HE and, to an extent, hinder the development of access policy. This critical analysis is intended to also emphasise gaps in policy and practice and to emphasise the need to continue researching with students as participants in the reform of HE.

In writing this book, it became apparent just how incomplete and uneven a picture of access we have. There are enormous gaps in what we know about even the most established “equity groups” (working class,

mature students and students with disabilities). These students are still primarily discussed in terms of participation figures linked to policy aspirations and initiatives but not very often as interlocutors, critics or agents within HE. Students, it seems, simply pass through HE. But without knowing how HE is experienced in the lives of students, we remain in the dark about the obstacles, resilience and risks which are central to the access story. It also means that we may well fail to appreciate just how traditional and excluding HEIs often are because, in part, these cultural and institutional barriers only become properly visible when we listen to students' stories.

The first chapter in this part of the book explores working class access to HE. It is argued that while we have good quantitative and even mixed methods research, there are significant empirical gaps in what we know about this topic especially in terms of what happens after this group of non-traditional students enter HE. This chapter discusses recent empirical research and uses this to problematise the dominant way class and access is researched and understood in policy.

The second chapter (written by Michael Shevlin et al.) considers the "place" of students with disabilities in HE. Anecdotal evidence suggests that once in the "system" students with disabilities are well supported. However, making the transition is much more problematic. The writers explore this in relation to the international context and draws on their own recent research on enhancing students with disabilities transitions into and through HE.

The third chapter (written by Mark Kearns) considers the position of mature students. As an equity group, they have been the subject of a number of studies and though their participation rates in Ireland are dramatically lower than other countries, much progress has been made in increasing their presence. In particular mature students have been the group that has forged the path through access programmes and onward towards transforming a HE system dominated by traditional age students. As Mark contends, this group is very heterogeneous and the complexities of the "mature" story are explored through the narratives of students in two Irish HEIs.

Gender was named as a major concern in access, participation and equality policies in the 1990s but this has become less visible. In the fourth chapter, Bernie Grummell and Rose Dolan argue that part of the reason is that on a macro level, participation by women meant this was left to one side. But this ignores how gender intersects with other aspects of social experience. They explore the complexity of this in a critique of policy and research and the exploration of data from DARE.

The final chapter in Part II considers the plight of part-time students (written by Nuala Hunt). Despite back in the early 1990s having been one of the key equity groups in HE long before the label was applied to them, they have remained problematic in a number of respects. This chapter tells another tale where students find that their part-time and flexible access is to access rather inflexible institutions. It is also an aspect of Irish HE where there is little in the way of definitional clarity as to what constitutes “part-time” and “flexible” as well as variable modes of provision across the sector. From what we know, this group tends to be more career focussed and in many cases work already. They unfortunately jut up against a system that offers partial (rather than part-time) and inflexible (rather than flexible) access.

MIND THE GAPS

Migration and the New Irish

We are aware that important groups of non-traditional students are missing in policy and research on access. The biggest gap relates to ethnicity and race. As far back as 1996, the Higher Education Equality Unit organised a conference on minority ethnic groups (Egan 1997). As part of the HEA’s annual equal access survey, there is some data on the ethnic background of students (HEA 2015d). The majority of respondents (86 per cent) in the 2013 survey described themselves as “Irish”, 8.6 per cent as “white other”, 1.5 per cent “African”, 0.7 per cent “Chinese” and 1.6 per cent “Any other Asian”. But overall we still know very little about Travellers, migrants or the so-called ‘new Irish’ in HE (Egan 1997; Keane 2009, 2011; Linehan and Hogan 2008; Sobiesiak 2012). We do know that in countries with high levels of ethnic diversity, such as the UK, that ethnicity is a very important factor in participation. This has been demonstrated via the very diverse patterns associated with different ethnic groups (for example see Bhopal and Danaher 2014; Finnegan et al. 2014). The story in Ireland is quite a complicated one for historical and other reasons. It is an ex-colony which after independence from the UK the state actively fostered a notion of the country as a culturally homogenous place in which questions of race, ethnicity and diversity appeared to have little purchase. The truth is never that simple. The existence of diverse cultures, including confessional cultures, and the oppression of minority ethnic groups such as

Travellers trouble this tidy story. Similarly, the experience of the Irish diaspora – which has fed into Irish national culture in significant ways – is complicated. The Irish have experienced subordination and exploitation as a ethnic minority in countries such as the US, the UK and Australia, but also have been complicit, and have benefitted from, ‘white privilege’ and from racism towards other peoples (Ignatiev 2009).

From the early 2000s, Ireland has become the home of a high number of migrants from within the EU (new accession countries in particular) and from non-EU countries. According to the Central Statistics Office in 2011, 12 per cent (or 544,357) of the population consists of non-Irish, almost double the proportion recorded in 2002 (5.8 per cent). The two largest groups are from Poland (22 per cent or 122,585; in 2002 this was 2,124) and the UK, (112,259; an increase from 103,476 in 2002). Approximately 12 per cent are from the Baltic states and those from Nigeria and Romania account for about 3 per cent each. Although people from just 12 countries (5 of whom are in the EU) make up 74 per cent of non-nationals, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) reports that there are “199 different nations represented” altogether (CSO 2012, p. 8). This group is also generally well educated. For instance, 11.2 per cent of the non-Irish hold “postgraduate diploma or degree” in comparison to 7.74 per cent of the Irish. Nineteen per cent hold a degree-level qualification in comparison to 16.1 per cent of the Irish, though both groups have similar levels of secondary (Leaving Certificate) level attainment: 19.7 per cent and 20.3 per cent for the non-Irish. Only 5.06 per cent of the non-Irish reported having only “primary or nor formal education” in comparison to 16.76 per cent of the Irish population. Other than there being higher proportions of “semi-skilled” non-Irish (11.5 per cent) relative to the Irish (7.4 per cent), the distributions between the two groups are roughly the same.

As a result of the arrival of migrants, primary and secondary schools in many parts of the country are now much more diverse in terms of race, accent, language, values, ethnicity and culture (Kitching 2010). According to the CSO, there are 78,569 children under the age of 15 from non-Irish families and 68,187 between the ages of 15 and 24 (CSO 2012). Also, 19.1 per cent of the population of Galway City are non-Irish, closely followed by Fingal at approximately 18 per cent and Waterford City 12 per cent. Even the most rural parts of Ireland such as Donegal have smaller communities of non-Irish people (8 per cent). This welcome diversity over recent years is posing interesting challenges for the school system but the impact on HE, as distinct from further education, is not yet well

understood. We do know that the problems posed by language and finance are major barriers as well as the difficulty many migrants have in ensuring that their HE qualifications be recognised.

The major barriers identified by Linehan and Hogan (2008, p. 3) who conclude that there is:

- An absence of clear, consistent and relevant information for potential third-level migrant students;
- Low levels of English language competence;
- Lack of recognition of international qualifications and prior learning faced by migrants in their attempts to access third level. There was no consistency in the responses given to this issue by third-level colleges.
- Inconsistent and confusing information regarding fees structures and the very high fees charged to non-EU citizens. The residency status of non-EU migrants and the lack of clarity regarding rights to education in Ireland prove to be confusing and problematic.

Besides this there are legal restrictions on asylum seekers entering HE and legislation means that Irish school goers who were born in non-EU countries but grew up in Ireland face very high “foreign student fees” when they enter HE – they bear the full economic cost of their course. In one university, the fees department quotes first year fees as €12,000 for a B.A.; €20,000 for a B.Ed. in Sport; and over €48,000 for Dentistry. But the deeply structured nature of racism which has economic and cultural dimensions creates barriers to participation which are far more significant than high fees, information and legal restrictions, Delving into this story has to become a major focus in Irish HE to grasp fully what access does and can do.

Irish Travellers

The story of Ireland’s Travellers is an older one; they are indigenous people who are an ethnic minority with their own culture, traditions and indeed language. The total number of Irish Travellers in 2011 was 29,573 – just about 0.6 per cent of the total population. About 15,000 Irish Travellers live in Britain and another 10,000 in the US. The struggle to sustain a nomadic tradition as well as poverty may contribute to the life expectancy of men who live 12 years shorter than settled men and Traveller women who live 12 years less than their female counterparts in

the settled community (Kelleher 2010). This is highlighted by the finding that 50 per cent die before the age of 39. Though a great deal of Travellers' concerns about education are about pre-school, primary and secondary in 2009, Supporting Travellers in College (STIC) peer support network was started for travellers in third level. It is a network of organizations and individuals working within the Traveller community. In the period of austerity, the government severely cut back many Traveller education programmes. According to the Irish Traveller Movement (ITM) that few travellers have been to HE. Six Travellers attended third level in 2002 (Healy and Binchy 2005, p. 3) and in 2007 there were at least 33 in HE (p. 2). In 2015, there were 35 full and part-time undergraduate new entrants; the HEA has set a target of 80 (HEA 2015e, p. 37).

The "Moving On" project encourages and supports Travellers to bridge into HE. A nomadic culture that also associates education with young people, financial barriers, low levels of previous education attainment, literacy, disparities between traditions and culture of travellers and that of HE institutions all contribute to low levels of engagement with HE (Healy and Binchy 2005, p. 10).

The first *Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland* (HEA 2004a) noted however, that only 197 Travellers had completed HE. It is worth noting that the overall number of adults holding third-level qualifications had fallen to 115 (0.9 per cent of the Travelling community) according to the 2011 census (CSO 2012). To put these HE figures in context, only 2 per cent of Travellers have completed senior cycle at second level, compared to 23 per cent of the general population for all age groups. Most Traveller children do not complete second-level education; therefore, improving access and participation in primary and second-level schooling forms an important part of Travellers' pre-access story. The enhancement of access to education services for Travellers is a multifaceted issue. Any response must take into account poor literacy levels among members of the community, also the living circumstances of the students, and the wider marginalisation experienced by Travellers in education (HEA 2008a, p. 29). In order for Travellers not to remain invisible to policymakers, accurate data must be gathered. The HEA report (2015e) states that:

This is the first time that a national target has been set for increasing participation in higher education by people from the Irish Traveller community. The

need for such a target was identified in consultation with Traveller representative groups and with Travellers who have succeeded in accessing further and higher education in Ireland. Given the very small number of Traveller students accessing higher education each year (0.1 per cent of entrants), a numerical rather than a per centage target is proposed. (HEA 2015e, p. 37)

In more general terms, the prejudice towards Travellers continues and there is resistance by the Government to giving them the official status as an ethnic minority. Though laws declare race and ethnicity as grounds on which one cannot discriminate, Travellers are not yet declared an ethnic group in Ireland. This omission in defiance of United Nations' positions stands in the way of travellers being able to assert their rights under a variety of legislation both Irish and EU. The United Nations Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2014 expressed concern at the:

Government's position with regard to Traveller ethnicity and encouraged the "Irish Government to work more concretely towards recognizing the Traveller community as an ethnic group". The Government remains in defiance of this recommendation. (ITM 2015)

The target groups we discuss in this Part II should be seen as distinct but in addition, the disadvantages of each group are compounded by belonging to two or even more of the equity groups. Being for example a woman with a disability is not a double disadvantage because the disadvantages work intersectionally to escalate the disadvantage. Some may belong to even more than two such groups, e.g. a Traveller woman with a disability. This has implications for all aspects of the access journey and the experience of HE including retention.

Finally, it is clear that our knowledge of these groups and how they experience HE is not only partial, but inadequate. As researchers in the HE system, we can see how only policies and practices grounded in rigorous research will survive and be productive. Only in this way will the many successes be further enhanced and major errors avoided.

Working Class Access to Higher Education: Structures, Experiences and Categories

Fergal Finnegan

INTRODUCTION

Research on widening participation in Ireland and access policy has repeatedly highlighted the existence of enduring class inequalities in HE. In fact, it has been a vital and defining concern. This chapter offers a summary and critical review of the available research on working class students' access to HE and outlines the key findings made from the late 1970s till today. One can point to a number of very well-developed lines of inquiry in the research, most notably the work on participation rates, but there are also major lacunae in this body of work. By mapping the contours of the field, a case will be made that what we know and can say about working class access to HE has clear empirical, methodological and theoretical limits. Drawing on the findings of a recent qualitative study of working-class students experience in Irish HE (Finnegan 2012), the chapter will build on this critique and outline on possible alternative way of conceptualising and researching working class access and participation.

IRISH CLASS ANALYSIS

Class is a major theme in Irish educational research, and scholars have repeatedly demonstrated that social class has a strong bearing on students' experience, trajectories and outcomes across all sectors of the education

system. For reasons that will become clear later in the chapter, it needs to be noted that the majority of these educational researchers (and for that matter most of the Irish social science studies of class as a whole) take either a political arithmetic or neo-Weberian approach to class (Breen and Whelan 1992; Clancy 1982, 1988, 1995, 2001; Clancy and Wall 2000; Hout 2004; Raftery and Hout 1985, 1993; McCoy and Byrne 2011; O'Connell 2005; Smyth and McCoy 2009; Whelan 1994; Whelan and Hannan 1999, *inter alia*). The most substantive alternative to this approach has come from researchers in Equality Studies/School of Social Justice at University College Dublin, which has looked at working class students' access as part of a more general radical egalitarian research programme which is strongly influenced by feminism (Lynch and O'Riordan 1998; see also Lynch 1989, 1999). Across the social sciences there is also a fairly extensive body of work on class in Ireland from Marxists (e.g., Allen 2000, 2011; Breathnach 2002, 2007, 2010; Cox 2011; Eipper 1986, 1989; Silverman 2001; Slater and McDonough 1994, *inter alia*), as well as economic and sociologists and historians who employ a range of theoretical resources, including Marxism to explore Irish society (e.g., Coulter and Coleman 2003; Kirby 2002, 2010; McCabe 2011; O'Hearn 1998, 2001). It is noteworthy however that none of this Marxist and Marxist influenced research has taken education as its major focus.

So there is a great deal of empirical evidence demonstrating the existence and persistence of class inequality across the education system, including HE, and this work is nested in a wider social science landscape of class analysis where political arithmetic; neo-Weberian macrosociology; and Marxist analyses of power, politics and state formation have predominated. But we want to argue that an adequate exploration of class requires *several* interconnected levels of analysis – the economic, historical, political, cultural and the everyday and experiential (Katznelson and Zolberg 1986). But nearly all of Irish class analysis explores only the first three levels and is mostly concerned with class in relation to social mobility or political mobilisation. Research which explores how class is understood, experienced, culturally mediated and resisted on an everyday level by working-class people is rare (Eipper 1989; O'Neill 1992; Saris and Bartley 2002; Silverman 2001). This general orientation to macrosociological and systemic analysis has strongly influenced how class has been approached in access research.

CLASS, SPACE AND POWER

We want to suggest a theory of social space drawing on the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991) and Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1985, 1989) and also on recent work on class and education (Reay 2003; Savage 2000, 2010; Sayer 2005; Skeggs 1997) offers a way of thinking dialectically across these interconnected levels of analysis. The need for such an approach emerged through a retroductive analysis of biographical accounts given by working-class student in Irish HE in tandem with a review of existing international and national research relevant to the topic (Finnegan 2012). As such it was an attempt to develop new conceptual tools within a specific context rather than arriving at a complete ‘universal’ theory of class. But as these arguments about class underpin the chapter, for the purpose of clarity, I will briefly summarise how class is understood here in theoretical terms. If the reader is not concerned with such issues they may prefer to go straight to the next section which offers an overview of the empirical research available on the topic of class and access.

The approach to class can be fruitfully linked to the critique offered in Chap. 5 of the dominant ‘social imaginary’, which is based on a model of the knowledge-based economy (KBE). One of the main arguments made there is that this imaginary invites us to think of social mobility as a relatively frictionless process. Building on this, we can now add that this requires a ‘notion of the instrumental homogeneity of space’ (Lefebvre 1991, p. 285), which is understood as flat, easily mapped and quickly traversed. But this ignores significant differences in embodied experience and is also based on highly questionable ontological assumptions about human beings as individuals bent on maximising their self-interest (Sayer 2011). Following Lefebvre (1991), we wish to take issue with this: space is not an empty ‘container’ of historical processes, rather space is *produced* in dynamic, conflictual and complex ways which depend on the organisation and reproduction of social relations. Instead of the spatial homogeneity evoked in the KBE social imaginary, there is hypercomplexity which comes from the ‘interpenetration and superimposition of [various types of] social spaces’ (Lefebvre 1991, p. 88) upon each other. Physical, mental and symbolic space are meshed and interconnected. Further, our embodied experience of space is shaped by the available representations and conceptions of space as well as the histories of power and division which are sedimented within social space.

Lefebvre maintains that we should also be attentive to the way space is produced on different scales, according to different rhythms and how the flows of capital, commodities, technologies, ideas, practices and information move *through* space to produce everyday embodied experience. Lefebvre (1991, p. 87) likens this to hydrodynamics:

Great movements, vast rhythms, immense waves – these all collide and ‘interfere’ with one another; lesser movements, on the other hand, interpenetrate. If we were to follow this model, we would say that any social locus could only be properly understood by taking two kinds of determinations into account: on the one hand, that locus would be mobilized, carried forward and sometimes smashed apart by major tendencies, those tendencies which ‘interfere’ with one another; on the other hand, it would be penetrated by, and shot through with, the weaker tendencies characteristic of networks and pathways.

It is important that the interlacing of the local and the global through flows and across networks are not seen just as distant macrosociological processes, they help shape our conceptions and lived experiences of space in everyday life. The production of space is never simply just about social reproduction and domination: there are social spaces which are tightly defined and strongly bounded areas as well as looser and less-controlled spaces which we move through, and are shaped by, where we can act in both small and significant ways in our own lives (see also de Certeau 1984; Scott 1985, 1990).

The KBE imaginary is defined by, and relies on, a particular dominant conception of space as homogeneous, abstract and manipulable: it is reduced to the empty space of things not the multiplicity of spaces of practices and people. This ignores the diversity of experiences of space and how these are linked to different interests within larger power structures.

In bridging this theorisation of social space with working class experiences of HE in Ireland, we want to turn to one of the most densely suggestive pieces on class and classification written by Bourdieu (1985). In it Bourdieu contends that social space is best conceptualised as a field of forces and relations in which the amount of capital, both cultural and economic, at one’s disposal defines one position within that space. Class positions should be plotted relationally according to the distribution and differentiation of *various* sorts of resources and powers across a range of

fields (1984, 1985). Social space is not homogenous and undifferentiated, rather it is divided into various *fields* and each field has its own specific 'logic of practice' with its own stakes and rewards (1984). So, for example, investment bankers and literary critics work in different fields and this affects the type of interactions and strategies used by agents in their respective fields of endeavour. A field is also defined by how the various form of capital, that is, cultural, economic, symbolic, and social, circulate, accumulate and are employed within that field (Bourdieu 1984, 1986a; Calhoun et al. 1993). Bourdieu also maintains that the boundaries and practices that constitute a field get redefined through struggle over time.

In order to explain the social logic of our trajectories through classed social space, Bourdieu (1990, p. 53) developed his theory of *habitus*, which he defines in the following way:

The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus, systems of durable transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations.

According to Bourdieu, habitus is created through agents historically and structurally conditioned movement through social space. By necessity this involves actors' adaptation to and an internalisation of social structures and Bourdieu claims that we should pay attention to how this leads us to naturalise certain principles of vision and division of how the social world is and should be. He is particularly interested in how dispositions are activated or neutralised in a given field (Bourdieu 1984, 2000). To use one of Bourdieu's favoured similes the relationship between habitus and field can be likened to one's feel for the game and the game itself (2000, p. 151). By examining how well a given habitus functions in response to the demands of a given field and the sort of *capitals* that are required to succeed in a specific field, Bourdieu believes, we can begin to properly understand the social dynamics underpinning the choices, preferences and strategies of social actors in social space. Bourdieu thinks this offers the best way of thinking about what defines class experience, how it shapes our sense of self and how social inequality gets reproduced. Class structures patterns of opportunity and restriction but also aspects of our personal experience and dispositions, in a profound way (Bourdieu 1984). Class is embodied, and affective; it saturates our unconscious and unconscious sense of self, our ways of

being and patterns of meaning making. As a consequence, the ‘meaning’ of class is not given, let alone self-evident, but is historically contingent, culturally mediated experience made and remade through continuities in everyday experience based on the structuring of social space and through various forms of symbolic struggle.

Class here is understood primarily in relation to the experience of ‘historically constituted power and powerlessness’ in social space (Aronowitz 2003, p. 141) structured by overlapping inequalities linked to control over capitals. The working class occupy the least advantaged and most subordinate positions in social space as a result of these inequalities. Social space is complex and layered, remade by the flows of capital, practices and ideas on one level, but can also be subdivided into relatively stable and partially autonomous fields of activity with specific dynamics; these fields are highly structured but are open to change. The production of space is central to social reproduction and embodied everyday experience. From this perspective class is not just about holding specific jobs, a given level of income, nor can it be fully understood through an analysis of the exploitation of labour. We also have to be alert to the cultural, social and symbolic dimensions of class domination (Bourdieu 1984). Class is relationally defined, and structurally maintained, through differential access to material resources, valued modes of being and opportunities for collective and individual development (Sayer 2005, 2011). This also entails grasping how ethnicity and gender and other axes of social division and distinction intersect with, reinforce and modify class power lines as well as what is distinct about the effect of class on, in and through social space (Anthias 2005; Skeggs 1997).

RESEARCH ON CLASS AND ACCESS

This approach is very different to the one used in most access research, which relies primarily on the class schema developed by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in collaboration with other statistical agencies and social scientists. Since 1951 the CSO has, using a variety of schema, collected and categorised data on occupations into socio-economic groups (SEGs). Occupations are assigned to one of ten discrete SEGs based on the putative skill and educational level required for a job (Employers and Managers, Higher Professionals, Lower Professionals, Non-Manual Workers, Skilled Manual Workers, Semi-Skilled Manual Workers, Unskilled Manual Workers, Farmers, Agricultural Workers and Own Account Workers). The

schema developed for social classes is more complex and uses a broadly Neo-Weberian framework, which places occupations into classes based on skills, employment and conditions: there are six classes and one residual group (Professional Workers, Managerial and Technical, Non-Manual, Skilled Manual, Semi-Skilled, Unskilled and All Others Gainfully Occupied and Unknown). Both of these schemas have been used in research on access but SEGs have been used far more frequently (Bernard 2006). Within this classification system the working class is typically understood as the four ‘lowest’ socio-economic groups – that is to say manual workers and routine non-manual workers.

This approach to class analysis has been central in access policy and research. We have already outlined how Patrick Clancy and others have drawn on this data on occupations along with information gathered on the socio-economic background of new HE entrants to examine the participation rates of various SEGs. This is a well-elaborated line of research dating back to the 1970s, which is supported and extended by the work on social stratification by the the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). Repeatedly, these researchers have discovered that the likelihood of participation in HE is very strongly tied to social background (Clancy 1982, 1988, 1995, 2001, 2015a; Clancy and Benson 1979; Clancy and Wall 2000). Despite the rapid expansion of HE and the rolling out of access there continues to be an enormous disparity in the third level participation rates of different social economic groups (O’Connell et al. 2006; HEA 2010a). People from higher professional, managerial and farming families have very high levels of participation and entrants from a higher professional background have reached ‘saturation’ levels of participation (Clancy and Wall 2000; O’Connell 2005). This research has been supplemented by research on participation rate by geographical area and districts. Again, the headline story is one of persistent class inequalities (O’Connell et al. 2006). For example, a study of admissions to universities by postal district by Clancy (2001) found that there was a 7 per cent admission rate in Ballyfermot, a working-class suburb in Dublin, and a 77 per cent admission rate in Foxrock, an upper-middle-class suburb in the same city. Some sense of what this has historically meant at a local level can be gleaned from reading Kathleen O’Neill’s (1992) study of a working-class community in Dublin in the 1990s, where of the 156 youth who had left school in the area only two of them had gone on to study at third level.

Research on class inequalities in relation to sector, institution, discipline and subject choice has shown evidence of persistent class inequalities

(Clancy 1982; Clancy and Wall 2000; O'Connell 2005). In 2009, almost 26 percent of new entrants into the IT sector were from the target SEGs, the average in the university sector was 19 per cent but in Ireland's two most elite universities working class students only made up 14–16 per cent of new entrants (HEA 2010a). In the most recent study that looks at this, Byrne (2009, p. 11) argues that the Irish system is, in comparative terms, an inclusive system but that clear class disparities remain in terms of both institutional differentiation and qualification differentiation.

It is not a static situation though: research has explored what is, and might be, changing due to the expansion of HE and the development of access initiatives. There has been a steady increase in the number of working-class students who come from skilled manual backgrounds (DES 2001; O'Connell 2005) and the impact of the 'access agenda' in some working-class areas has been dramatic – for instance, in some areas of Dublin participation rates doubled between 1998 and 2004 (O'Connell 2005).

Of particular interest here is the on-going debate on the effect of 'saturation' levels of participation among the cohorts drawn from the highest socio-economic groups. This is an international phenomenon and we already mentioned that Shavit and Blossfeld's (1993) influential study demonstrated the persistence of inequality across a wide range of national contexts. But this argument has been reviewed and amended in more recent work (Shavit et al. 2007) which looks at the phenomenon of expansion in fifteen countries and has concluded that there has been a *lessening* of class inequality in HE due to the growth of the sector. Furthermore, in Clancy's recent overview of Irish HE (2015), based on Eurostudent data, it is argued there is evidence of this trend in Ireland and moreover that in comparative terms access to HE by working-class students is less unequal in Ireland than in many other European countries.

Despite these changes, there have been uneven results in bringing people from non-manual, semi- and unskilled socio-economic backgrounds into college and a recent review of access suggests that the percentage of students from some of these groups has dropped or remained more or less static in recent years (HEA 2010c). Of particular concern has been the decline in the participation rates of entrants from non-manual backgrounds (HEA 2008a, 2010c). The non-manual group is large and heterogeneous but, significantly, this group now includes many of the routine and poorly paid service jobs in the Irish economy, precisely the types of jobs that Breathnach's (2007) research suggests are important in understanding the process of occupational polarisation in Ireland. The significance of the

changing nature of work and the importance of providing access for people from routine non-manual occupational families has been highlighted in two other research projects (Fleming et al. 2010; McCoy et al. 2010). Overall, participation rates for working-class students remain stubbornly below the HEA targets and this group only accounts for 23 per cent of new entrants (HEA 2010c). The number of students coming directly from schools through HEAR, an access route aimed specifically at school students in disadvantaged areas, is proportionally relatively small – this group accounted for only 1,009 students out of a total of 34,500 new entrants in 2010 (HEA 2010c).¹ Overall, when we look at the data on working class participation and access based on SEGs, we encounter a rather ambiguous picture in which the effectiveness of access measures is not entirely clear: progressive change has occurred but widening participation has not been as rapid or linear as expected.

THE LIMITS OF EXISTING RESEARCH ON SOCIAL CLASS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Clancy's research has helped to ensure that class inequality is very high on the agenda in HE policy. This is no small thing, especially when one remembers that for a variety of reasons the 'Irish society is often thought of as a classless society' (Share et al. 2007, p. 170). But as we argued in Chap. 4, the fact that *one* particular form of analysis and research has predominated is nevertheless problematic. While internationally, 'class analysis is almost overwhelmed by a variety of contending theories which produce a remarkable array of definitions of class boundaries, fractions and locations' (Pawson 1989, p. 235), there is hardly an echo of these disputes and discussion in Irish research on HE. Consequently, most of the advances made in research on working class access have come from the deepening and elaboration of an approach that employs a minimal definition of class, based on occupations and that relies overwhelmingly on quantitative methods.

The use of SEGs, especially in the fairly narrow framework used for the 'access triad' discussed in Chap. 4, has tended to limit the discussion of participation in a way that leaves it disconnected from wider social processes and events. SEGs are used sectoral and institutional targets but this is a dehistoricised, reified understanding of class. Arguably the focus on specific SEGs as target groups contributes to the idea that social class

inequalities are partial and perhaps even residual problems rather than enduring and a defining axis of power in society. What is certain is that the favoured approach to class analysis in access policy and research directs our attention to the secondary effects of class inequality rather than towards the sources of inequality and the necessary and defining features of class division. The causes of class inequality, the existence, or non-existence, of shared conditions across working-class SEGS, the way inequalities are affected by elite decisions and popular agency are completely left aside. This stops the conversation almost precisely at the point where it should begin.

Furthermore, most of the research says very little about what students think, feel or do in or after college; it leaves the main actors out of the drama. To return to our earlier discussion, taking a systemic 'god's eye view' undoubtedly *does* capture aspects of class that cannot be readily understood on an everyday level, but *staying solely* at this level misses a great deal. It purges class of the cultural, emotional and even its moral significance (Sayer 2005).

There is however a small collection of work which has gone beyond the dominant terms used in policy and research. Lynch and O'Riordan's (1998, see also 1996) study of barriers to working class participation in HE stands out in this regard as it is theoretically reflexive, empirically rigorous and attentive to the existence of deep structures of class inequality and the nuances of lived experience. For this research, Lynch and O'Riordan conducted interviews with students in school and college, school staff and community workers. This included interviews with forty HE students who were working class. Their most important finding is that a range of (1998, p. 147) 'economic, social and cultural, and educational constraints were identified as the principal barriers to equality of access and participation in higher education' with the economic being the most significant of these barriers. They concluded that 'class differences in education are not the result of some set of preconceived preferences, therefore; rather, they are the by-product of an on-going set of negotiations between agents and structures' (1998, p. 447) and need to be explored in all of their cultural, economic, normative and affective dimensions.

But the challenge to conduct research on class and access in new and more varied ways has, by and large, not been taken up. As noted in Chap. 4, qualitative research and especially critical qualitative research has occupied a marginal role within HE policy, but more recently the trend has been to move towards mixed-method studies. McCoy et al.'s (2010; see also

McCoy and Byrne 2011) research on the non-manual group is the most directly relevant study of this sort to the present discussion. This mixed methods study involved a large-scale quantitative dataset (3,775 school leavers) and in-depth interviews with 29 school leavers (13 of which were from routine non-manual group). The study confirms many of the findings made by Lynch and O’Riordan and indicates that access and participation need to be viewed (McCoy et al. 2011, p. 155) ‘as the outcome of a longer-term process of educational engagement. Educational experiences, particularly in secondary school, play a central role in the longer-term educational trajectories’. It also stressed the importance of information and guidance in access.

Despite these important studies when we review the literature as a whole we can say that working class participation and non-participation in Irish HE is still only vaguely understood in many important respects; while we have compelling evidence that class inequality remains one of the most salient features of Irish education, we know very little about how working-class students view and value education or what, if anything, what effect attending HE has on this key ‘equity group’.

CLASS, ACCESS AND HE

The remainder of the chapter discusses findings from a research project exploring working class experiences of HE (Finnegan 2012). Eighty-one in-depth interviews were conducted longitudinally with fifty-one people of all ages in three HE institutions (elite and non-elite). Forty-three of the students were working class, and a middle-class cohort was included for comparative analysis. Twenty-eight of the total cohort were mature students and thirty-three were women. A biographical approach was taken to interviewing as this offers especially ‘rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history, inner and outerworlds, self and other’ (Merrill and West 2009, p. 1; see also Alheit and Dausien 2000; Finnegan 2009, 2014b, 2016a). Participants came from working-class SEGs but as the research developed the limits of using a SEG based approach for describing class became clear. People ‘use a language more complicated, more puzzling than the computations of material well-being than their interpreters use’ (Sennett and Cobb 1977, p. 18) and taking full account of how people understand their lives and learning on their own terms leads to a different way of viewing access and theorising class.

The research suggests class matters both inside and outside the walls of the university but how the experience of class is internalised, framed and narrated is very varied indeed. Even those interviewees who readily described themselves as working class, would offer biographical accounts that included both class identifications and dis-identifications (see also Skeggs 1997). In the majority of life stories, class was brought into focus at certain points and periods and downplayed in other segments of their biography. A third of people chose to use explicit class identifiers in telling their stories most commonly using terms such as ‘working class’, ‘disadvantaged’ and ‘not posh’. Far more commonly, and more significantly, class emerged through accounts of shared patterns of experience, common reference points and similar life trajectories. What these people said about their experience in communities, in education and in work reveals something important about the ‘immanent structure of the social world’ (Bourdieu 1986a, p. 46). In tracing the contours and boundaries of the social world through the eyes of these people, the spatial dimensions of class experience emerged as a major theme. Inequalities in ownership, authority and power and cultural capital were absolutely fundamental to how both class and education were understood in these biographical accounts.

Class, the research indicates, also has to be understood in spatial terms. There was a particularly strong association of class with place: interviewees frequently used geographical signifiers, for example, certain addresses, or being from a council-owned ‘block of flats’, were often used as a shorthand for class background (see also Silverman 2001). This was linked by many to accounts of family life and coming from a place with a strong community spirit. Almost universally the descriptions of place and community were associated with having limited resources and being subject to forces largely outside one’s control (for example, in relation to the impact of mass unemployment or the arrival of illegal drugs in certain communities, etc.). Imposed restrictions and withheld opportunities meant that people felt, as Eithne puts it, ‘*all avenues are closed to you if you come from the wrong end of town*’ and to move against this gravitational force takes considerable resilience, planning and effort. In this way, descriptions of places were overlaid with a map of social relations. Frequently, people contrasted the reality of living in a working-class area with what is typically encountered in a wealthier district. Significantly, the need to struggle against such circumstances was absent in the interviews with the middle-class students. These evocations of place as constraining and relationally defined were also shot through

with symbolic significance. Students often felt that they also had to anticipate and handle negative perceptions of their community and, to varying degrees, this was internalised. Kieran explains ‘*I’m from Xtown [well known working class area of Dublin] and [so] people always assume “he’s a scumbag”-that is people’s impression of Xtown. When I say I am from Xtown people can’t believe it. I am proud of my ma and da because of the way they brought me up.*’

Areas, neighbourhood and communities were described as physical, symbolic and relational spaces, and this was one of the main ways of articulating the meaning of class. Paid work was given almost equal importance. The lived experience of work and the threat of unemployment were fundamental to how class was understood and for discussing movement and immobility in social space. Mature working-class students frequently said they had very little choice in the jobs they had taken after leaving school. Just as striking was that workplaces were frequently associated with a lack of autonomy, boredom and subordination. Mark, a man in his twenties expressed this succinctly: he decided to come to college because he grew sick of doing ‘*donkey work*’ on building sites, so even though the money was good he decided to enter university. Often, people felt very strongly about how hemmed in and restricted they felt at work; Eithne, who worked in a shop, said ‘*it does depress me. I hate going in*’.

There was another type of barrier to movement highlighted, which is connected to the increasingly credentialised nature of society. Many mature students had hit a promotion ‘class ceiling’² in their careers; Katy’s story touches on this and she links this to not being in control over structural forces. Here we see an example of the way individual agency is shaped by immediate circumstances but also affected by the flows of capital globally:

I think [not having credentials] held me back a lot [...]. I was in the training department and I would see people who would come in and I would feel ‘I could do that job, not better, but as good as them’, but I didn’t have the academic qualifications to back me up or to go on and manage this department.[...] Then I was made redundant. I was made redundant from ‘Premiumcorp [pseudonym for large multinational] – 800 people and jobs were all gone to Asia. So I had to go there [to Asia] to train the new workforce. We didn’t have to do it, but you were encouraged. How else were they going to train them because at that stage most of people had left? So when I was over there [in Asia] I thought ‘what I am going to do when I get home?’ I am in this job but I am not qualified per se to be doing it. [...] I have lots of expertise and I am qualified by experience, but I am not qualified in any other way.

Communities and workplaces were viewed as relational social spaces defined largely by unequal access to material and symbolic resources where power over decisions is not in your hands and working against the pull of circumstances is not easy or straightforward. As Elaine puts it: *'It's like a river, it's like there is a river flowing in between the doers and the ones that tell the doers to do and the thinkers and non-thinkers.'* The emotional impact and the moral dimension of the lived experience of class inequality should not be underestimated and yet again this was often articulated in spatial terms. Terry says *'where I came from [the working class part of a medium sized rural town] -I remember feeling embarrassed, less than, basically having, having less worth than other people, not being listened to and not being taken seriously, condescended to, looked down upon, frowned upon-people expecting you not to understand. Personally, I believe I am better than that.'* His position in social space is not simply about material resources and opportunities but about feeling subject to judgement and even denigrated and disrespected. Similarly, in recalling his childhood in an inner city part of Dublin, Kev said: *'I felt very frustrated. Ireland to me was a terrible, terrible place. You were. It was demeaning to be from certain areas of society. You were held down deliberately.'* This was very common refrain: a large number of people were especially aware of the negative connotations associated with being working class in middle-class environments. It should be noted that age, gender and political engagement had a significant impact on how this aspect of working class experience was articulated and handled. Unsurprisingly, this sense of been *'looked down upon and frowned upon'* creates a good deal of ambivalence about class (see also Savage et al. 2001).

Class then is more than income, occupation or address; the 'position of a given agent within the social space can thus be defined by the positions he [sic] occupies in the different fields' (Bourdieu 1985, p. 724) and this has material, cultural and affective dimensions which cannot be overlooked if we want to understand inequality and has implications for how we think of access and mobility.

EDUCATION AS A SPACE WITHIN SOCIAL SPACE

If biographies are powerfully shaped, if not entirely determined, by the boundaries and divisions in social space and class is seen as having economic, cultural and even moral dimensions, this will of course affect how education is viewed and experienced. The accounts of schooling were regularly linked to wider experiences of restrictions in work and

community. Many people felt overlooked, disrespected or even, like Tara, ‘harassed’ and this crystallised as a feeling that they were ill suited to education and even incapable and ‘stupid’ (Katy). Again, there are significant difference in the research sub-cohorts and the stories of younger people, especially women, were far more positive than mature students, especially mature men. There were also a number of accounts of enjoying school but that frequently difficulties in class or outside the school gates obstructed full participation.

On the other hand, non-compulsory education in FE, community education, access courses and HE were seen as highly valued social spaces with, distinct characteristics by both young and older students. The participants were unanimous about the value of access programmes; in fact, not one single serious criticism was voiced by students about access programmes in four years of interviews. Instead, FE tutors and university access officers were highly praised and numerous students said that without these programmes they would never have made it into, or sometimes through, university.

To a remarkable extent HE was also valued. Strikingly, this was even the case when staff or courses disappointed students. In explaining why HE was so important, the desire to learn and the hope for a break in the ordinary course of things surfaced repeatedly. The university is very commonly imagined as a space where meaningful transitions in one’s sense of self, some of which are potentially transformative, could occur. The interviewees saw attending HE as gaining access to previously denied symbolic resources, increasing the likelihood of upward social mobility, bolstering their capacity for agency and as a space where they could explore new possibilities in life and do what might be called ‘identity work’. David put this strongly saying after coming to college he felt ‘*I am the new me. I am somebody else now.*’ Part of this is that HE is understood as a meritocratic set of institutions where you can ‘*prove them wrong*’ (Amy) (in this case, Amy is referring to people who look down on lone parents in working-class areas). Students also put a good deal of value on learning ‘*for its own sake*’ and a majority of the interviewees expresses, in one or another form, the idea that education was an important part of personal development. James explained: ‘*I have learnt all these things-these things that have enriched me so much and made me a much a better person and made me open my eyes up to other people that I would have got wrong years ago.*’ This was associated by James and many others with having time to reflect, intellectual stimulation and affirmation of one’s intellectual capability.

The link to worth and recognition and overcoming previous disrespect was explicit; to be educated, the students indicated, is to be more worthy of respect and ‘*on an equal footing with others*’ (Sinead). Interestingly, a large number of students, especially mature students, also suggested that getting a degree gave them a voice in the society, to ‘*be able stand to an argument*’ (James). It was also a common refrain among the students that getting a degree was not simply about protecting oneself and one’s family from the worst problems faced in working-class life, it was also valued because it provided an opportunity to ‘*give something back*’ and to ‘*bring people along*’, which was imagined in a wide variety of, mainly solidaristic, ways.

The idea that HE was a, perhaps the, door to a meritocratic society was also expressed by many interviewees. Luke said, ‘*once you have the degree we will all be on a level playing field*’, and one student even said, ‘*the lack of education that caused the divide, the class divide*’. This seems to support the claims made for HE as a space of upward movement and frictionless transitions. But the students’ lifestories as a whole suggest otherwise. Class continues to effect everyday experience in HEIs. On a very basic level some of this related to material resources. Young students, those who came from families who were in low-paid work or who relied on social welfare, were often working a lot in part-time jobs while in college and on extremely tight budgets. Even among students who were in less-straightened circumstances participating in social life could be tricky not least because of the assumptions made by middle-class students. Ger, said ‘*For me the University is like the ultimate middle-class institution [...] It’s always “Are you going out? Are you going out? Are you going out?” and if you don’t have the money it is like “Get it from your parents!”*’

Many people found their universities isolating. This was especially strong in some of the accounts of elite institutions. For some it was simply too middle class – ‘*a foreign country*’ as James put it. The sense of being in a space where you do not feel you fit but which is nevertheless highly valued was a frequent theme in the interviews. This can create anxious questions and difficult choices, including the need to change oneself in ways that are psychically very demanding. In fact, many of the participants thought that becoming a college student *necessitated* a break from family, friends and their community, and this is tangled up with the deeply rooted notion that HE is, by definition, not part of working-class life. For example, halfway through her degree Elaine found herself thinking about her community and asking herself with apprehension, ‘*Am I with*

them or am I with myself? The extent to which these breaks and transitions entailed a profound remaking of the self appears to depend on age and to a lesser extent gender with younger students recounting the most complete and fluid personal transformations.

Most of the students *did* negotiate these difficulties successfully by their own accounts. But the research indicates that the readily available discourses for describing class and education makes this task difficult and even fraught. Students would often discuss being from a 'lone parent family', or coming from a 'disadvantaged areas', or being an 'access student' and so forth. These categories were used because they were readily available. But current access and welfare categories are completely inadequate for explaining the complexities of educational and social experience and to a striking degree students found it hard to handle the dissonances and contradictions thrown up by the reality of HE. As Carolyn Steedman says, 'The stories that people tell themselves in order to explain how they got to the place that they currently inhabit – are often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official interpretive devices of a culture' (1986, p. 6). This is further complicated by the moral dimensions of class discussed previously, which perturbed and worried many students: the widespread belief that to be working class is to get things wrong, to fail, to be lesser is deeply embedded in Irish society, and for many students this message was reinforced by their time in college. It is very telling that the students who did not feel subject to this deficit discourse like this had discovered through politics, study, community work or family members a vocabulary for placing personal experience in sociological terms and were proud of being working class.

DISCUSSION

Expansion and widening participation in Ireland since the 1990s has made HE a more contradictory space with dynamics and tensions that are poorly described using traditional accounts of social reproduction or as a process of modernisation linked to the 'optimal' use of human capital. HE has become a distinct type of symbolic and social space but one which, in class terms, is directly informed by the experience of inequalities beyond its walls. Communities, employment and schooling are profoundly shaped by class and this lived, embodied experience of restriction and subordination in society, in its economic, cultural, symbolic and even moral dimensions has to be acknowledged within access and participation initiatives and policies. These inequalities shape, but do not determine in an unmediated

way, what occurs in HE. It is a liminal zone: a space of imagined and actual transitions. In individualised and unequal societies, HE serves as an ‘in-between’ space, however temporary, for reflection, individual agency and creativity (Finnegan 2012; Finnegan and Merrill 2015). As Reay notes, ‘growing numbers of the working classes are caught up in education [...] as an escape, as a project from maximising and fulfilling the self or complicated mixture of the two’ (2001, p. 336).

A great number of interviewees were deeply passionate about education. Given how persistent the myth of working class disinterest in education this is worth saying. The working-class demand and desire for education is too often forgotten or left to one side in many critical theories of education which describe working class participation in formal education as an unleavened tale of misadventure and difficulty (Althusser 2008; Bernstein 1971; Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Bowles and Gintis 1976).

The research strongly suggests that the major obstacles remain the same as they were before access policies were mainstreamed – finance, institutional practices and cultural barriers (Lynch and O’Riordan 1996). Financial resources are absolutely necessary for achieving greater equality and grants and funding were mentioned as crucial to their decision to attend by many students. The interviews also suggest that the people who are most likely to encounter serious financial barriers are those relying on benefits or individuals with very little family support.

It is also clear from these students’ accounts that what institutions – in the compulsory, FE or HE sectors – do, or do not do, can have a massive impact on an individual’s educational trajectory. Widening access relies on a delicate web of supports and small changes and initiatives often have a disproportionate impact. In particular, providing a wide range of paths into HE through community education and access programmes appears to be vital.

But access is still mainly approached as facilitating entry into institutions that remain very traditional in their ideas and practices. So the dominant culture in HE – which is still largely middle class – continues to be very different, and often at odds, with the emergent and residual cultures brought to HE by working-class students who now constitute a significant proportion of the student body. While going to university as a working-class student may be appealing, it remains ‘a risky business’ (Barnett 2007; Reay 2003). This is true both in terms of handling day-to-day interactions and in terms of effecting more profound changes in identity and work. This is because there are still significant financial and cultural barriers to participation and success.

Working-class students are very often arriving at quite traditional universities and possess different cultural capital and habitus to that of the middle-class students and institution, which is not valued or seen as equally ‘legitimate’ (Bourdieu 1984). Often the process of ‘becoming educated’ – of adapting and succeeding – can later raise issues of belonging in relation to the self, family and friends.

Despite the efforts of access offices to bring students into colleges and offer support to them while they are enrolled the extent to which HEIs are relying on individual students’ resilience to overcome the biographical pressures that accompany this transition into a middle-class space is remarkable but hardly praiseworthy. Crucially, in most of the accounts overcoming such difficulties are envisaged by students as an individual problem, rather than an institutional responsibility or more properly as social responsibility. Relying on student resilience has its limits and if we are serious about widening access and equality we have to move away from testing working-class students’ capacity to cope and adapt. To address this in any meaningful way requires that working-class people are given a far clearer voice in discussions of what access is and should be. If that was deemed important, then research on class and access would reflect this more clearly. It means, to repeat a point made in the last chapter, renewing the sociological imagination to develop ways of discussing class that can build on the passion and interests of working-class students and which can counter deficit discourses and enhance student agency (Finnegan 2015). Part of this should involve a space in the university for working-class studies (Russo and Linkon 2005). On a much broader level, it means a different approach to pedagogy and further democratisation of universities matters, which we will return to in [Chap. 11](#).

NOTES

1. In 2012 according to Byrne et al. (2013), 7.4 per cent, or 3,302 students, entered HE, Level 7 and 8. The number of eligible complete applications via the scheme was 2,930 applications for Level 8 programmes. Of these, 88.5 per cent ($n = 2,593$) received an offer and 62 per cent accepted an offer (1,607). In 2010, 87 per cent of the Level 8 ‘acceptances’ entered into HE. It is useful to note that all new entrants for 2012 totaled 40,865 but only 24,273 entered DARE participating HEIs. Therefore, it is important to adjust any data accordingly to avoid erroneous conclusions.
2. The phrase is borrowed from John Bissett’s (2000) research on class and schooling.

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Moving to Higher Education: Opportunities and Barriers Experienced by People with Disabilities

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we will examine how national initiatives have developed over recent decades and how they impacted on the participation of people with disabilities within HE. We contend that Initial access initiatives tended to focus on people from poorer socio-economic backgrounds and/or those from ethnic minorities. It was only at a later stage that children and young people with disabilities were given additional supports to enable their participation in educational settings and in particular HE.

INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Access initiatives supporting people with disabilities emerged within the context of concerted efforts by many countries to develop and establish more inclusive societies. The World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca (UNESCO 1994), a seminal event within the move towards educational inclusion, specifically refers to the importance

of supporting access, transfer and progression within the education system for young people with disabilities: ‘should be helped to make an effective transition from school to adult working life . . . support to enter HE whenever possible and subsequent vocational training preparing them to function as independent, contributing members of their communities after leaving school’ (UNESCO 1994, p. 34). The World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000, reinforced the recommendations from the Salamanca Conference through encouraging the development of effective partnerships: ‘between schoolteachers, families, communities, civil society, employers, voluntary bodies, social services and political authorities’ (p. 66) to achieve this goal. The United Nations Convention on Rights for Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006, Article 24) asserts the rights of people with disabilities to access all levels of education:

States Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. To this end, States Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities.

NATIONAL CONTEXT

Since the latter years of the twentieth century, there has been a focus within Irish educational and social policies on developing an infrastructure to support the greater participation of people with disabilities within Irish society. There has been an attempt at policy level to examine potential barriers to full participation within the education system and address these through a series of policy initiatives and enabling legislation. For example, a framework to support access, transfer and progression for all learners in the education system was mandated in the Qualifications Act (IG 1999). It was recognised that this framework, while designed to facilitate all learners, had particular relevance for people with disabilities (NQAI 2003). Facilitating meaningful access for people with disabilities required a series of measures including adaptation of existing programmes, flexible delivery, reasonable accommodation, appropriate supports and programmes designed: ‘to promote equality and combat discrimination’ (NQAI 2003, p. 6). The Employment Equality Act (IG 1998a) and the

Equal Status Act (IG 2000) provide support for the concept of access with the former permitting positive action to support for the employment of disabled people and the latter stipulating that reasonable accommodation should be made for a student with a disability where: ‘without this treatment or facilities, it would be impossible or unduly difficult to avail of the services provided’ (NQAI 2003, p. 8). It was anticipated that the establishment of an access, transfer and progression framework would result in: ‘a more diverse learner community throughout further and higher education’ (NQAI 2003, p. 15). Universities were obliged under the Universities Act (Irish Government 1997) to develop policies with regard to: ‘access to the university and to university education by economically or socially disadvantaged people, by people who have a disability and by people from sections of society significantly under-represented in the student body’ (Section 36: 1 (a)).

As was discussed in Chaps. 3 and 5, the report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level (DES 2001) represented a significant advance in establishing a viable framework for access, transfer and progression for people with disabilities within the education system. The authors recommended the setting of national targets for increased participation by students with disabilities. The Fund for Students with Disabilities was established and administered by the National Access Office. This fund was designed to support participation through the provision of assistive technology, sign language interpreters, note takers and extra tuition. A succession of Higher Education Authority reports (2005, 2008a, 2010c, 2015e) promoted a coherent rationale for extending access to HE, acknowledging the importance of HE opportunities both for the realisation of individual and societal goals such as economic progress and social cohesion. The second National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008–13 (HEA 2008a) aimed to double the numbers of people with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities participating in HE. The Mid-Term Review of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (HEA 2010c) reported that while there was evident progress in achieving participation targets for people with disabilities the majority of targets for 2010 had not been achieved. There was a renewed commitment to achieving the original targets over the lifetime of the plan; however, there was also a clear recognition that the rapid deterioration in the country’s economic circumstances had forced a review of the access plan to accommodate the needs of the newly unemployed with increased demand for a coherent response from HE institutions for retraining and

upskilling. As discussed in [Chap. 3](#), it was recognised that HE institutions had been proactive in developing specific access initiatives such as the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) and increased support in assistive technology and study skills. The DARE scheme is designed to take into account the adverse impact of a disability on the ability of students with a disability to achieve the requisite entry scores for admission to their preferred programmes of study ([HEA 2008a](#)). Students deemed eligible for the DARE scheme can compete for places with a reduced entry score in the Leaving Certificate examination and if successful will receive additional academic support within HE institutions. The Fund for Students with Disabilities budget had increased substantially from 2003–4 to 2008–9 with an allocation of 5.6 m. (2003–4) doubling to 11.3 m. (2008–9) and a more than doubling of the number of students with disabilities supported in further and HE with 1,425 (2003–4) and 3,689 (2008–9) ([HEA 2010c](#)).

Over the last decade, Disability/Access officers have been appointed in each HE institution with the responsibility for establishing support services for students with disabilities which can enable these students to transfer successfully to and progress through HE. Support services generally consist of needs assessment for each student to determine support needs, curricular access supports such as assistive technology, the provision of sign interpreters and note takers along with extra focussed academic tutorials. The Disability Officer will also recommend reasonable accommodations for assignments and examinations and liaise with academic and administrative staff within the institution. Outreach activities include established links with post-primary schools, open days and the Better Options Fair ([AHEAD 2008](#)) which provides in-depth information on accessibility of institutions and courses, availability of specific academic and personal supports and reasonable accommodations offered in each institution.

The AHEAD Report ([2015](#)) provides the most up to date figures on patterns of participation for students with disabilities with 27 (out of a total of 28) HE institutions reporting the participation rates. A total of 9,694 students (4.7 per cent of total student population) were identified with 8,769 (undergraduate) and 925 (postgraduate). Over the past decade, there has been an increase in participation rates though there are significantly fewer in postgraduate study or undertaking part-time courses of study. The participation of Deaf students has consistently fallen over the past 3 years. Students with disabilities are far more likely

to be studying in Arts and Humanities; however, students with ASD are marginally more likely to be found in the fields of Computing and Science. While students with disabilities were significantly under-represented in Education and Nursing over the last couple of years, this trend is being slowly reversed.

The latest National Access Plan (HEA 2015e) has set a number of targets for levels of participation by students with disabilities over the time period 2015–19. The three under-represented groups (physical, sensory and multiple disabilities) who were the focus of the previous plan (HEA 2008a) remain, but with an aspiration to increase from the current 6 per cent (approximately) to 8 per cent as a proportion of new entrants. The targets for those with physical disabilities are to go from 390 (current) to 570 (2019); the Deaf/hard of hearing from 210 (current) to 280 (2019); those who are blind/have a vision impairment from 140 (current) to 200 (2019). While specific targets have been formulated for particular groups, the Higher Education Authority remains committed to supporting the access needs of students in other categories of disability (for example, students with a learning disability, with mental health conditions or with neurological conditions).

ACCESS, TRANSFER AND PROGRESSION: PATTERNS OF PARTICIPATION

The participation of people with disabilities in HE is a complex issue as illustrated by research in this area both nationally and internationally. Factors influencing decision-making processes regarding post-school choices for students with disabilities will be examined within the context of how decision-making processes are facilitated for all students. In addition, recent Irish research on the access and transfer of students with disabilities to HE in the Republic of Ireland will be reviewed.

International data indicate that young people with disabilities are less likely to avail of HE opportunities than their contemporaries (OECD 2011a). The USA longitudinal study (NLTS2) reported that only 45 per cent of young people with disabilities were likely to enrol on post-secondary educational courses compared to 53 per cent of their peers. In addition, these young people were more likely to attend 2-year programmes (32 per cent) and were least likely to have enrolled in 4-year

college programmes (Newman et al. 2009). Disability category differences were apparent in the post-school outcomes examined: young people with visual or hearing impairments were more likely to attend post-secondary school placements than were those with speech/language or other health impairments, orthopaedic impairments, multiple disabilities, emotional disturbances or general learning disabilities.

Watson and Nolan's (2011) study investigated educational participation by people with disabilities within the Republic of Ireland. It was reported that 43 per cent of people with disabilities had not progressed beyond primary education compared to 19 per cent in the general population. In addition, 10 per cent of people with disabilities hold a third level degree qualification compared to 19 per cent in the general population. People with disabilities in each age cohort fare worse than their counterparts without disabilities with regard to their level of education. For example, in the 25–29 age group, 19 per cent of people with disabilities completed formal schooling at the end of primary school compared to 3 per cent of the general population. Within this age cohort, these people had lower rates of completion of second level schooling, 63 per cent compared to 84 per cent of the general population. One third of the students with disabilities left education earlier than intended which they attributed to a combination of systemic failures to accommodate the impact of their disability on their ability to complete their education (CSO 2010). The patterns of participation and non-participation outlined above give an indication of the extent of disadvantage experienced by people with disabilities in relation to educational access and transfer between the different levels of the education system.

Transition Planning and Decision Making

A 2011 review of access and transfer pathways for students with disabilities in five European countries and the USA confirmed that post-primary schools played a critical role in facilitating this pathway process: 'access to tertiary education and employment for young adults with disabilities greatly depends on the capacity of the secondary education system to prepare them for the passage to adulthood' (OECD 2011a, p. 27). However, major limitations were evident including the fact that schools were not inclined to encourage the students to plan for access and transfer early in their school career. There was limited evidence that

schools were proactive in preparing students with disabilities for the demands of HE or employment.

In the USA, transition planning was mandated through legislation and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (US Government 1997) requires transition planning in the individualised education programs (IEPs) of all secondary school students with disabilities beginning at age 14 (or earlier, if appropriate) in an effort to prepare them for the challenges of post-school life. This requirement was intended to make operational one of the IDEA's central tenets that a primary purpose of the free appropriate public education guaranteed to children and youth with SEN is to 'prepare them for employment and independent living' (IDEA 1997 Final Regulations, Section 300.1[a]). Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NTLS-2) (Cameto et al. 2004) confirmed that this IDEA requirement had been achieved in the majority of post-primary schools. Two-thirds of students with disabilities had begun transition planning at age 14 as required, and by the time students are at age 17/18, 96 per cent of them had transition planning in place. School staff reported that about three-quarters of these students had an identified course of post-school study to enable them to achieve their transition goals. The vast majority of students and their parents (85 per cent) were actively involved in the transition planning process though there was some evidence that collaborative partnerships between parents and schools had been achieved for about a third of students and their families.

In England, policy guidance on transition planning is provided in DfES's (2001) Code of Practice, which establishes an annually reviewed transition plan for students with disabilities beginning in year 9 (13/14 years). The Code of Practice clearly states that the student concerned and his/her parents/carers must be fully involved in the transition planning process and the importance of liaison with outside agencies is emphasised. Despite these stipulations, Dewson et al. (2004) reported that less than half of all students interviewed 2 years after leaving compulsory education (at age 16) could recall having a transition planning review meeting. It is highly unlikely that school professionals alone can deal with all these complex, inter-related issues, which is why it is generally recognised that the extent of inter-agency collaboration with education providers is crucial to the success of the transition process. While in school many young people with disabilities are often supported by professional services in the community such as social workers, health workers

or professionals from voluntary groups, and all of these can play a part in enabling effective transition for these students to post-school placements. However, the traditional division between child and adult services can make continuity in essential services problematic. Dee (2006) reported that professionals involved in the transition process needed to be aware that the disparity of power relationships in play could unduly influence the decisions being taken.

The following components of transition planning were found to be effective in a series of research studies conducted in the USA and England: informed choices based on accessible information; guidance around careers and employment opportunities after the course; including the student and parents/carers fully in the planning process; inter-agency liaison and communication; practical issues (finance, accommodation and transport and travel); continuity of medical care if necessary; consideration of social and academic issues arising from transition (losing and re-forming friendship groups and social networks; change of teaching styles and demands of course) (Cameto et al. 2004; Dewson et al. 2004; Marriott 2008; Wagner et al. 2006).

Preparing students, particularly those with disabilities, for successful access and transfer to post-school placement is a key task for post-primary schools. In Phillips and Clarke's (2010) UK study, students with disabilities reported that a positive school environment was a crucial factor in enabling them to make a successful transition to HE. Supportive teachers encouraged the students, had high expectations and enabled the students to make informed decisions about their post-school placements. Schools provide much of the information on educational opportunities and often act as the central coordinators of all the professionals in the transition process. Autonomy and empowerment for young people with disabilities have been recognised as a critical factor in facilitating access, transfer and progression to HE (Lewis et al. 2005). However, there is considerable evidence that the views of students who have disabilities are little represented in studies of transition processes (Cook et al. 2001; Farmakopoulou and Watson 2003). Smyth et al.'s (2011) study in the Republic of Ireland demonstrated that parents and families play a critical role in facilitating access, transfer and progression from compulsory education to post-school options for all students. Parents and families had been influential throughout their school career in enabling their children in making decisions around programmes, subject choice and level of study. Similarly, students with disabilities look to their

parents and families for support and guidance in the decision-making process around access, transfer and progression from compulsory schooling to post-school placement (Phillips and Clarke 2010). Parental support and guidance can encourage positive aspirations for students with disabilities as illustrated in the following: in study of transition for students with SEN:

A background of having had active support and encouragement from parents about academic capabilities was a critical factor in encouraging progression into higher education from school...strong parental belief in their children's ability seemed to counter even the most negative of early educational experiences by helping instil or reinforce self-efficacy and academic confidence, even when external validation was not present. (Phillips and Clarke 2010, p. 35)

Studies have demonstrated that parents can offer crucial continuity of support at a period in life when students with disabilities are facing many additional challenges (Aspel et al. 1999; Cameto et al. 2004; Goupil et al. 2002). However, there is evidence that the families and carers of students with disabilities are not sufficiently involved with the transition process, despite their wishes and concerns (Abbott and Heslop 2009; Dee 2006; Wagner et al. 2006). Even when families are involved in the transition process, there is no guarantee that their key concerns will be addressed and on occasion the views of professionals can dominate (Ward et al. 2003). In England, parents are often unclear about what options are available and may be frustrated by a lack of available and realistic options in their local area (Byers et al. 2008; Lewis et al. 2007).

SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES

Making the transition from school to HE can be problematic and stressful for all students as it coincides with other significant transitions, such as from living at home to living independently, from family financial support to managing a budget, and coping with the demands of a completely different style of educational delivery and the intellectual demands of studying at a higher level (Yorke and Longden 2008). HE establishments are increasingly aware that positive first-year experiences for all students are crucial in enabling students to complete their undergraduate study and minimise attrition (Palmer et al. 2009). Social integration into HE has

been shown to be a key factor in ensuring that all students make successful transitions and survive their first year at university (Palmer et al. 2009; Yorke and Langden 2008). Students in the first year of HE reported that rebuilding friendship networks was a major challenge and developing a sense of belonging was a critical factor in successful transition to life in HE (Palmer et al. 2009). Harrison's (2006) research into first-year student's withdrawal in English HE reiterated these points: 'poor preparation, poor or passive decision-making and difficulties with socialisation or adapting to the student lifestyle' (p. 388) were potentially more important factors for success than the academic demands of the institution. While students with disabilities share many of the challenges faced by their peers in making a successful transition to HE, they usually face additional challenges in relation to admission procedures, institutional and programme accessibilities, receiving appropriate supports, developing friendship networks and overcoming the negative disability stereotypes held by others in the new environment (Marriott 2008). The transition process often involves a number of professionals, support agencies and a requirement to disclose disability to access appropriate supports (Dee 2006; Marriott 2008). Pre-transition activities are an important element in the transition process for students with disabilities including pre-entry visits, taster courses and open days, and contact with students with disabilities who have successfully made the transition to HE (Elliott and Wilson 2008; Marriott 2008). Ensuring a quality transition process for students with disabilities, 'depends on the existence of an inclusive ethos at the level of the institution which makes openness to diversity one of its goals and pedagogical, social, psychological and physical accessibility a component of the institution's culture' (OECD 2011a, p. 10). The OECD review (2011a) identified a number of institutional strategies to promote access, transfer and progression for students with disabilities. This involves designing the admissions and support strategies to provide an institution-wide access framework. Strategies include developing links with accommodation and transport services; developing working relationships with post-primary schools; encouraging early disclosure of support needs to facilitate provision of appropriate supports; and advising students on organisational aspects of chosen course. Transition was facilitated for first-year students with disabilities through 'the positive impact of friendships, peer support networks, significant education contacts and studying within an environment where the culture and related education practices understand and promote diverse learning' (Gibson 2012, p. 366). Support

provision for disabilities was presented as a ‘normal’ yet important element of provision to all new students which proved to be a significant indicator that students with disabilities would be made welcome and have their needs met.

Making a successful transition is the first step for students with disabilities; however, it is equally important that these students are enabled to complete their studies. Given that there is limited evidence around successful completion rates, a study in the Republic of Ireland provides such useful insights (UCC/CIT 2010). This report tracked the 2005 intake of students with disabilities across their career in HE. Low levels of entry were reported for students with sensory impairments and also for students who have mental health difficulties. Students with specific learning disabilities comprised the largest cohort among students with disabilities (61.4 per cent). Students with mental health difficulties had the lowest retention rates across all disability categories (56 per cent). First year represented a major challenge for students with disabilities and the highest rates of withdrawal occurred at this juncture. Challenging factors included difficulties with accessing appropriate technologies, settling into a more diverse physical and learning environment and developing social networks.

An Irish study (McGuckin et al. 2013) examined the access, transfer and progression pathways to HE for students with disabilities. The key findings that emerged from this study are now considered in the following under the themes of (i) preparation for transition to HE; (ii) managing the transition; (iii) early experiences in HE.

Preparation for Transition

Schools play a critical role in preparing young people with disabilities for the challenges involved in making the transition to post-school life. Within this study, there was considerable evidence that schools were regarded by students with disabilities as positive environments, with teachers who were open and approachable. However, there was little evidence that schools were proactive in developing transition planning at an early stage in the school careers of these students. Early transition planning enables students with disabilities to consider course options over an extended period, make the appropriate choice of subjects and facilitates active involvement in the process by the students and their families as demonstrated in the following observation by a disability support officer.

The whole transitioning process and the whole career progression are very, very difficult particularly if they have chosen the wrong subjects, moving from junior to senior cycle; it is very, very difficult for them then to make the right choice in relation to further and HE. So it is very complicated and the whole process needs to start a lot earlier with parents, young people and schools being a lot more informed as to what is out there.

The support provided by Guidance Counsellors was highly valued by the students with disabilities, and regarded as pivotal in enabling them to make informed choices about post-school options. However, there was a perception that Guidance Counsellors sometimes lack detailed knowledge about support systems in HE, specific progression routes to HE through Further Education colleges and educational opportunities for students with complex needs as illustrated in the following quotation from an administrator in a Further Education college ‘Guidance Counsellors don’t have the time or level of expertise needed for people with some very specific requirements’. This view was reiterated by Guidance Counsellors who perceived that despite some improvements, there was a lack of easily available information about the types of supports available in the receiving institutions. Within this study, Guidance Counsellors believed that a central point of information (national agency) needed to be established to address the gaps in their knowledge. Guidance Counsellors were aware that students with disabilities required more highly developed self-determination skills, as they moved from a highly supported and structured environment to a more challenging situation that demanded a higher degree of independent decision making. Guidance Counsellors were also concerned about the relative weighting that should be given to supporting academic attainment for students with disabilities compared to focussing on more practical life skills such as independent living.

Generally, students with disabilities were looking forward to their post-school education and anticipated that they would encounter a greater variety of learning experiences and opportunities for social inclusion. This anticipation was often mixed with some apprehension as illustrated by this student who has a physical disability:

For me the kind of loss of familiarity might be . . . does daunt me a bit but at the same time on a more optimistic level I think if I went to anywhere outside of here [it] is better because it’s a new start, it’s probably a chance

to... starting over is rare, and because they're rare, they're valuable and... I can start again, I can be anyone. Of course I can be myself but I can have the chance to bloom in a better way.

Parents and carers played a significant role in the transition process and were considered to be absolutely critical to the success of the process. Strong home-school links were evident and there was an awareness that parents/carers would continue to play a crucial role in supporting the students with disabilities throughout the transition process and in their post-school placements. As one Guidance Counsellor emphasised:

But his parents, now, would have been very involved with him and filling out his forms and they drove it all for him. So they would have been... and they will continue to support him. And his sister's in Leaving Cert and she's a high achiever as well so, he'll get huge support.

While these students with disabilities are generally considered as adults within their post-school placement, there is clear evidence that parents and carers continue to have an enhanced role in supporting students with disabilities, a role that needs to be formally acknowledged.

While the importance of developing access pathways to HE was acknowledged by support professionals, some concerns were expressed about the operation of the DARE (Disability Access Route to Education) scheme. Unintentional barriers included misconceptions about who was eligible to apply to DARE scheme, and the widespread perception that students gaining access to HE through DARE were not achieving this on merit compared to their non-disabled peers. In addition, the prohibitive cost of acquiring a recent psychological assessment/consultant report was seen as a significant barrier (it should be noted that recent adaptations to the DARE scheme if implemented will remove the need for a recent psychological assessment).

Managing the Transition

Students with disabilities reported that pre-course contact with HE institutions was highly significant in influencing their course choices as explained by one student who has a learning disability: 'because of all the details they give you and the letters and the support. That's why I'm going to [name of HE institution]—because they are really

supportive'. Friendly approachable personnel were particularly valued and direct personal contact with students with disabilities who had already made the transition to HE was very important. Open days were considered useful and specific information sessions targeted at particular groups of students with disabilities (e.g. students with Asperger Syndrome, students with physical disabilities) were valued.

Of key importance to these students was accessing the support that was available in their receiving institution. Unlike their previous experience in school, seeking support once the students progressed to further and HE required a new approach including independence and disclosing their SEN or disability if they had not done so already. This self-disclosure was a major change encountered in the progression into further and HE since it involved making decisions and taking on independent responsibilities, and could result in a decision not to seek support as expressed by one student who has Asperger syndrome:

It [support at school] was kind of forced upon me really . . . I didn't think people were . . . believed in me, so much as my abilities. So kind of disheartening really, that people would feel that you needed this help.

Another student with Asperger syndrome consciously decided not to assume the 'disability' label and so did not disclose or seek support. Other students with Asperger syndrome found it difficult to engage in the support process and support was only gained when parents intervened. In other cases, students did not access academic support services until they encountered difficulties in relation to assignments or examinations.

One of the biggest challenges facing students with disabilities concerned the significant changes in teaching, learning and assessment experienced in HE. Some students valued the anonymity and that their difficulties in learning were not publicised in front of their peers. Others, particularly those students with Asperger syndrome found the larger classes particularly daunting. Students particularly welcomed the opportunity to establish working relationships with tutors and lecturers who were approachable and treated them like adults. Students generally welcomed the opportunity to develop independence skills and taking greater

responsibility for their own learning as expressed by one student who has a learning disability:

It was more responsibility on me. Like they'd say, 'You have to go there and look at it yourself.' They're not going to push you like secondary school did like, your homework is... It's not like that and it's very different. It kinda, it took me about a month to really get used that kind of side of it.

The multiple modes of assessment were viewed favourably and regarded as a much fairer way of assessing their subject knowledge and understanding than the Leaving Certificate examination, which was conveyed as follows by a student with a physical disability:

I like how 'freeing' it is compared to school... I cannot just be asked to work on the spot. I need, you know, someone telling me, 'You've an essay due; it's due in one month and seven days' or something. And that gives me time to think, 'Okay I can get this perfect'... I think it gives me the time to work on everything properly, you know.

Social integration into the HE environment did not appear to be a major issue for the students with disabilities. The majority continued to live at home and so perhaps existing friendship groups and social networks had been retained. Those students who had moved away from home were particularly appreciative of social events organised as an induction for all students and 'ice-breaker' activities within their class groupings. The concept of a 'fresh start' was very strong for these students and this included developing their friendship groupings as observed by one student who has a physical disability:

I think you can very easily make friends in university. I've no doubt about that, because theres interests for everything. There is a juggling society, there's a society just for people who want to drink.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

While there are many encouraging signs that there have been significant improvements in opportunities for people with disabilities to access HE, a few cautionary notes are necessary. It is worth noting that further

support is required to develop meaningful transition plans for young people with disabilities at an early stage in their secondary school careers. There also appears to be differing rates of access depending on the type of disability experienced as illustrated by the fact that there have been limited increases for young people with physical or sensory disabilities despite targeted programmes. Opportunities for increased access to HE for people with disabilities need to be matched by enabling policies that ensure highly qualified disabled people are not trapped in welfare dependency and can attain economic independence.

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Mature Students' in Irish Higher Education

Mark Kearns

INTRODUCTION

This chapter considers the position of mature students (23+) in Irish HE. I will examine, among other things, the disjuncture between the rhetoric of widening access for mature students on the one hand and the continued, poor representation of this group in the system to now. Specific attention is given to the falling numbers of older learners in the period 2011–15 despite ambitious policy targets for the group set out in the recent *National Strategy for Higher Education 2013–2030* (DES 2011) [hereafter *National Strategy*]. This is achieved by examining, first, the relevant literature pertaining to policy and participation for mature students, and second, by utilising the findings from a recent study examining the position of new undergraduate mature students ($n = 30$) in two Irish universities in the academic year 2012–13 (Kearns 2016). While the reasons are likely to be wide and complex, it is argued that this disjuncture primarily amounts to lack of resolve on the part of policymakers and HIEs to address the position of older learners in the system, and a corresponding reliance on the traditional-aged cohort during a time of unprecedented growth in the sector. It would seem that, despite claims for ‘mass’ or ‘universal’ (Trow 1973; Burrage 2010) participation in HE, the Irish system has persistently favoured participation from younger students, and those from higher socio-economic backgrounds in particular (DES 1999, 2000; OECD 2006).

This situation is compounded by the continued reliance on a simple age-related definition and understanding of mature students in policy and

policy-related documents. The findings from the study of mature students reveal a highly heterogeneous grouping whose motivation for taking up HE study differs markedly from the ‘narrow market fundamentalism’ (Fleming et al. 2010) underlying widening access policy for mature students and other equity groups. In keeping with the extant literature on the matter, this research also found that mature students have markedly different needs (for example pedagogical and social) that their younger peers, which in turn has implications for facilitating access, participation as well as success for the group in HE. All of this suggests that if policymakers and other stakeholders are serious about increasing the numbers in HE, then a far more nuanced understanding and approach to accommodating older learners in the system is required. This refers, not just to mechanisms for increasing access to HE for mature students, and for targeted funding in particular, but also to more fundamental changes to a system and culture that continues to be dominated by the needs and concerns of a younger-aged cohort.

MATURE STUDENTS: POLICY AND PARTICIPATION IN PERSPECTIVE

At a recent conference examining the legacy of the seminal *Investment in Education* (IIE) report (IG 1965) Slowey (2012) served to remind us that, while significant numbers of Irish people have benefitted from the massive expansion of HE over the last four decades, many more remained excluded. The landmark *White Paper on Adult Education* recorded that at 3.4 per cent of new entrants had ‘lowest mature-aged participation rates in the industrialised world’ at this time (DES 2000, p. 138). This issue was again highlighted in the subsequent OECD report on Irish HE (OECD 2004, 2006) that would inform much of the subsequent *National Strategy for Higher Education 2013–2030* (DES 2011) document. The OECD examiners adopted a markedly critical stance to the issue of older learners in the system, noting how Irish universities, in particular, are ‘unusual in the extent to which their student bodies are concentrated within the age group 18–23’, and that the main student body continued to ‘drawn mainly from the managerial and professional classes’ (OECD 2006, p. 211). The report was somewhat scathing of the efforts to increase the rate of mature student participation, suggesting that the then target of 16 per cent for mature new undergraduate entrants ‘needs to be pursued with more energy and imagination than has been in evidence hitherto’ (2006, p. 211).

Table 8.1 Mature students as a % of all new full-time undergraduate entrants: selected years 2000–2014

<i>Year</i>	2000	2004	2006	2010	2014
%	3.4	8.0	10.0	15.0	12.0

While some progress has been made since the OCED report (Table 8.1), mature student participation remains some way short of the participation rates enjoyed by older learners in other Western industrialised countries. For example, mature students account for a quarter of university graduation rates in Iceland, New Zealand, Sweden and Switzerland (OECD 2011b). Other research demonstrates that the Republic of Ireland (ROI) has the youngest HE student population in the (previous) EU-27 with a median age of 20 years (Eurostat 2011). With this in mind, the *National Strategy* predicted that mature students would comprise 18 per cent of all new undergraduate entrants to HE by 2015, rising to 20 per cent in 2020 and peak at 25 per cent in 2025 (DES 2011). These targets in turn appear to be driven, not by the need to introduce greater equity in the system, or any notions of a more inclusive HE provision, but rather the necessity for individuals to reskill or upskill or risk being ‘left behind’ in the new, global knowledge economy. In more specific terms, the *National Strategy* document predicted that demand will be generated from different types of mature learners, including: (1) older learners engaging with HE as a result of high unemployment rates across the economy and (2) those returning to education to reskill or update their knowledge base. The report also identifies a third group who are ‘likely to be vulnerable to unemployment’ (2010, p. 46). This in turn reflects the human capital dimension and an increasing narrow, economic outlook for HE over the past decade or so (DTE 2002; EGFSN 2007, 2014; IG 2008).

However, the targets set out in the *National Strategy* document already appear in some doubt given the slow, but steady decline of mature students taking up HE in the period 2011–15. Despite the continued growth in the overall undergraduate population during this period, mature student numbers have gradually fallen back to 12 per cent of all new entrants in the academic year 2014–15 (HEA 2015a). One of the possible explanations for this suggests that a revision of funding arrangements arising from Government austerity measures (see Chap. 4) and specifically a cut in favourable adjacent rates, have had a particularly detrimental impact on

participation rates for mature students across all sectors of HE. This chimes with the UK experience, where the introduction of a pay-as-you go system of HE has had a negative impact on mature student participation in this jurisdiction (National Union of Students/Million+ 2012; ICF 2013). The relevant literature on the matter suggests that mature students are far more likely to be deterred by the financial consequences attached to taking up full-time third-level education compared with their younger counterparts, and that there are other especial risks associated with for a return to study for this group.

MATURE STUDENTS IN HE: A RISKY BUSINESS

Leonard (1999) identified four specific risk factors associated with a return to study for her mature student participants: financial, psychological/health, social, academic) while a fifth category of ‘identity risk’ is included here to describe claims that HE participation contains risks for already fragile learner identities (Crossan et al. 2003) and/or a surfacing of anxieties around existing class or gender or cultural identities (Reay et al. 2010). Considering this in more detail, it would seem that many mature students enter HE with a degree of uncertainty surrounding the financial commitment and eventual return on their investment (Griffiths 2002; Moss 2004), but still hold high expectations that their efforts will result in financially rewarding jobs or careers, despite some evidence to the contrary (Purcell et al. 2007). Other research suggests that mature students enter HE without a full realisation of the true cost of HE participation, and this can have a significant (negative) impact on their studies, academic grades and so on (Gorard et al. 2006; Alsop et al. 2008). Full-time study can place immense financial burden for this group, and this is particularly the case for those who enter with existing incomes remain close to the poverty line (Lynch 1997; Tett 2004; McGivney 2004; Griffiths 2002; Brine and Waller 2004; White 2008; Eurostudent 2016). The research also points to a critical lack of time for study-related activities (Edwards 1993; Reay et al. 2002; Bowl 2003) that can have severe implications for the health and well-being for a group already grappling with the academic demands of HE and external responsibilities, including significant part-time work. A return to full-time study may also pose a particular threat to existing relationships for the group (Fleming and Murphy 1998; Leonard 1999; Merrill 1999; Griffiths 2002; White 2008). As they adopt their new role as a HE student,

mature students may also encounter feelings of disjuncture between current and well-established life roles (mother, father, employee) and the new role of full-time, third level student (Edwards 1993; Lister 2003; Alsop et al. 2008; Wainwright and Marandet 2010). This can result in problematic relations with significant others (Fleming and Murphy 1997).

The fragile nature of some mature students' 'education biographies' (Merrill and Alheit 2004) can manifest in a lack of confidence in their ability to cope in academia (Merrill 1999; Leonard 1999; Leathwood and O'Connell 2003; Stevens 2003). Leonard's (1999) study suggests that female mature students in particular are likely to suffer crises of confidence in terms of their academic ability and experience greater distress concerning coursework and examinations as a consequence. Elsewhere, Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) noted how constant feelings of inadequacy or 'not being good enough' were deep-rooted and long-standing in the accounts of the mature students in their study. An initial engagement in seminars or lectures was described by some participants in this study as 'not being intellectual' enough for the rigours of academia. These feelings can be particularly acute in the initial stage of entry that can also provoke feelings of strangerhood (Stevens 2003), isolation (Foster 2009), alienation (Bowl 2003) and anomie (Merrill 1999), leading to considerable anxiety and stress for the group in the initial, transition phase.

However, the research literature indicates that the risk involved in undertaking HE is not evenly spread throughout the mature student group. Previous research indicates that this is inherently more risky, costly and uncertain choice for working-class, mature students than it is for their middle-class counterparts. More specifically, studies examining the experiences of working class women demonstrate how this particular sub-group face multiple barriers (financial, other) to their success in HE and take up their studies 'resource poor' relative to other mature student groups (Bowl 2003; Reay 2004; Tett 2004). Despite the heavy workload associated with a return to full-time education, mature women returners' often continue to bear the burden of family care when they enter HE and have to juggle multiple roles and responsibilities as a result (Edwards 1993; Parr 2000; Alsop et al. 2008). In her prominent study of women returners in the UK context, Edwards refers to the 'greedy institutions' of home and HE that exerted significant emotional, as well as physical, demands on her women participants (1993, p. 63). The withdrawal of time and concomitant care can lead to acute feelings of guilt on the part of her women participants, some of whom faced persistent opposition to their HE participation from

partners or significant others (Edwards 1993; Merrill 1999; Griffiths 2002; White 2008). Other research (Tett 2004; Reay et al. 2010) points to issues of adjustment for working class students in as they seek to come to terms with an alien ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) of more elite institutions serving a traditional student demographic. The ‘net result’ is that mature students are at higher risk of withdrawal from HE than their younger counterparts in a system that is often ambivalent to their specific needs (HEA 2016b). This refers specifically to pedagogical and support needs that differ in many ways from a younger age cohort and illustrated by the efforts of Kelly (2004), Keane (2009), Fleming et al. (2010) and Fleming and Finnegan (2011) in the ROI context. These, and other contributions in the literature (Leathwood and O’Connell 2003; Burke 2009; Daniels 2010) point to HE policy and institutional systems that continue to favour the notion of the independent, autonomous traditional-aged learner profile that remains far outside the expectations and experiences of many mature students in HE. Given the above, Sandman (2010) suggests that HEIs are challenged to replace ‘outmoded pedagogy, policies and practices with systemic supports for adult students’.

WORTH THE RISK? A STUDY OF MATURE STUDENTS IN TWO IRISH UNIVERSITIES

With these debates in mind, this study sets out to examine the position of mature, full-time, new undergraduate students in two distinct Irish universities in the period 2011–2012. The research questions for the study can be simply stated as:

1. What is the profile of mature (23+), full-time, new undergraduate entrants taking up HE in the academic year 2011–2012?;
2. What intentions and related expectations do these students’ hold for their HE participation and, bearing in mind these intentions/expectations;
3. How do mature students’ experience their first year of study in HE?

Two universities with contrasting institutional mission and response to accommodating older learners were selected to provide a comparative analysis of the experiences of mature students in HE, described here as College A and College B. Briefly, College A trades on a long-standing reputation for accommodating a more diverse student population, and mature students in

particular. Mature students in this college represented 18 per cent of all new entrants in the period 2011–12, by far the highest representation of any HEI in the university sector (HEA 2013d). In contrast, College B retains a rigid limit on the numbers of mature entrants (10 per cent) while continuing to serve a more traditional student body in terms of age and profile. A process of purposive sampling (Miles and Huberman 1994) was employed to achieve a broad representation of mature students across different faculties, disciplines and subject areas. This process yielded a diverse sample ($n = 30$) in terms of age, previous occupations, status, nationalities, background, class, sexual orientation and so on, across a broad spectrum of disciplines and subjects, ranging from nursing and health sciences to engineering, pure sciences and the arts. While there was some gender imbalance in the sample, the participation of 12 male participants is nonetheless significant given the poor representation of this sub-group in the relevant literature to now.

The Conceptual Framework

The notion of risk was employed as a heuristic device in which to explore the experiences of the sample in their first year in HE. This in turn reflects broader trends in social science research where risk and uncertainty have emerged as central themes to explain how individuals have responded to the challenges presented by globalisation, individualisation and the ‘privatisation of risk’ in advanced Western societies (Elliot 2002; Lupton 2013; Walklate and Mythen 2010; Zinn and Taylor-Gooby 2006). At the level of the everyday risk and individual action, Zinn and Taylor-Gooby (2006) point to specific factors that have contributed to an erosion of the certainty that once underlined people lives in more traditional or early modern societies, in particular ‘more flexible labour markets, social mobility, as well greater diversity in lifestyles and ways of living’ (pp. 69–70). In this scenario, individuals are increasingly compelled to take ever more responsibility for their life-career trajectories as a response to the dangers (or ‘bads’), as well as opportunities, (or ‘goods’) that come with greater freedom to explore new roles and identities in contemporary, western societies. This form of reflexive life planning or ‘biographical rearranging’ is a prevalent work of Beck (1992, 1998) in his speculative, ‘risk society’ thesis. A central argument made by Beck is that, unlike the pre-modern or traditional era where individual fate was tied to the collective, we have now entered an historical phase where ‘success’ and perhaps more pertinently failure are increasingly located at the level of the individual rather than the

result of structural constraints or barriers, otherwise referred to as the 'scapegoat society' (1992, p. 49). In this scenario, individual agents are required to plan and act reflexively, continuously assessing their position in the labour market and upgrading their skills and qualifications accordingly. However, this situation is somewhat paradoxical; while seemingly being 'freed' from the constraints previously imposed by class, gender or social background, individual agents are increasingly dependent on the institutions of late modernity for the necessary resources required to carve out 'a life of one's own' (Beck 1992, p. 54). Most especially, this includes reliance on systems of education and on education credentials that are now an essential requirement for success in volatile labour markets that are increasingly tied to the vagaries of highly mobile, global, capital. In this way, Beck's thesis offered a useful commentary with which to examine, among others things, the kind of tensions placed on self and biography in this so-called period of 'high' or 'second' modernity.

Methodology and Methods

A critical ethnographic approach along the lines suggested by Carspecken and Apple (1993) was employed to explore the experiences of this group. Critical ethnography is grounded in a social-constructivist epistemological framework in which knowledge generation within research is understood as an active, context-based process influenced by the values, histories and practices of the researcher and of the community in which the research is done (Atwater 1996). In their five-stage Critical Qualitative Methodology (CRM), Carspecken and Apple (1993) describe a deliberate process of locating agency and investigating how individual actions are shaped by, and in turn shape broader structural processes mediated by the institutions of modernity, such as systems of government and their proxies (as in systems of health, education and so on). Here, the researcher is engaged in an iterative process of fieldwork, dialogical-based interviewing and other interactive methods of data generation that sets out to capture the specific meaning or meanings that individual actors give to their activities in the education sphere. This approach was further complimented by insights offered by biographical and narrative approaches to investigating adults returning to education that places individual actions in the context of educational efforts across the lifespan, otherwise referred to as 'learning careers' (Crossan et al. 2003) or 'educational biographies' (Merrill and Alheit 2004). This combined methodology follows broader patterns in

sociological research of risk that seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the way individual experience and context contribute to individuals' perceptions of, and responses to risk in everyday life (Denny 2005; Lupton 2013; Taylor-Gooby and Zinn 2006). Here, the focus is on the subject's interpretation of life situations and the choices made in response to them, as well as investigating how individuals maintain their identity or restore an injured identity over time. To this end, the participants supplied a personal statement of their intentions to HE that was then used in subsequent interviews to determine the particular meaning or meanings that they give to the decision to return to education at a later stage of life. The students' also maintained a diary of their experiences (academic and social) over the course of their first year, which in turn provided valuable generative materials for final interviews with the sample at the end of their last term in college. Borrowing from Wallman (1980), their position might be described as one of 'proxy-ethnographers'; observing and documenting their journey in HE, as well as the experiences of other mature students that they encountered along the way. This process yielded a total of 34 personal statements, 68 interviews and over 100 diary entries of varying length and content.

FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY

Mature Students: Participants Profiles and Intentions for Entering HE

The study revealed a highly heterogeneous group (23–55 years) comprising two distinct generations to HE in the academic year 2012–13. Thus, while some in the sample presented close to the traditional student profile in terms of age, background, academic profile, social status and so on, others shared few characteristics with their younger counterparts. This was emphasised, for example, in their previous education experiences and levels of attainment, ranging from those who had left formal schooling with no qualifications and little recent engagement in education, to those with recent experience of study at undergraduate or even postgraduate (MBA) level. An unanticipated finding reveals a significant number ($n = 10$) returning to HE for a second time, four of who had already enjoyed success as undergraduates. The heterogeneity in the group is further emphasised in the complexity of meaning or meanings that these students offered for their return to education at a later age. This included themes of

unrecognised or unrealised potential, missed opportunity or ambitions thwarted. In his account, Tony described completing second-cycle followed a successful career in the printing trade, but that he had long nurtured the idea that he had the aptitude for third-level study:

I was always told by relatives that I had the capability to do it. And that I should be doing it. As I said, my mother started a college fund for me when I was four.

For Audrey, HE offered the chance to prove to those who had previously doubted her academic potential:

It's kind of to prove a point, you know. I remember some teachers; my year head, he was on my side a lot of the time. But some teachers: 'You'll never get anywhere at all'. And it's kind of: I'm in (College B) and kind of: you don't know what you are talking about really.

For these students, a return to study represented unfinished business, a cathartic process that offered the opportunity to right perceived wrongs or redeem oneself in the face of poor judgements made in the education or life sphere. Still others considered the possible impact of their participation on significant others, or of making a difference in wider society. This altruism was a particularly female narrative, emphasising the particularly gendered nature of the mature student HE choice. For example, Paula described her HE primarily in terms of improved education-life chances for her two small children:

I hope that they will follow me and break the cycle of leaving school early in the family. I want my children to reach their full potential in life whatever they choose to do. I want them to have options.

Another example is Jo, who had eschewed a successful career in sales to take up a health science degree and the prospect of making a difference in the lives of those suffering from serious illness:

I think down the line...I don't want to say make a difference because it sounds like I want to change the world: there are other reasons why I chose (health profession). But, yeah, to effect some sort of changes, even if they are only small.

A common theme across the group was of HE as a journey of personal and intellectual discovery, of pursuing vocational degrees or subject areas of interest and/or gaining deeper sense of one's place in the world. According to Dave:

I didn't want to come here just for the end result. I wanted to enjoy the journey as well. I wanted to learn something that I had an interest in because I didn't want to be sitting here frustrated: 'Don't worry; it's only three years to go: you'll get a good job out of it in the end.' I didn't want to do Accounting and sit there thinking-I hate Accounting.

While the process often held a deep-held, highly personal significance for this sample, their reasons for returning to study were also hallmarked by highly pragmatic goals, including better paid, more meaningful employment or careers and the prospect of a 'good life'. Moreover, there is evidence here, previously anecdotal, of more groups being pulled into the system as the impact of the 2008 economic recession shifting employment trends as well as deeper, structural changes in the makeup of labour markets. Paul was made redundant from his role as IT manager in 2010, a situation he ascribes to a combination of changing technologies and natural wastage as well as the impact of the recession. A similar example is Tom, who described how it was unlikely that he would have taken up HE had there been ample employment in the construction industry on his return from Australia in 2008: 'If I had come back to Ireland, and there was full-employment, I don't think that I would have come back into education'.

Making the Transition to HE

While there were some commonalities in terms of their HE intentions, there remained significant differences in resources (time, other) across the sample as they entered the academy. This was especially true for those with parental or caring duties and for single parents in particular. Moreover, those with previous, recent experience of third-level study reported a distinct advantage compared to those who presented as 'first-timers'. Despite some evidence of an equalisation of domestic duties, it was the women in this study who continued to bear the burden of care as they entered the academy. And while some in this sample were well positioned to absorb the cost of their undergraduate degrees without incurring

significant debt, others took up their studies close to the poverty line. A lack of time and financial resources seemed to place the entire project at risk for some students from the outset according to Paula:

I can't spend time in the library after lectures as I would be paying a tenner an hour extra on childcare to do so. I would be better off buying books which I can't afford either way at the moment. My timetable is not too bad: I'm in late on Monday and Tuesday, so they are the only days I need to pay for childcare, even though that's still 75 euro a week. My sister picks up the kids on Thursdays, so that saves a few bob. I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed and stressed.

Paula's account was typical of the 'juggling act' described by many of the women in this study in their first year of study. The lack of time for studying was further compounded in some cases by having to undertake or significant part-time work ($n = 8$) or even self-employment ($n = 2$) to sustain themselves and their families for the duration of their studies. Julie's account describes the frustrations involved in balancing the various roles of wife and mother to two small children, being self-employed as well coping with the demands of being as full-time student:

It seems like survival of the fittest is the order of the day. It's a huge concern as a mature student because I worry that, if I fall behind, I may not be able to catch up. At the moment I am most definitely 'running to stand still'. I explained it to my husband yesterday as follows: At the moment I am being a terrible mother, wife and mother all in order to become an average student. Not exactly what I planned a few months ago!

Julie's description is typical of the guilt felt by many women carers in the group, where an inability to cope with many competing demands on time and resources was often internalised as personal shortcomings, rather than the failure of the institutions to cater for their particular needs. These had serious repercussions, not just in social terms, but also in terms of finding academic community with others. The initial period proved an intensely isolating experience for those who found themselves isolated as 'the only mature student in the village' (Cathy). Cathy describes the predicament of those who had expected 'others like me', only find themselves 'stranded' as middle-aged men and women in programmes and courses dominated by school leavers:

Since September, I have been alone for lunch, coffee, etc. I come in alone and I go home alone. That's just it and I can suck it up because there are no mature students in either of my subjects. It's a huge pity.

Andrea describes a similar experience in her health sciences course in College B:

The main challenges for me as mature student were mental/emotional. I was quite self-conscious, alone and awkward surrounded by much younger classmates and no one-else with children.

This situation seemed to be further compounded by a disjuncture between these mature students' expectations for a more collaborative learning experience and emphasis on independent study from early in the process. Ger's account underlines how this proved counterintuitive to their expectations for a deeper, more meaningful and communal HE learning experience:

I have felt very isolated at times here. It's very individualistic and I'm struggling with that. And it's feeding from: you are coming in with a leaving cert and it's all about what you have done . . . but I thought that would have changed. So many of the young people don't want to learn that way or don't need to learn that way and don't need to be interactive. It's very much one your own; it's a real do-it-yourself package.

For some, question marks over their legitimacy as older students in the academy were often compounded by a perceived lack of academic prowess compared to their younger peers, and that they would somehow be 'found out' as remarked on by Elaine:

When I saw that I was chosen for this course I was still expecting that when I went to the mature student induction, I still expected someone to say: 'oh no', you are in the wrong place.

Staying the Course: Surviving the First Year

In keeping with other research (Fleming and Finnegan 2011; Kelly 2004), the first-year experience for this sample was further impacted by other factors such as disability, ill-health (mental and/or physical), while bereavement of close relatives or friends also had a significant

impact on HE participation at critical times in their first year. For many, the process quickly became attritional in nature, and where staying the course and literally ‘surviving the first year’ became the main focus or goal. This situation was further compounded by extant institutional processes and practices that often seemed to work against their specific needs as older students in the academy. This refers to the practical aspects, including semesterisation, timetabling of lectures and tutorials, procedures for assessment and so forth. Again, it was the carers in the sample, and female carers in particular, that were impacted most by a rigid HE regime and provision. In her diary entry, Claire describes her frustration at:

the apparent lack of thought given to those with other responsibilities (for example childcare) when allocating tutorials or lecture changes. It seems like everything is arranged around the idea that students can just turn up whenever. Some of us are not eighteen anymore.

It seemed that the more these students deviated from the traditional profile or ‘norm’ in terms of age, profile, background, etc., the greater the risk of them not progressing to the next stage. In their final interviews, some expressed doubt about their continued participation in HE, and what form this might take. This was particularly the case for those studying in ‘B’, who had faced an onerous examination schedule that took little account of their practical situation as carers or parents, and the prospect of exam retakes or repeating the first year. This contrasted sharply with the experiences of those in ‘A’ who had enjoyed a continuous assessment process that better suited their academic, as well as practical needs. Given the higher proportion of mature students in A, the students in this college could also look forward to the continued support from older colleagues, while many of their colleagues in B faced the prospect of three more years of being on the periphery of the college community in this site.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has served to highlight a number of inconsistencies, contradictions and anomalies with respect to policy as well as system-institutional responses to accommodate an older, more diverse student

body in HE. In turn, this provides some explanation for the continued, poor position of mature students in the system, as well as highlighting a potential way forward in dealing more effectively with the phenomena of older learners in HE. With Waller (2006), the study of mature students demonstrates a far more heterogeneous, diverse group than the convenient age-related label in policy and policy-related documents. As such this group represents broader patterns of engagement and participation in HE than the younger-aged student profile that has been preoccupation of the system to now. This in turn has consequences for a consideration of, among other things, the particular support needs (academic or pastoral) of mature students as they enter the academy. Clearly, there is a need to differentiate between younger-age mature students with previous third-level experience or success and older, first-time entrants who make their way into the system following a 30-year absence from formal education and with fewer educational resources to hand. The study further demonstrates wide disparities in terms of the practical resources available to mature students as they take up their studies. This refers not only to widely differing financial resources, but also to the critical lack of time or 'time poverty' (Bowl 2003) that places a severe handicap on many mature students' ability to 'stay the course' and to succeed in HE.

All of this points to, first the need for a more nuanced definition and understanding of the mature student group, and the recognition that some mature students fall into several equity groups identified in policy. Following the example of Levin (Forthcoming), it might be useful to think this about particular 'at-risk' mature students in HE. In his 'risk model', Levin (Forthcoming) suggests that the greater number of characteristics of non-traditional status, the more likely a student is to give up their studies. The term non-traditional in this context refers to those students who deviate from the 'norm' by dint of previous education background, status, financial and time resources and so on. While this might be over-simplification of the matter, this conceptualisation nonetheless allows for some differentiation in the mature student group, and thus the need for specific, targeted interventions and on-going supports for mature students entering the system. In turn, this reflects a growing recognition that access to HE remains only one part of the equity equation, and the need for a more holistic, tailored approach to accommodating students of difference in the system (Bowes et al. 2013; Milburn 2012). Bowes et al. (2013) refer to a 'student lifecycle'

approach to retention and success for minority groups, which is similar to Milburn's (2012) prescription of the 'student-life course' or: 'Getting ready, getting in, staying in and getting on'. This in turn places an onus on HEIs to give consideration to the current, seemingly inadequate procedures for recruitment and pre-preparation of mature students, and in particular those who remain most distanced from HE participation. Moreover, this places an emphasis on the need for firm structures to ensure that, once they reach the academy, this group has every opportunity to maximise their participation and outcomes in HE.

While Levin's contribution is useful, this nonetheless fails to distinguish between the experiences of male and female mature students in HE. The findings from this study further emphasise the highly gendered nature of the mature student HE experience highlighted in two decades of previous research on the matter (Alsop et al. 2008; Edwards 1993; Merrill 1999; Bowl 2003; O'Shea and Stone 2011). This applies in particular to mature women carers in HE, who are often required to manage multiple roles and responsibilities with the vagaries of full-time HE study. There are parallels here with Beck's description of a 'no-longer' and 'not-yet' scenario in these women's efforts at being competent or 'worthy' citizens, students, partners, mothers while attempting to carve out 'a life of one's own' (2002, p. 56). For Beck, this situation creates numerous ambivalences and contradictions in women's lives, not unlike the descriptions supplied by the women carers in this study. The tendency of these students to blame themselves for perceived inadequacies in any of these realms further underlines Beck's (1992) prescription for the 'risk', or perhaps more pertinently the 'scapegoat society', and where failure is attributed to the individual shortcomings rather than structural constraints imposed by status, class, gender and so on. In simple terms, many mature students face multiple barriers to their participation and success in a system seemingly ambivalent to their position as older learners in the academy.

This brings the discussion to the impact of institutional approaches to accommodating an older more diverse student cohort in HE. While there is evidence in the study of a more 'mature student friendly' approach in some departments or schools, and this applied especially to College A, the experiences of this sample demonstrate a system and provision that remains wedded to the needs and concerns of a younger-aged student cohort. This relates not only to the practical aspects of HE participation, but also to teaching, learning and assessment regime that

runs contrary to many of these students' preference for a deeper, more meaningful learning experience. Despite the presence of a more diverse student body on campus, it would seem that HEIs persist with a model of participation that remains far outside the experiences of many older learners entering the HE system. There is agreement with Sandman (2010) when she suggests the need to move beyond mere tinkering at the margins, towards a model of participation that better reflects the particular learning and support needs of mature students in HE. For Sandman (2010):

The data on adults into HE indicates that those HEIs who are successful are those who recognise change, embrace it and implement the integration of adult curricula and support and delivery systems. (Sandman 2010, p. 223)

Sandman's contribution further emphasises the need to stop blaming individuals for perceived deficiencies, and the recognition that access, participation and success for older and minority groups remains dependent on HEIs adapting to the needs of a changing student body in HE.

It is suggested that the failure of the HE system to deal with an older, more diverse range of students is symptomatic of reluctance on the part of HEIs, and in the university sector in particular, to accommodate students' diversity. This is illustrated in the relatively small quotas set aside for mature students by many of the older, larger institutions, and which runs contrary to national policy targets for under-represented groups in the system (HEA 2015e). Further evidence for this claim can be gained by close examination of the so-called agreements or 'compacts' between the HEA and individual HEIs (HEA 2012b). With few exceptions, these documents underline a lack of commitment to widening participation for mature students and other target groups, and a continued preference for traditional-aged study cohort in a time of continued, planned expansion in student numbers in HE (DES 2011). Moreover, the continued imposition of mature student interviews as an entry requirement in some HEIs further discriminates a group already facing multiple barriers to participation for this group in HE. Perhaps of more immediate concern are moves towards a pay-as-you go system of HE and a concurrent withdrawal of financial supports for mature students that have negatively impacted participation for this group in the period 2011–15. While the financial aspect is one consideration in a myriad

of factors impacting the mature student decision, this group appears particularly sensitive to changes in funding regimes. It is suggested that the (current) political instability in the Irish context may preclude the introduction of UK-style tuition fees anytime in the near future, but any further moves in this direction are likely to accelerate the downward trend of mature students in the system. Indeed, policymakers are urged to consider a reversal of cuts in funding to mature students, and in particular the reinstatement of a favourable adjacent rate whose initial introduction coincided with a rise in mature students' numbers in the period 2005–10.

In light of the findings of this study, it may also be productive for policymakers to consider, more fully, why mature students take the risk to return to study in the first place. While the potential employment–financial rewards of gaining degree remain foremost for this group, clearly there remains some dissonance between what these mature students perceive to be the benefits of HE and policy agenda focussed exclusively on skills to be able to effectively compete in the ‘knowledge economy’ (DES 2011). Along with other research dealing with matter (Fleming et al. 2010), the participants in this study described a complexity of intentions for their HE participation beyond simple economic concerns, including gains for self, for others as well as for society at large. For some students, the stakes were high, for example in breaking the cycle of intergenerational unemployment and poverty in their families, or avoiding this prospect. However, it would seem to be the ultimate irony that those with most to gain from their HE participation also faced the greatest risks to successfully completing their undergraduate studies. Lastly, this discussion gives (brief) consideration to the current trajectory of HE policy and a sector that has effectively been reduced to ‘an arm of economic policy’ (Hazelkorn and Massaro 2011). While mature students are undoubtedly focussed on better futures and better jobs, for many this is also a profound process of personal and intellectual discovery, not unlike an earlier ‘Newmanesque’ version of HE, now seemingly defunct. Their descriptions of making a difference and playing a more active, meaningful role in society also echo an earlier lifelong learning agenda, also now geared towards skills and knowledge for ROI to be able to compete in the global knowledge economy. In this way, mature students offer a vision for HE that goes beyond a narrow economic outlook and a prognosis of: Wrong Way! Turn Back!

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Gendered Experiences of Non-traditional Students in Irish Higher Education

Bernie Grummell and Rose Ryan

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on how gender is situated as part of enduring and deeply embedded inequalities in student access and participation to higher education (HE). This acknowledges how gender is shaped by the wider ‘social expectations women and men are subject to, institutional practices and culture which often reinforce persistent gendered inequalities and the commitment of institutional and national bodies towards the pursuit of gender equality’ (Loots and Walker 2015, p. 372). How gender intersects with other areas of inequalities, such as class, ethnicity, age and disability, is core to this analysis. This is explored in terms of the relationship between policy aspirations, implementation and lived experiences of education. At the heart of this analysis lies a concern with the experiences of non-traditional learners as they engage with the culture and structures of HE.

Discourses of performativity, accountability, professionalism, employability and individualism have shaped the contours of Irish HE in recent decades within a neo-liberal drive towards greater efficiency (Lynch et al. 2012). How this is experienced by students in terms of access, identity and widening participation is vital. Non-traditional students struggle to fit ever-narrowing categories of learner and ways of measuring learning and participation. Learners are being positioned as clients developing

their employability skills, while the learning processes and curricula remain dominated by logical mathematical reasoning and modes of expression. Knowledge is structured within academic hierarchies, which are governed by pedagogies of expertise, and the hierarchies of assessment and accreditation. This has powerful consequences in terms of stratification and reproduction at a societal level (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Within neo-liberalism, education is increasingly coalescing within a knowledge economy discourse which privileges certain disciplines as vital to the economic wellbeing of the nation, primarily the science, technology, engineering and mathematical (STEM) subjects. This re-channelling of education's purpose has occurred concurrent to the massification of HE, creating contradictory flows of expansion and stratification in HE. Democratic and social justice values interweave with market-driven economic discourses.

Much of the evidence for these gendered experiences originates from national statistical analyses that track key trends in Irish HE. This chapter critically examines the measurement capacity of such quantitative analysis, which is often embedded in positivist frameworks linked to performative demands. The individual unit basis of measurements often disguises the complex intersectional nature of how inequalities are experienced by those participating in the education system. How this becomes known through quantifiable indicators, measurement tools and formal access initiatives is a vital part of this story. How we come to know the lived experiences of students as they engage with the culture and structures of HE needs to be at the heart of our thinking. HE is experienced very differently by female and male students, not only in terms of learning experiences but also through a complex intersection of power, recognition and resources (Archer et al. 2003; Leathwood and Read 2009; Baker et al. 2009).

THE HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENT AS INDEPENDENT RATIONAL-CRITICAL AGENT

How we think of the HE student is deeply rooted in traditional notions of learning and the individual in Western philosophy. This tends to be an image of the individual learner as an autonomous subject independent of other family, work and social commitments, who draws on logical mathematical reasoning and modes of expression (Lynch and Ivancheva 2015).

These historical roots of the academic learner identity have renewed resonance through ‘the independent and self-reliant individual of neo-liberalism – the new choice-making subject who is required to continually “invest” in their own up-skilling to compete in the flexible labour market’ (Leathwood and Read 2009, p. 97). This merging of traditional academic constructs of the HE student with the drive of the neo-liberal knowledge economy creates powerful imperatives for contemporary learners. This has particular significance for non-traditional learners who do not fit these characteristics easily. It is contextualised in this chapter in terms of the differing experiences of HE by female and male students.

*Where the Lens Focuses: Policy and Research Attention
on Gender in Higher Education*

Policy attention has focused on particular gendered implications of access and widening participation in HE. As Ball remind us, ‘Policies rarely tell you exactly what to do, they rarely dictate or determine practice, but some more than others narrow the range of creative responses’ (2012, p. 3). General patterns of access to HE continue to be highlighted nationally, with OECD and HEA data revealing that more young women than ever are participating in HE as part of the massification of HE. This occurred within the broader landscape of Irish policy, which has shifted in the past few decades from the explicit interest in gender equality evident in the 1990s to the current narrowing of discursive possibilities. The Green Paper (DES 1992) and the Report on the National Education Convention (Coolahan 1994) highlighted gender equality as a fundamental issue. The White Paper (DES 1995a) followed suit by actively requiring all HE institutions to develop policies on gender equality and assigned responsibility to the HEA to monitor and support this (1995, p. 109). This was part of a ‘wider commitment to . . . [the] principle of equality [a]s a cornerstone of national educational policy’ (1995a, p. 207) being implemented in the equality and educational legislation of this time and through initiatives such as the Gender Equality Unit (which monitored and commissioned research on gender equality in the then Department of Education and Science).

This level of activity fell away from early 2000s onwards, with the *Report of the Action Group on Access to Higher Education* (DES 2001) on access to HE making no mention of gender equality. The *National*

Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008–2013 report acknowledged that a ‘significant and growing gender gap [in favour of females] has emerged over recent years’ in Irish HE, which while moderate by international levels was of growing concern (HEA 2008a, p. 37). This was framed primarily in terms of addressing male disadvantage, identifying ‘key challenges includ[ing] the...strengthening of the interface with further education and the expansion of opportunities to combine work and study’ (2008a, p. 38). This marked a significant reframing of policy responses to gender equality in terms of male participation and the linking of gender equality in HE with further education, work and study. The most recent *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019* (HEA 2015c) report notes gender as a longstanding national policy priority of achieving equity of access to HE, with no other active engagement. Through these most recent reports, we see a noticeable policy shift from the explicit concern and policy implementation of gender equality in the 1990s to the current limited policy focus on particular aspects of gender equality if at all.

Irish HE follows international trends where more females are participating in HE (OECD 2015c); 87,785 females as compared to 85,439 males in 2015 (HEA 2016c). This varies by sector, with colleges (of education mainly) and universities enrolling more females while the IoTs continue to enrol more males (HEA 2016c). These participation patterns belie a more complex picture. International studies such as PISA (2012) and OECD (2015c) highlight the ‘double disadvantage of having too many boys who drop out of school or leave school with low skills and/or skills that are not well matched with labour market requirements’ (OECD 2015c, p. 21). This is allied with diverse gendered representation in different disciplines, with females ‘under-represented in the fields of mathematics, physical science and computing, but dominate the fields of biology, medicine, agriculture and humanities’ (OECD 2015c, p. 19). Expectations are also different, as PISA (2012) ‘reveals that boys and girls hold different expectations for their futures and that they tend to prepare themselves for life after compulsory education in very different ways’ (OECD 2015c, p. 4). Girls are more likely to focus on subject interests and a combination of personal, social and family reasons, while boys cite financial and employment reasons (Archer et al. 2003, p. 123).

As a consequence of these trends, policy and research attention has continued to focus on the broad patterns of gender statistics. Less attention

has been paid to how these trends have been constructed through the technologies of measurement. Gender is defined in a binary discourse in terms of male and female, with the recognition of gender diversity evident through the campaigning and 2015 gender recognition bill not yet apparent in research (GLEN 2016; TENI 2015). While the language of this chapter adopts this wider recognition of gender diversity, the lack of research data attuned to gender diversity means that the focus remains primarily on the gendered experiences of males and females in the HE, with other gendered stories yet to be told. This technology of measurement focuses on how individuals access and navigate the education system. The stories of these learners and groups are solidified as singular units or entities, defined in terms of how they might fit within the existing system, rather than any consideration of the diverse intersectionality in people's lives. The onus is on individual learner(s), with measurement units focusing on access, progression and output. Noticeably, there is little capacity to focus on the background context of learners or the institutional context of learning, which we know is vitally important for widening participation. Consequently:

WP policy is embedded in regulatory practices, which aim to 'fix' or 'correct' the WP subject, so that s/he will fit in to the hegemonic expectations of what it means to be a university student. The fixing or correcting is based on an (imaginary) ideal student-subject, associated with normalised values and dispositions, historically connected with the young, able-bodied, middle-classed, white racialised subject. (Burke 2011, p. 171)

This has profound implications for non-traditional learners who do not easily fit the measurable criteria of these regulatory practices. It is gendered with income classifications, for example, being premised on gendered assumptions about male labour, assumptions about homogeneity within socio-economic groups and the labour market itself as well as a wide array of socio-cultural norms about gender (Archer et al. 2003, p. 11)

As Burke notes, this 'fail[s] to take account of deeply embedded and complex histories of exclusion, inequality and misrecognition' of non-traditional students in HE (2011, p. 173). Identities are always in process, material and discursive, subjectively experienced and constantly shifting within their specific socio-cultural and temporal contexts (Archer et al. 2003, pp. 13–14). The effects of this individualised orientation are further

exacerbated in a neo-liberal economy based on individual employability in a global marketplace. Individuals are expected to self-regulate and manage their learning to ensure that their skills match the changing needs of a precarious, flexible and competitive employment market. This approach promotes certain disciplines in HE (primarily STEM subjects), learning outcomes (clearly defined subject and generic skills, which are measurable and incremental in nature) and learning skills (flexible, independent and critical learning skills, which are performance-related and deemed as useful for employability). These discourses interrupt the apparent meritocracy of the HE system, undermining the policy intentions of equal access and participation for all learners.

GENDERED PATTERNS IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION

The shift towards system massification, which began in the mid-1980s, had important gender dimensions that continue to feature. While this expansion is often cited as part of the Irish success story which led to relatively equal numbers of females and males now attending HE (Clancy and Wall 2000; O'Connell et al. 2006; HEA 2016c), it belies a more complex gendered picture. Females are more likely to participate at certain levels and disciplines and are more likely than male students to progress through and graduate from HE (HEA 2016b). This expansion mainly concerned specific sectors of the Irish population, primarily learners accessing undergraduate programmes directly from school through the Central Applications Office (CAO) system. These learners are stratified according to the points that they achieve in the Leaving Certificate with access to high demand (mainly professional) courses restricted to those who achieve high academic results.

Institutional stratification within the HE system is also significant, with universities, colleges and IoTs not only providing different types and levels of programmes, but also types of learning experiences, which attract diverse students. For example, Irish colleges (71 per cent) and universities (53 per cent) enrol more females, while the IoTs continue to enrol more males (57 per cent), reflecting different cultures and subject offerings (HEA 2016b). Skeggs (1997) notes how the discourses of academia and vocationalism are themselves gendered. Academic knowledge has been ascribed a higher status in elite institutions and is associated with the rational logical and mathematical knowledges, which were perceived as masculine (Leathwood and Read 2009). Vocational knowledge has been

traditionally given a lower recognition in educational systems, as well as being gendered within its own offerings, with industry and apprenticeships programmes associated with male students (such as construction services and engineering), while vocational education for female students has centred on the lower paid and precarious service industries, such as hairdressing, beautician and childcare (Grummell and Murray 2015) (Table 9.1).

Patterns of subject choice are also gendered, with science, technology, engineering and mathematical subjects dominated by male students, while females make up the majority in education, humanities and arts, social sciences, business, law and services (HEA 2016c). The clustering of women in arts and humanities while men dominate STEM subjects echoes social and economic hegemonic norms (giving these disciplines higher recognition, remuneration and career progression opportunities). This gendered stratification of different types of knowledge represents ‘subjects such as physics, chemistry and mathematics . . . as highly academic, difficult and masculine. These “hard” subjects are contrasted with the “soft”, presumed easier, arts and humanities that tend to be coded as feminine’ (Leathwood 2013, p. 135). This must be positioned within the wider socio-cultural expectations of hegemonic femininities and masculinities, which frame subject choices.

There is also a gender difference evident in the level of programme, with greater female representation in undergraduate diplomas, honours degrees, postgraduate certificates and diplomas but marginally lower female representation in the higher-level postgraduate masters and Ph.D. programmes (HEA 2016c) and likewise in terms of lower levels of females at the professorial and higher rankings of academic staff (Lynch et al. 2012). These trends are reflected in graduation levels, with 54 per cent of all HE awards being conferred to females in 2013.

Table 9.1 Gender of all full-time enrolments in HEA-funded institutions, 2015 (HEA 2016c)

<i>Full-time enrolments in HEIs</i>	<i>Universities</i>	<i>Colleges</i>	<i>Institutes of technology</i>	<i>Totals</i>
Males	44,266	3,073	38,100	85,439
Females	50,854	6,707	30,224	87,785
				173,224

This is described as the ‘female advantage’, particularly in relation to undergraduate diploma awards (62 per cent female), honours degrees (56 per cent female), postgraduate diplomas and certificates (63 per cent and 68 per cent female, respectively) and taught masters (55 per cent female). The counter-discourse of male disadvantage is also evident in the literature and policy documents, especially at school level. These binary discourses of female/male dis/advantage need to be challenged and problematised as they gloss over very complex stratification patterns and set in train highly problematic deficit-based modes of intervention.

INTERSECTIONS OF GENDER AND OTHER EQUALITIES IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION

Research points to the importance of developing more nuanced analyses, which recognise the complex nature of stratification across class, gender and ethnic identities (Savage et al. 1992; Reay et al. 2001; Francis et al. 2014). Loots and Walker (2015, p. 370) argue for ‘cognisance of intersectional influences on students’ gendered HE experiences [as] . . . a vital consideration in policy goals and implementation strategies.’ Such cognisance is clearly relevant for ambiguous experiences of students from working class backgrounds in HE where many speak of the difficulties that they have in adapting to the learning culture and structures of HE (Fleming et al. 2010; Merrill et al. 2010). Socio-economic diversity continues to be a concern in Irish education, with national statistics revealing persistent class-based inequalities in access and participation throughout the expansion of HE (Clancy 1988; Clancy and Wall 2000; McCoy and Smyth 2011).

The growing number of mature students who have entered the HE sector in recent decades reveals one such intersection with important gender implications. Many of these are female, most of whom have families and primary care responsibilities. Many speak of how their family circumstances influenced their educational participation with many leaving work to care for their children and later choosing to return to education when their children are older as a long-held ambition. The influence of discourses of hegemonic femininities and care commitments are important to consider in terms of experiences of these students (Skeggs 1997; Lynch et al. 2009). The context and culture of HE institutions are important

with mature students as they are more likely to progress to the second year of their programmes in IoTs as compared to universities (HEA 2016c). As compared with 28.7 per cent of male undergraduates, 35.9 per cent of all female undergraduates study part-time (ECU 2008 cited in Burke 2011, p. 174). Gendered patterns of part-time versus full-time registration of students have important implications for women. Part-time registration entails significant fees and often excludes students from fees exemptions, tax rebates and grants. By virtue of this, women from lower socio-economic and from ethnic minority backgrounds in particular are often under-represented.

New types of students have entered Irish HE in recent years – notably through initiatives for students with disabilities, socio-economic disadvantage and mature students, but also students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Data are only emerging now about students from an ethnic minority background, but this issue warrants further investigation in terms of its implications for widening access and participation. Participation rates for students from Traveller background remain consistently low, reflecting the dismal track record of inclusion of Travellers in Irish society. As Pavee Point and Irish Travellers Movement have highlighted, inclusion targets are based on individual student access rather than a deeper appreciation of Travellers' culture. For example, many Travellers are married and living independently before the age of 23 years, which means they are not eligible for Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) grants. For female Travellers, family commitments and cultural norms may preclude or discourage them from participation in HE, indicating the intersection of ethnicity and gendered factors.

With regard to other equality issues, existing diversities has become more visible on a public stage. Greater recognition of sexual identities is evident through the general cultural shift in Irish society (Inglis 1998). Specifically the concerted efforts of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning and Intersex (LGBTQI) movement and Marriage Equality referendum (2015) have achieved greater visibility and rights across all areas of Irish society (GLEN 2016). LGBTQI societies in HE have been very vocal in these campaigns. However, this is not necessarily reflected in the curricula or pedagogical approaches of HE. Approaches still tend to be framed in terms of specific initiatives to address homophobia primarily aimed at and developing from the school sectors. In HE, sexualities are most clearly visibly in the development of specialised research areas and programmes (such as women's studies,

masculinities, LGBT and queer studies) rather than being part of the normative culture of HE.

ACCESS INITIATIVES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: GENDER IN THE DARE INITIATIVE

Government response to these inequalities in access and participation has been to establish formal initiatives to incentivise individual access routes for diverse groups to HE. The remainder of this chapter explores one such initiative in order to explore the gendered dynamics for widening access and participation. The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme was established to increase the numbers of students with disabilities progressing from second level to HE by reserving a number of places for DARE-eligible students on reduced CAO points.¹ The following analysis explores national applications and acceptance rates through the DARE scheme in 2010 and 2011.² This gives important insights into the intersection of gender with disability issues in understanding access and participation to HE. While this research does not fully represent the diversity of gender and disability backgrounds among students, it does provide an opportunity to provide a quantitative snapshot of the non-traditional students who applied and accept a place on HE courses through the DARE initiative in these years. It reveals important insights into the modes of intervention of how access initiatives operate and their gendered implications, as explored next.

DARE operates through the designation of categories of disability eligible for consideration under the scheme.³ Disability Advisory Boards devised quantifiable indicators which are mapped to the academic impact of each disability on Leaving Certificate examination performance. Critically examining how and why these criteria are selected reveal the ‘problematic nature of judging who has potential, and who does not, [which] is silenced in the policy discourse’ (Burke 2011, pp. 170–171). In this case, it creates an access system premised on academic learning impacts⁴ that are selected by qualified professionals (rather than wider learning, environmental or social criteria that literature and research demonstrates are key for learning, especially for learners with disabilities already disadvantaged by an academic system). This leaves the power balance and decision-making in the

narrow realm of the professional field associated with disability and education, rather than the wider experiential, social and affective knowledge of those living with disabilities. In most cases, a medically-reported diagnosis of a specific disability guarantees eligibility highlighting the privileging of medical-based definitions of disability. Byrne et al.'s research highlights 'strong concerns that the application process may be biased in favour of those with greater financial resources at their disposal to access medical or psychological reports' (Byrne et al. 2014, p. 114) which is also echoed in recent reports by Rose et al. (2015) and Banks et al. (2015).

The establishment of these criteria can be set within the wider context of research and policy debate over the technologies of measurement being used. Measurement tends to be based on quantifiable units distilled from complex bio-medical-social experiences of disability. How this process of identifying and using such indicators shapes the lived experiences of disability and learning often remains invisible. As Loots and Walker (2015) note:

tracking numerical parity does not address the deeper seated inequalities associated with gender... The pursuit of equality is therefore measured through equal representation, without considering the daily lived experiences of individuals affected by policy goals and ignoring the proposed social justice outcomes of policies. (Loots and Walker 2015, p. 363)

Hence, this chapter seeks to reveal some of the complexity which lies behind these statistics, both in terms of why these measurement technologies are being used and how they are implemented through policy and practice. The following section outlines the application process and general profile of DARE applicants in 2010–11, before exploring what becomes known and knowable in this data about the intersection of gender and disability.

Intersections of Gender and Disability in the DARE Application Process 2010–11

Applicants to the DARE scheme provide general demographic and education information required by the CAO. They submit additional documentation to provide formal evidence of their disability, as well as extensive supporting evidence from medical and social professionals, schools and

personal statements. This places considerable demands on the applicant, their family and school support network. This relates not only the power of this measurement technology to shape what become knowable about these applicants, but also is acknowledged as a key constraint to accessing such schemes (Byrne et al. 2013). The onus remains on the individual applicant and their families/communities to fit their experiences into the framework of indicators being used, rather than the system being truly inclusive and able to account equally for the diversity for all applicants to HE. Byrne et al.'s (2013) review of DARE and HEAR access initiatives noted institutional variations in terms of student intake, recruitment, implementation, subject choice and supports for DARE.

The DARE application process provides information on the primary and/or other disability stated by the applicant, medical or supporting information provided by the applicant, the supports confirmed by the applicant as received at second level and requested at HE, student's personal statement outlining the impact of disability, and overall outcome or eligibility status under the DARE scheme. In the case of the data in Tables 9.2 and 9.3, patterns of gender, disability and school types among successful and ineligible applicants to DARE in 2010 and 2011 are clear. Data provided by the University of Limerick (which managed the data for the participating institutions during this period) show a significant increase in applications to the DARE scheme during this time (see Table 9.2)

A general review of the data reveals a continual increase in the number of applicants from 2,160 people in 2010 to 2,531 applicants in 2011. Eligible applications for this period increased from 43 per cent (933 applications) in 2010 to 50 per cent (1,272 applicants) in 2011. Acceptances by DARE-eligible applicants in HE significantly increased (by 753) in that two-year period. Of continuing concern though are the high numbers of ineligible applications (880 applications in 2010 and 875 in 2011) and the numbers

Table 9.2 DARE applications summary, 2010–2011 (%)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total applications</i>	<i>Total ineligible applicants</i>	<i>Total eligible applicants</i>	<i>Total places accepted in HET^a</i>
2010	2,161	880 (41)	933 (43)	385
2011	2,531	875 (35)	1,272 (50)	753

^aThe total accepted places was taken directly from a progress report from HEAR DARE coordinator dated March 2013 and integrated with the data provided by University of Limerick in this table.

Table 9.3 Gender of DARE applicants 2010 and 2011

	<i>2010 actual</i>	<i>Per cent of applications</i>	<i>2011 actual</i>	<i>Per cent of applications</i>
Male	1,246	57.7	1,387	54.8
Female	915	42.3	1,144	45.2
Total	2,161	100.0	2,531	100.0

who do not enter HEIs due to ineligibility despite the extensive work which went into the application process (563 people in 2010 and 523 people in 2011). Male applicants outnumber female applicants in both years, but as Byrne et al. (2013, p. 116) note female applicants are more likely to submit completed applications – all features that warrant further investigation. There was a small percentage increase of female applicants in 2011, as illustrated in Table 9.3.

Of these, the majority of applicants were in the 18–19 years group (55–58 per cent of males were 18–19 years, while 42–45 per cent of females were 18–19 years in 2010 and 2011). A review of gender by disability type for both years reveals that males outnumber females significantly in relation to particular disability categories, notably Asperger’s Syndrome/Autism, Attention Deficit Disorder and Dyspraxia/Developmental Coordination Disorder. Females significantly outnumber males in these years in relation to two disability categories: Mental Health conditions and Significant Ongoing Illnesses (see Fig. 9.1). The gendered dynamics of these patterns is evident in previous research (Banks et al. 2015), which highlights an association between boys and SEN at school level, as well as links between children with disabilities, poverty and disadvantaged backgrounds. These dynamics highlight vital recognition and resource issues for students who are being disadvantaged in a complex matrix of intersecting aspects, with gendered inflections forming one element.

As Fig. 9.2 illustrates, the majority of these applicants attended public second level schools (742 male students and 674 female students in 2010), but with a sizeable percentage attending private fee-paying or revision schools (305 males and 177 females), followed by 192 males and 105 females attending a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)⁵ school and a minority attending special schools.

While the spread between school type is expected (with public schools forming the majority of Irish second levels, sizeable numbers attending DEIS schools, and smaller numbers of private, revision and special

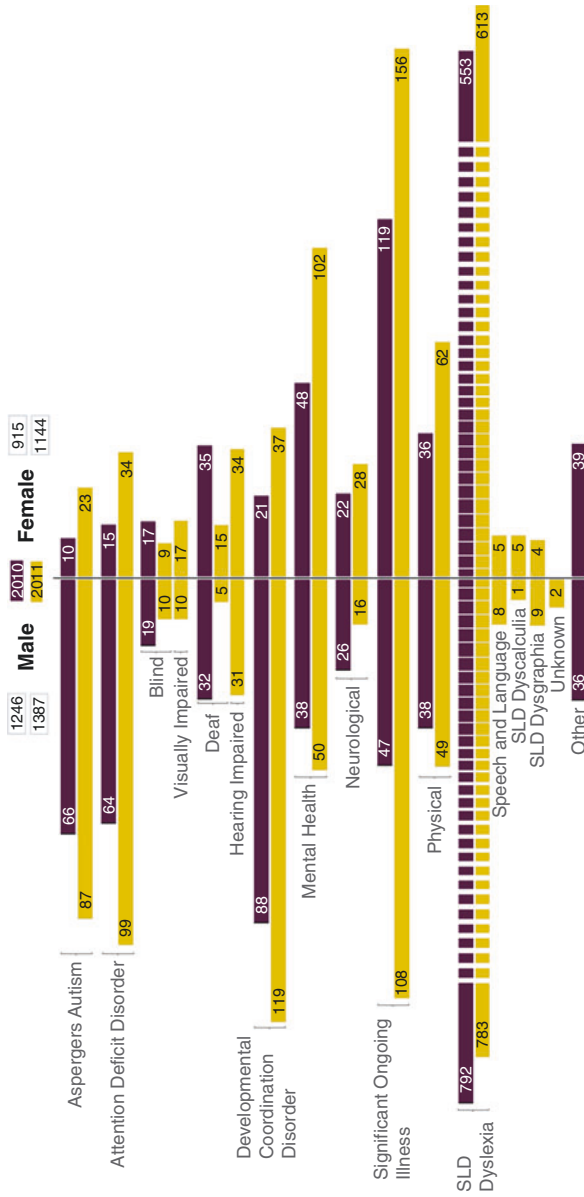


Fig. 9.1 Disability and gender categorisation of DARE applicants 2010 and 2011

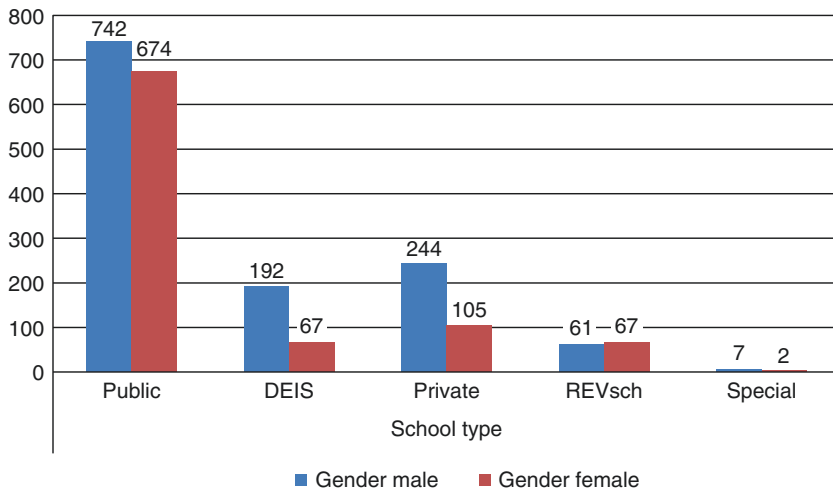


Fig. 9.2 Gender of DARE applicants (n) by school type in 2010

schools), the range is significant. Proportionally, there are more applicants from private and revision schools applying to DARE, raising concerns about the socio-economic diversity being achieved. Byrne et al. (2013, pp. 20–21) highlight a similar concern with their study, showing an over-representation of DARE-eligible applicants attending fee-paying second level schools and non-government funded fee-paying schools (‘grind schools’) and an under-representation of those attending DEIS schools (9 per cent compared to 14 per cent of all CAO applicants). These patterns are the reverse of what we might expect, given that existing school data reveal ‘stark differences in SEN prevalence between children from working class backgrounds and their middle class counterparts [with] concentrations of SEN in DEIS schools’ (Banks and McCoy 2011, p. 6). These patterns suggest that the application process is not working for those who are already under-resourced and disadvantaged. Numbers from special schools are very low, which is disappointing given the disability focus of the DARE initiative. Gender is also a feature, with proportionally less females applying to DARE from DEIS, private or special schools. It is only from revision schools where there are more female DARE applicants in 2010 than males, with a high proportion of female students also coming from public school backgrounds (see Fig. 9.2). This reveals significant

socio-economic and gendered trends among students who apply to HE through the DARE initiative.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This analysis focuses on how gender is situated as part of the complex of enduring and deeply embedded inequalities in access and participation to HE, especially for non-traditional students. Historically, the expansion of Irish HE has been tightly bound up with Irish economic needs through a human capital approach (Hurley 2014), but more recently within a frame of market-driven capitalism and neoliberal employability. HE policy blends social justice aspirations with a discursive hegemony about the role of HE to inculcate entrepreneurial and individualistic values for the knowledge economy. This has taken shape within a new managerialist system, which structure learners and their experiences in processes of performativity, accreditation and professionalism. This chapter has been concerned with the gendered implications of non-traditional students in HE.

This chapter problematises the quantitative basis of the technology of measuring access and participation by reducing complex life experiences into measureable individual units. While this reveals patterns of gendered engagement and exclusions, it oversimplifies the complex intersectionality of these experiences in the messy realities of learners' lives. As argued throughout this book, this compartmentalises complex gendered experience of diverse groups and individuals into discrete units as the 'objects of intervention'. This creates modes of intervention based on how the system measures complex gender experiences as 'problematic' rather than an incapacity of the educational system or society to respond to diversity.

The latter part of this chapter analyses empirical evidence about the intersection of gender and disability based on on-going statistical analysis of students accessing HE through the DARE initiative in 2010 and 2011. It reveals key intersections of disability, gender and school type, which require significantly more research. They do point to the importance of critically interrogating the capacity of our current technologies of measurement and accountability to represent and support inclusive diversity. Loots and Walker (2015) call for:

a more comprehensive understanding of gender equality in higher education contexts to inform gender policies, one which expands the freedoms of

human beings to choose the lives that are valuable for them as the informational space for evaluating justice. The gender equality we argue for stresses the ability of individuals as active agents of change, guided by the availability of capabilities to challenge social structures and confinements, as well as the interaction between individuals, social structures and institutions. The link between active intervention enabling policy creation and the implementation thereof is therefore a fundamental capability enhancer for empowerment. (Loots and Walker 2015, p. 373).

NOTES

1. Twelve institutions participated in DARE in 2010–2011, which includes seven universities; two IoTs, Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT); the National College of Ireland (NCI); Mater Dei Institute of Education; and the Pontifical University Maynooth.
2. With thanks to DARE board, who gave permission for this data analysis to be completed for this chapter. It is part of a bigger research analysis being completed by Rose Ryan in Maynooth University.
3. These ten disability categories include Asperger's Syndrome/Autism, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Blind/Vision Impaired, Deaf/Hard of Hearing, Dyspraxia, Mental Health Condition, Neurological Conditions (including Brain Injury, Speech and Language Disabilities), Significant Ongoing Illness, Physical Disability and Specific Learning Difficulty (including Dyslexia and Dyscalculia).
4. In the case of students who are blind or visually impaired, or who are deaf or hard of hearing and students with specific learning difficulties, a severity or significance of the condition must be evidenced with medical reports. In the case of specific learning difficulties, two literacy attainments must be at or less than the 10th percentile and overall a student must have a general ability score in excess of a standard score of 90.
5. Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is the Action Plan for Educational Inclusion which was launched in May 2005 and remains the Department of Education and Skills policy instrument to address educational disadvantage. (<http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/DEIS-Delivering-Equality-of-Opportunity-in-Schools-/>).

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Part-Time and Flexible Learning in Irish Higher Education

Nuala Hunt

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to critically examine recent public policy documents and explore how part-time education has been conceptualised, defined and framed within discourses concerned with the reform of higher education (HE) in Ireland. While successive widening participation strategies neglected part-time students, the onset of the economic downturn in 2007 signalled a renewed interest in part-time and flexible learning as a means of expanding HE at a time of significant change, as public investment in education declines (O'Connor 2014; Clarke et al. 2015) and the HEA introduced service agreements linked to performance targets across the sector. Since 2000, public policy has presented part-time HE in conjunction with flexible learning and training. Part-time is also a mode of participation that has been embedded within the national agenda for lifelong learning. More specifically, within the Irish policy context, part-time has been constructed in relation to the broader themes of expansion and reform of HE (DES 2011; HEA 2009). Within this context the status and visibility of part-time learning in HE policy, both nationally and within HEIs, has grown considerably whereas prior to 2000 it received very limited or no attention at all (McMahon 2000). What is curious about the notion of 'part-time' is that (1) it is rarely treated as a stand-alone topic and appears to be implicit within debates on lifelong learning and

that (2) it is explicitly tied to widening participation strategies (see [Chap. 3](#) for an overview).

In Ireland, part-time learning in HE has not been extensively studied and the ‘absence of any comprehensive research on part-time students’ (Sheerin, nd, p. 15) is commonplace. Darmody and Fleming (2009, p. 71) observed that ‘very little is known about an overall workload and general life situations of part-time students, especially in an Irish context’. However, this was not unique to Ireland, research in the United Kingdom and North America indicated that there was limited interest in part-time HE (Kember et al. 2001; Darmody and Fleming 2009; Laird Nelson and Cruce 2009; Callender 2011). Swain and Hammond (2011, p. 591) concluded that ‘although many students in HE are mature part-time learners, they have not been the specific focus of much research or policy interest’. Part-time was less visible within public policy for several decades and it appeared ‘as having a lower priority than full-time’ (Kember et al. 2001, p. 32). In the United Kingdom, it had become peripheral and ‘side-lined in the HE policy agenda’ (Callender 2011, p. 469). The neglect of part-time and the low status associated with this mode of learning indicated that policy-makers priorities lay elsewhere. Particular attention was paid to increasing the numbers of school leavers transitioning to full-time HE. According to Thornhill (1999), the ‘exclusive focus’ on school leavers yielded results – as we showed in [Chaps. 2](#) and [3](#) the numbers participating in HE grew, correspondingly Ireland’s position advanced within OECD countries. From the late 1990s onwards, attempts were made to improve access to and widen participation within HE through distinct policy initiatives. Nevertheless, although the overall number of students participating in HE increased, segments of the population, particularly older adults, continued to present with low levels of educational attainment (HEA 2008b). As we argued in [Chap. 2](#), concerns over the need to increase the quality of the Irish labour force vis-à-vis National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) levels became a significant ‘driver’ in terms of access policy.

As we also argued in [Chap. 3](#), successive access reports and plans were concerned with addressing diversity and supporting equity within HE. In particular, widening participation strategies focused on mainstream full-time HE, with a specific interest in ‘targeting’ socio-economic disadvantaged groups, mature adults, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities. Although part-time was part of these plans it has been overshadowed and overlooked by the overemphasis on full-time participation. Though part-time was predominantly a mature student provision, there

was no specific funding or support for part-time HE. This anomaly and ‘lack of fairness’ within the system was noted but not addressed (OECD 2006; HEA 2005, p. 15).

CONCEPTUALISING PART-TIME AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING

A recurring theme within public policy has been the blurring of part-time, so that it has become ill-defined and lately related to terms such as ‘flexible’. In the 2009 HEA position paper, ‘Open and Flexible learning’ (HEA 2009) and the subsequent report titled ‘Part-time and Flexible Higher Education’ (HEA 2012a) the terms part-time and flexible were used interchangeably. In Open and Flexible Learning (OFL), part-time was presented as a form of flexible learning, that is, by its very nature it enables individuals who have other commitments in work and/or at home to participate in HE. By 2012, part-time and flexible were synonymous and taken together they could provide a route into HE as well as a mechanism to expand provision across the sector. Whether part-time and flexible are inter-related, synonymous or distinguishable may appear to be of limited significance. Pragmatically coupling part-time with flexible makes sense, together they can provide for an expanded provision. Why trouble with definitions, meaning and value, when parameters between flexible and part-time overlap anyway? Nevertheless, differences between flexible and part-time do exist, and it is worthwhile to explore these as they do have consequences in both policy and pedagogical terms.

Part-timers, in terms of data collection and funding, remain at the edges. In order to be recognised for grant purposes in some instances part-time students could be bundled to appear as full-time equivalents. However, the situation has changed in recent years, as part-time and flexible students are now counted within institutional returns to the HEA and appear as a category within annual reports. Although part-timers are now visible for statistical purposes, the issue of fees remains unresolved and part-time HE is largely self-financing. Flannery and McGarr (2014, p. 1) examined discourses in relation to flexibility and flexible learning in Irish HE and found that they were presented largely as being ‘unproblematically as beneficial and straightforward concepts’. Contrary to the manner in which it was presented in policy, the authors argued that ‘flexible learning’ was ‘not an unproblematic’ concept (Flannery and McGarr 2014, p. 1). In the rush to implement flexibility across HE, the difficulties and tensions associated with expanded provision could be

overlooked. The authors caution against this and encourage reflection on the complexity attached to seemingly straightforward concepts such as flexibility. However, Flannery and McGarr do not distinguish flexible from part-time, and they subsume these terms under the umbrella of flexibility within HE.

Defining part-time can be a challenge as there are few formal definitions. Schuller noted that it ‘can mean a variety of different things’, though evidence indicates that part-time has been shaped by providers as well as policymakers (Schuller et al. 1999, p. 52). Callender (2011, p. 470) acknowledged the lack of definition in the United Kingdom but described part-time students as ‘those that do not fit the definition of a full-time student’. The HEA (2012a, p. 8) report defined part-time as those ‘students who were attending part-time courses over a full academic year and leading to an award’. Also the boundaries that separate full from part-time became increasingly unclear (Darmody and Smyth 2007), particularly as many students combine their studies with ‘other commitments’, including paid work, ‘and are de facto studying on a part-time basis’ (Jamieson et al. 2009, p. 245). Evidence also indicated that there was greater diversity within part-time in terms of student profile (HEA 2012a; Callender 2011; Swain and Hammond 2011); also, at a structural level the lack of parity in terms of fees and access to campus-based supports distinguished this cohort from full-time (HEA 2012a).

Traditionally, flexible learning was associated with distance education and online learning; the Open University (OU) represents a successful model of paper-based flexible programmes and distance provision. However the exclusive association with technology, e-learning and remote learning no longer holds. Increasingly in public policy, flexible learning is interpreted broadly; it can mean programmes that are wholly on-line, those that utilise a blended method of learning, in-service education as well as distance education (HEA 2012a). Within HE, participating flexibly does not preclude a student from being registered full-time. Though flexible and full-time can be coupled, in contrast part-time confers a different mode and status on students, even where they are participating flexibly within HE. For those HEIs who introduced blended approaches or programmes that were wholly on-line (though noteworthy as an indicator of adapting to changing demands), such advancement was no longer sufficient. What has emerged consistently from public policy documents and funding strategies was the intention for reform so that HE would embrace flexibility at a structural and systemic level.

Additionally, the implementation of the Bologna Agreement (European Ministers of Education 1999) has brought about significant structural reforms of European-wide HE qualification frameworks. It heralded the introduction of modularisation and learning outcomes, which was rolled out across Irish HE in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Where modularisation was embedded within HEIs, then in theory, an outcomes-based curricula should provide for equivalence between full- and part-time learning. This initiative represented a significant change and hastened increased flexibility of HE. Flexibility as applied to HE, consists of three categories: (1) structural, (2) curricular and (3) pedagogical. According to the European Commission (EC 2013), adopting Bologna within HE resulted in increased flexibility, including: first, structural change in terms of optimising transfer options through the introduction of the three cycle system of '3+2+3'; second, curricular flexibility in terms of modularisation; and third, pedagogical flexibility with learning outcomes and a student-centred approach to teaching.

Within HEIs in Ireland, part-time is often constructed as a longer version of full-time. Part-time has not been presented as conceptually or pedagogically different, though a review of institutional practices, student experiences and policies within HEIs may suggest other. Often, what separates and distinguishes full-time from part-time is duration of participation, student profile, fees, the limited range of programme options on offer, status, mode and access to facilities and supports. Evidence of completion and retention figures among part-time students can be difficult to establish, as researchers have devoted attention to full-time rather than part-time progression (HEA 2010c, 2014b). However part-time is also recognised as, predominantly, a form of mature student provision, which led Fleming (1998) to argue that catering for and responding to the needs of adult learners requires institutions to change their practice and adopt adult friendly approaches.¹ How the needs of adult learners and part-time students have been supported, resourced, and catered to across the sector and within individual HEIs is inadequately documented and researched. Furthermore, little is known about who teaches part-time students, particular pedagogical approaches or specific curriculum development responses. There is limited empirical research to establish or understand the range of experiences, practices and policies that exist locally. It is likely that there is a lack of consistency across HE, with varying practices and differing policies present. Evidently, pockets of good practice have been established, as individual HEIs champion flexible provision, mature students and adult learning; however elsewhere within the sector,

there may be limited interest in or thinly spread resources available to cater for diverse needs. Not all HEI have embraced flexible or lifelong learning fully, furthermore it may not be of strategic concern as there were few incentives to encourage this (McMahon 2000). The HEA have indicated that the annual recurring grant to individual HEIs, should provide a means of regulating how HEIs address national targets; though it has yet to become evident what the implications of inadequate progress or non-compliance specifically in relation to part-time could yield.

HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY AND PART-TIME LEARNING

In Ireland part-time HE has been located within the national strategy for widening participation and firmly linked to the lifelong learning agenda. The expanded concept of lifelong learning was given an injection with the *Green paper on adult education* (1998) followed by *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education* (2000). The latter set about promoting an inclusive agenda, which included calling for the integration of adult learning within mainstream HE as well as advocating training, up-skilling and meeting labour market needs through further and HE. This was also reinforced by the influential 2006 OECD report on HE in Ireland (OECD 2006). Aspects of the lifelong learning agenda were embedded in a range of subsequent policy initiatives, which included the introduction of a National Strategy beginning in 2003, to address access and equity across HE (see Chap. 3). More recently, educational policy interests have focused on reform of further and HE, with an emphasis on enhanced quality, rationalisation, improved performance and increased flexibility within HE (DES 2011).

While lifelong learning remains an overarching concept for policy makers, there are concerns that it has been tarnished as a result of association with labour market interests and it requires rehabilitation in keeping with its humanistic origins (Fleming 2011). Flannery and McGarr (2014, p. 4) expressed similar concerns, when they argued that lifelong learning policy shifted from being a ‘socially inclusive discourse’ manifest in the 1970s to one that is concerned with ‘widening participation in HE in order to enhance employability’ in the 2000 White Paper (DES 2000) and more recently the 2011 National Strategy for Higher Education 2013–2030 (DES 2011). In more recent years, public policy reports presented flexible and part-time learning together as tools for expansion and reform within HE (DES 2011; HEA 2009, 2012a). Between 2009

and 2012, the HEA published two separate documents, a paper and report on part-time and flexible learning in HE. This flurry of activity is noteworthy as there was a dearth of research or policy dedicated to part-time prior to that time.

Open and Flexible Learning (2009)

The 2009 ‘Open and Flexible learning’ (OFL) position paper, presented an argument for increased flexibility and expansion of HE. This document was adopted by the HEA as a strategy and it informed the subsequent *National Strategy on Higher Education 2013–2030* (DES 2011). This short paper was packed with big ideas, namely, reform of HE based upon a combination of structural and pedagogical changes. The purpose of the position paper was to argue for greater flexibility across Irish HE structures and systems; in particular ‘to establish flexible learning as a mainstream concern of Irish higher education’ (HEA 2009, p. 9). An HE system that is more flexible could address the learning needs of adults or school leavers – those cohorts who were unable to participate full-time. Using a range of academic sources, the paper presents a rationale for the development of a HE system that is flexible. It was argued that where blended approaches to teaching, as well as online learning, were combined with the integration of technology and mainstreaming of continuing education provision, this should create increased participation.

In order to bolster the case for increased flexibility, the authors assembled several arguments: the advance in technology enhanced learning, developments in teaching and learning in HE, gaps in part-time provision with higher numbers of part-time programmes at sub-degree level, the need to mainstream continuing education, the existence of different practices in part-time across the sector, with IoTs offering a wider range of undergraduate part-time options. Some of the challenges of providing for a flexible and expanded HE were identified, in particular the lack of adequate funding and the failure to address the fees issue and provide for parity between full- and part-time students. Funding was acknowledged as an issue in so far as ‘colleges must operate flexible learning programmes on a largely self-funded basis’ (HEA 2009, p. 7). Similarly, the infrastructural difficulties presented by students who might transfer from programmes within and between institutions were acknowledged. The paper constructs an argument in favour of increased flexibility of HE based on a clear articulation of societal changes, meeting diverse learning needs, and the reform of HE more generally combined with

institutional leadership. Old arguments inherent to lifelong learning were resurrected, such as the need for inclusion, managing the impact of globalisation and the embedding of a culture of learning that is life-wide. The authors, however, adopt a conciliatory approach as the intention was ‘to foster evolution’ within the system, rather than ‘revolution’, in order to enable ‘flexibility in delivery’ rather than enforce it. In light of this, institutions were to be encouraged and supported to become more ‘responsive to the learning and skills needs of citizens’ (HEA 2009, p. 12). The structure and tone of the position paper differs from the later 2012 report, as the underpinning approach was to present a cogent argument for increased flexibility of HE within the context of a changing educational landscape. Inevitably the authors argued that advances in technology, globalisation and economic uncertainty, require on-going reform of systems, structures and practices within HE.

Part-Time and Flexible Higher Education in Ireland (2012)

In 2012, a second HEA policy document was published, which was initially circulated as a consultation paper to HEIs and key stakeholders. A final edited version appeared with a revised title, ‘Part-time and Flexible Higher Education in Ireland’, and included a number of key recommendations for the delivery of increased part-time provision. Part-time and Flexible HE set out a ‘policy framework for part-time/flexible learning in Irish higher education’, which was to be achieved through existing national strategies, namely, the national equity and access plan as well as the national strategy for HE and the national skills strategy (HEA 2012a, p. 6). The key recommendations included the achievement of ‘full equality of provision and support’ for all learners in HE, which amounted to ‘seamless, equality-based provision of HE in Ireland, regardless of mode or duration of study’ that was to be arrived at by 2016 (HEA 2012a, p. 33). In addition, national and local targets for ‘part-time/flexible learning’ would be established as well as the development of improved and enhanced support services for part-time learners. Critically, ‘proposals’ would be developed to provide targeted financial support to under-represented students and the HEA funding model would enable ‘equal access funding’ to ‘support the entry and participation of all participating students in HE’ (HEA 2012a, p. 5). However, the lack of specific detail in relation to planning or funding to achieve these goals for part-time learning somewhat reduces the

transformative potential of the rhetoric leaving it deflated. In reality, additional funding was not forthcoming to support implementation of the recommendations. Rather it appears that existing initiatives and strategies, such as the national plan for equity of access (HEA 2012a) and the National Strategy for Education (DES 2011), would be optimised as a mechanism to fulfil the goals set out in the report. Also, by 2012 an alternative scheme had been introduced that could address some of the issues relating to part-time, the labour activation Springboard initiative offered a temporary solution to the complex issue of fees. This initiative targeted unemployed with free places on part-time HE programmes linked to the labour market. This short-term scheme increased the numbers of part-time students in HE.

The 2012 HEA report made use of ‘comprehensive data’ collected from the HEIs, coupled with CSO figures, and elements of the Eurostudent survey, to augment arguments for increased flexibility or to point up existing limitations in the provision of part-time. As with the earlier paper this report also treated part-time and flexible learning as interchangeable terms. It also assembled and rehearsed several aspects of the debate surrounding part-time provision in an Irish context, which included:

- Part-time as a feature of the national agenda for lifelong learning;
- Part-time students are predominantly mature;
- Part-timers are not a homogeneous group but a diverse mix of age groups;
- There are increased levels of part-time participation in the IoT sector;
- There are larger numbers of part-time courses at sub-degree levels 6 and 7;
- Part-time students are treated differently to students taking full-time courses;
- Part-time students do not have access to the same supports as their full-time equivalents;
- Part-time students must pay fees;
- Part-time students juggle responsibilities and can struggle to manage workload;
- Increased part-time and flexible learning opportunities can provide a skilled labour force; and
- ‘Springboard’ facilitated the achievement of targets pertaining to part-time in the short term.

In the context of the 2008 economic downturn, along with increased unemployment, coupled with the requirement to achieve the national agenda for lifelong learning, widening participation was presented as the engine to drive flexibility within HE. Increased participation through the expansion of part-time and flexible learning options was a goal to be achieved through a set of established strategies. Curiously, although part-time had been a feature of the national plan for equity of access for almost a decade, successive reports failed to indicate any major developments or the implementation of reforms in relation to part-time.

The part-time and flexible HE reports aimed to provide ‘an overview of national policy for part-time’, as well as ‘current participation in higher education’, which was combined with making a social and economic case for raising levels of education attainment (HEA 2012a, p. 7). Institutional practices, though reported on, were not examined consistently across the sector or in any great detail. Though this HEA document was dedicated to part-time and flexible HE, it does not represent an in-depth or detailed examination of policies, practices or student experiences. HEIs were encouraged to respond to the draft version of the report and some selected responses were included in the final version. There was no evidence of a theoretical framework informing policies outlined in the document. Though lifelong learning appears as the overarching concept, there was no examination of it, nor how it might apply to multiple educational providers, at a time of reform, economic challenge and fiscal constraint. Responses to the initial consultation report were extracted from selected respondents within HEIs, these were cross-referenced with data collated from existing sources. Feedback from students who applied for Springboard courses in 2011 featured intermittently, though student numbers participating in the scheme were excluded from the statistics presented (HEA 2012a). The evolving, but complex, relationship between further and HE sectors and employers and HE were not examined in any detail but noted in passing.

PARITY AND PART-TIMERS

The main barrier to increasing participation on a part-time basis and the most significant issue cited by survey respondents (HEA 2012a) was the failure to provide for parity in terms of the fees. Though the arguments for increased flexibility within HE are compelling, a significant roadblock exists in the form of fees and the absence of government subsidy or grants for part-time undergraduate or postgraduate students. This

disparity separates full-time students from part-time ones and most definitely so for undergraduates. Part-time students are not in receipt of a grant and are required to pay fees ‘and other costs associated with participation’ (Daly 2015). It appears both odd and contradictory that access to HE should be championed within the national strategy for access and equity and recognised as a route ‘for those from disadvantaged backgrounds’, as well as mature students and yet part-time students, mostly adults, are not eligible for free fees or a grant unlike full-time students (Daly 2015). Taking up the argument for legitimising the inequity of part-time students’ position, Mary Daly, who is the president of the Royal Irish Academy, noted that ‘financial pressures continue to be the biggest impediment for prospective part-time students in accessing higher education’ (2015). While acknowledging the significant developments underway in the Irish education system, this was an indicator of ‘an inflexible system’; furthermore, it appeared unfair (Daly 2015).

There are no simple or singular solutions on the horizon to address the fees issue. Since the advent of the economic downturn, which has become a feature of Irish economic existence since 2008, there were diversions in the form of a government-funded labour activation scheme; of particular attention was the Springboard initiative, which emerged following the banking collapse. The purpose of the targeted initiative was to provide unemployed people with opportunities to re-skill or up-skill through specific HE programmes in disciplines where there was potential for employment, such as: information and communications technology, international financial services, biopharma-pharmachem, food and beverage. Lately the emphasis has shifted towards encouraging self-employment and entrepreneurship as an outcome for programmes. Springboard has expanded since its introduction in 2009–10, to the extent that approximately 6,021 places were offered on courses in 2012–13 (HEA 2012a). By 2015, some 812 courses had been offered, with over 21,000 participants during that time frame and an expenditure of €85 million. Springboard programmes were offered at under-graduate and post-graduate levels mainly; it has been the IoTs, independent and private colleges that have provided the majority of courses. This short-term government-backed scheme has contributed significantly to achieving the goal of increased part-time participation. However, in the context of traditional undergraduate degree programmes and despite much in the way of rhetorical assertions, there has been very little expansion in participation rates.

Over a ten-year period (2004–2014), the number of part-time enrolments has declined from 23,815 to 21,062, with the ratios between the IoTs, the colleges and the universities remaining much the same, with the former being the predominate provider of programmes. It is useful to note that whereas the IoTs have seen a decline and then rise in enrolments, the universities have declined over this ten-year period. [Table 10.1](#) shows the relationship between the increase in full-time enrolments to part-time enrolments over the same period. Again, it shows that although the sector as a whole has continued to expand, part-time provision has remained relatively static.

Ultimately, the thorny issue of how to support and provide for increased part-time participation over the long term remains unresolved. Daly (2015) maintains that the costs involved in addressing the fees issue are not substantial and that in order to deliver on the idea of a ‘knowledge economy more must be done to expand the reach of higher education’. The National Plan for Equity of Access to HE (HEA 2008a, p. 45) claimed that the government planned to address the fees issue but only for approved courses, while the 2012 report highlighted fees and parity for part-time students as a key recommendation for future action. This refrain was also echoed in the subsequent 2015–2019 action plan, but left any detailed commentary to impeding final Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education report. Though new performance

Table 10.1 Full-time undergraduate enrolments in HEA-funded HEIs, 2013–2004

<i>Year</i>	<i>IoTs, full- time</i>	<i>Colleges, full- time</i>	<i>University, full-time</i>	<i>Total, full- time</i>	<i>Total Part-time, all sectors</i>	<i>Part-time as % of all enrolments</i>
2014–2015	65,164	8,621	77,515	151,300	21,062	12.2
2012–2013	62,376	8,077	72,265	142,718	21,130	12.9
2011–2012	61,183	8,011	72,032	141,226	20,616	12.7
2010–2011	60,119	8,814	71,146	139,092	19,355	12.2
2009–2010	56,893	7,709	69,247	133,849	19,097	12.5
2008–2009	51,892	7,218	65,880	124,990	20,456	14.1
2007–2008	49,334	7,358	63,079	119,798	21,013	14.9
2006–2007	51,322	6,798	61,241	120,926	8,506	–
2005–2006	51,517	6,662	60,172	119,361	21,970	15.7
2004–2005	50,424	4,325	60,975	115,724	23,815	17.1

Source: HEA (2016c).

metrics have been introduced by the HEA, there is no evidence to indicate specific actions being taken directly in relation to fees for part-time study.²

EXPANSION, REFORM AND PART-TIME PROVISION

However desirable the goal of increased participation, there are potential pitfalls for an expanding HE sector, particularly where part-time and flexible learning are viewed as the means to achieve that goal but without adequate research undertaken, additional resources offered or changes to funding mechanisms for HEIs made. The argument for expanding HE, making it more accessible particularly through extending part-time and flexible learning was established some time ago. When examining the potential of expansion, Tight (1991, p. 80) observed that ‘part-time provision remains the most pragmatic means of expanding access and for encouraging the shift from elite to mass higher education’. The debate moved on; by the time of the publication of the National Strategy for Higher Education (DES 2011) attention had shifted from accessibility to providing for the changing needs of the economy, maintaining competitiveness in a global environment and employability. Reform of the systems and structures of HE was required in conjunction with enhanced governance. HE was failing to respond adequately to the needs of adult and mature students through inflexible system; it was also noted that there was a ‘low level of part-time study opportunities’ (DES 2011, p. 46). Table 10.2 shows the different ISECD field of study in which part-time students are enrolled on in 2015. What this indicates is that provision of part-time programmes tends to be most extensive in the ‘business, administration and law’ (24 per cent), followed by ‘engineering, manufacturing and construction’ (17 per cent). For the former field of study, the majority of students (79 per cent) are enrolled in the IoT sector, as well as 94 per cent of those undertaking programmes in engineering. Apart from ‘education’, ‘social sciences’ and the ‘arts and humanities’ (traditional universities programmes), this unequal distribution of enrolments can be seen across the other fields. From this, we can infer that either students prefer the IoT sector over the universities or that the latter as a sector are not as well disposed to part-time provision. The noted lack of supply was based on the collation of data, which indicated when compared to full-time that part-time was lagging behind. This was not new information, as this gap in provision had been identified on several occasions in the past (DES 2000; HEA 2008a, 2009). The strategy document encouraged

Table 10.2 Part-time undergraduates by International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) field of study, gender and type of HEI, 2015

	Universities						Colleges						IoTs						Totals			Per cent of all
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T				
Field of Study (ISCED)	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T				
Education	115	412	527	5	84	89	34	187	221	154	683	837	4.0									
Services	135	37	172	-	-	-	841	379	1,220	976	416	1,392	6.6									
Generic programmes and qualifications	399	483	882	11	8	19	219	179	398	629	670	1,299	6.2									
Arts and humanities	378	790	1,168	74	194	268	385	532	917	837	1,516	2,353	11.2									
Social sciences, journalism and information	211	455	666	-	-	-	70	123	193	281	578	859	4.1									
Business, administration and law	443	616	1,059	-	20	20	1,861	2,185	4,046	2,304	2,821	5,125	24.3									
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	124	68	192	-	-	-	747	398	1,145	871	466	1,337	6.3									
Information and communications technologies	84	40	124	-	-	-	999	182	1,181	1,083	222	1,305	6.2									
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	181	72	253	-	10	10	2,933	443	3,376	3,114	525	3,639	17.3									
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	14	1	15	-	-	-	12	10	22	26	11	37	0.2									
Health and welfare	306	1,050	1,356	15	94	109	253	1,161	1,414	574	2,305	2,879	13.7									
Total	2,390	4,024	6,414	105	410	515	8,354	5,779	14,133	10,849	10,213	21,062										

Source: HEA (2016c).

increased participation for adults through part-time and flexible learning, although there was a lack of detail or specifics as to how this might be achieved in the absence of increased resources or funding.

Growing part-time provision as a way of making more effective use of resources and of increasing student numbers at marginal cost was viewed by Schuller et al. (1999) as a negative development. The downside of expanded provision through growth in part-time, flexible options continues to trouble researchers (Flannery and McGarr 2014), particularly where resources are limited, flexibility has been poorly conceptualised and sustainability is an issue. The negative implication of continued expansion resonated with teachers in HE. Anecdotal evidence suggested that the increased casualisation of the academic workforce could affect the quality of the learning experience. Coughlan (2015) set out to examine the growth in part-time staffing arrangements but found it difficult to secure accurate data from the HEA, as definitions of what constituted part-time was interpreted differently by individual HEIs.

A succession of public policy documents published in recent years prioritised reform of HE. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (DES 2011), which has guided policy, stated the intention was towards enhanced performance, accountability and governance, with consolidation and rationalisation of the sector. The growing consensus is that HE is undergoing a major 'structural reform' at a time of reduced public spending and increased demand. At a sectoral level, reform has been characterised by inter-institutional alliances, collaborations, regional partnerships and clusters (Walsh and Loxley 2015; Hazelkorn 2014; Clancy 2015a). The arrival of the national student survey (ISSE) has added some insight into student experience and increased the range of data available also it addressed performance interests across the sector (HEA 2015f). Nevertheless, continuous reforms are impacting on learning and teaching, as recent research by Donnelly and Harding (2015) indicated that market forces are shaping the design and sustainability of programmes within HEIs.

Key policy reports tend to rely heavily on data primarily collated through the HEA, Central Statistics Office (CSO), DES and Forfas (this advisory body was dismantled in 2014). The HEA has increased the level of statistical reporting; in contrast to previous decades they now track students within and across the system and have captured large amounts of data in relation to part-time and flexible learners. The statistics indicate that the number of students participating on a part-time basis at undergraduate level fell at the height of the economic downturn

but has recovered since 2008–2009, while in contrast, postgraduate part-time enrolments continued to climb during the same period (see [Tables 10.3](#) and [10.4](#)) and had a much higher ratio of full-time postgraduate enrolments than undergraduate programme. Clearly the incentive to ‘supply’ the postgraduate ‘market’, and especially so for the universities, is a more attractive proposition. The HEA statistics capture the overall student numbers and break these into broad disciplinary bands; however it does not provide analysis or detail on the duration of programmes, or identify gaps in disciplinary areas, that is, whether part-time or flexible programmes have been suspended or discontinued since the downturn. This information could only be obtained through research and analysis at institutional level (Donnelly and Harding 2015).

Part-time HE has struggled to assert its identity as a subject worthy of the interest to researchers; where it has been examined it has been the issues of status, equity and marginalisation that are foregrounded. Published research has tended to focus on informing policy by drawing attention to the fees issue, levels of participation, diversity and the implications of creeping neo-liberalism within HE. Little is known about the challenges part-time students experience in terms of managing workload, persistence, patterns of learning and progression within HE. Equally, there is limited research focusing on approaches to teaching and supporting part-time students. Regrettably empirical research on the subject of part-time HE remains in short supply. The consequence of this gap in research is that it ‘makes planning and policy difficult to formulate or interpret’ (Darmody and Fleming 2009, p. 67).

CONCLUSION

Part-time HE has been inadequately resourced, under-researched and marginalised in public policy and academic discourse. Though this has been described as ‘both surprising and regrettable’, it is nonetheless a feature of public policy for some time now (Daly 2015). Evidently HE policies have prioritised the needs of school leavers transitioning to HE and successive strategies have focused on growing students’ participation, including increased diversity within full-time mainstream. What emerged from public policy efforts in recent years has been an emphasis on increasing flexibility by means of expanding part-time and flexible learning. Such proposals and recommendations are packaged within the context of a national strategy for access, lifelong learning as well as linked to reform of HE. Considerable

Table 10.3 Part-time postgraduate enrolments within HEA-funded HEIs, 2013–2004

<i>Year</i>	<i>IoTs, part-time</i>	<i>Colleges, part-time</i>	<i>Universities, part-time</i>	<i>Total, part-time</i>	<i>Full-time enrolments</i>	<i>Part-time as% of all enrolments</i>
2014–2015	3,764	2,136	9,241	15,141	21,294	41.6
2012–2013	2,975	1,745	9,331	14,051	21,566	39.5
2011–2012	2,636	1,806	8,343	12,785	20,955	37.9
2010–2011	2,610	2,101	8,149	12,860	21,880	37.0
2009–2010	2,529	–	10,272 ^a	12,801	22,419	36.3
2008–2009	2,104	–	9,138 ^a	11,242	20,700	35.2
2007–2008	2,471	–	8,502 ^a	10,973	18,807	36.8
2006–2007	1,565	–	7,950 ^a	9,515	17,789	34.8
2005–2006	1,316	–	7,573 ^a	8,889	17,013	34.3
2004–2005	982	–	6,977 ^a	7,959	16,574	32.4

^aIncludes college enrolments.

Source: HEA (2016c).

reform has been undertaken in Irish HE over several decades, yet it appears that free fees for part-time students continues to elude. The agenda of reform for HE champions increased flexible and part-time learning but in the absence of additional expenditure or government action on fees, it is likely that programmes will continue to be self-financing.

The lack of parity regarding part-time student fees was identified consistently in policy documents and in the discourse, but it has been ignored by successive governments. The Springboard initiative has provided a diversion by offering a substantial increase in places on HE programmes free to part-time students. This temporary scheme serves to illustrate a demand for part-time HE albeit for students who are eligible and where programmes are linked to labour market needs. Sustainability and quality of HE are recurring themes for researchers, providers and policy makers at a global and local level. Part-time straddles conceptual and theoretical frames, belonging within national strategies for lifelong learning and access; it is also coupled with flexibility, change and expansion of HE. Part-time can be a means to include mature students as well as offering up-skilling and re-skilling opportunities contingent on changing economic factors. The degree to which these aspects are competing, conflicting or complementary depends on the formation and focus of education policy. As part-timers are not a homogenous group but made up of a diverse range of ages and social

Table 10.4 Part-time undergraduate enrolments within HEA-funded HEIs, 2013–2004

<i>Year</i>	<i>IoTs</i>	<i>Colleges</i>	<i>Universities</i>	<i>Total</i>
2014–2015	14,133	515	6,414	21,062
2012–2013	12,891	736	7,503	21,130
2011–2012	12,414	778	7,424	20,616
2010–2011	12,885	704	5,766	19,355
2009–2010	12,921	605	5,494	19,097
2008–2009	12,921	694	6,838	20,456
2007–2008	12,997	367	7,649	21,013
2006–2007	^a	261	8,245	8,506 ^b
2005–2006	13,228	317	8,425	21,970
2004–2005	14,088	258	9,469	23,815

^aNo data available for this year.

^bExcludes the IoTs.

Source: HEA (2016c)

backgrounds, those who are first timers and those who have qualifications their participation in HE may be restricted. Though often ill-defined, part-time has been interpreted loosely; it has adjusted to changing circumstances over time, being previously associated with participation on night-time courses as well as sub-degree programmes with limited progression routes. Its renewed association with reform and expansion presents HE with significant challenges as well as opportunities.

NOTES

1. According to the HEA, of the 1,600 new entrants into part-time programmes, mature students comprise 88 percent or 1,412 of this cohort (derived from 2011 HEA data). See [Chap. 3](#) for a detailed discussion of HEA targets and equity groups.
2. Unlike full-time undergraduate fees, information on part-time fees is somewhat difficult to find on HEI websites. However as a rough guide, they seem to be contingent upon the type of programme (the sciences attract a higher rate than non-sciences); but this is not out of line with the EU fee for full-time programmes. For example in 2015, Dublin Institute of Technology charged €2,330 per year for their part-time B.A. (Hons.) in Business Studies, the full-time equivalent is €3,819; for B.Sc. in Maths the part-time fee was €1,750 per year. In Dublin City University, the part-time fee

for their Bachelor of Nursing/Community Studies is €5,850 per year and their B.Sc. in Education and Training is €4,190. In University College Dublin, the annual part-time fees range from €1,750 for B.Sc. in Rural Science to €4,370 for a B.Sc. in Veterinary Nursing.

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Introduction: Teaching, Learning and Retention

In Part III, we move beyond the macro historical policy analysis and study of how access for non-traditional learners is played out in the context of Ireland and its HE system. We also move beyond the story of individual groups of non-traditional students – women, working class, disability, part-time and mature – where a considerable amount is known at least quantitatively about these target groups. In this part, we consider important aspects of the widening participation and access story, which are often left aside. It would be an incomplete narrative if we only looked at the entry routes into HE and how a range of factors (whether, as stated earlier, they are barriers or resources) that impact on the journey towards a more inclusive system. Pedagogy ([Chap. 11](#)) and Retention ([Chap. 12](#)) are our main concerns now.

Further, in this section, we want to return to some of the normative and political concerns named in the first part of the book in more detail. The following chapters – such as [Chaps. 2–10](#) – will review the relevant literature and research but we also want to link the empirical and methodological issues to a critical vision of what might be possible. Underpinning the review of history, policy and research throughout the book have been the egalitarian commitment to “identify the ways in which existing social institutions and social structures impose harms on people” (Wright 2010, p. 11). But meaningful critique calls for something else – an openness to imagining alternatives. Barnett (2013) in which he makes a compelling and persuasive case for exercising our imaginations in a bolder and more sustained fashion in thinking

about education to “leap beyond the familiar” (2013, p. 15). It is only through a *future orientated debate* in which we discuss the adequacy, scope and depth of various proposals that we can really begin “to develop a coherent and credible theory of alternatives to existing institutions and social structures” (Wright 2010, p. 20; see also Finnegan 2016b).

In the following chapters, we link with or comment on one such proposal: a “thick” version of democracy *requires* innovative and participatory forms of education (Dewey 1966). A learning society is above all a problem posing society, which knows how to organise and encourage highly reflexive learning. Democracy – based on full participation and meaningful deliberation – has to be learnt and relearnt, practiced and questioned, tested and redefined on a variety of different scales and settings including, and perhaps especially, in third level education. This general emancipatory and democratic interest is explored in relation to concrete and specific institutional questions about teaching, learning and retention.

In [Chap. 11](#), we introduce an important and new “character” in the story of widening participation and access. This character appears in the everyday space of classrooms and lecture halls, at the coal-face of the learning experience of students and the teaching experience of staff. Pedagogy is this character’s name. This part of the narrative is as rich and complex and multi-layered as the story we have been telling so far. It revolves around the dialectical relationships between the institution, the teaching staff and the students mediated by curricula and policy directives. We outline how teaching and learning have been approached in policy and discuss empirical research on the pedagogical needs of non-traditional students. We argue that non-traditional university requires non-traditional approaches to pedagogy, which is of relevance to students of all backgrounds.

[Chapter 12](#) is about the retention of those who access third level education. Why do so many stay, or persist? What factors impact on whether they stay or leave early? What personal and institutional factors impact on the retention aspect of the access story? The chapter on retention will also emphasise how the term retention itself is in transition and many current policy initiatives name the issue as “success”. Retention and success as terms may point to different aspects of the experience of students in HE. The former alerts us to the institutional priorities and the latter is more in tune with student concerns. But in time too, “success” will become problematic, if it is not so already. Some who leave early, in spite of having a dream of going to college, actually experience the process

of leaving as a positive decision – for now. They may return later when financial and other concerns are more easily managed. In this chapter, we offer a broad overview of how retention/success is understood internationally, how it has been taken up in Ireland and how retention is related to access and equality.

These two final chapters point in a particular way to the incompleteness of the widening participation and access story as they indicate that the story commenced with good intentions, some considerable success and some problems; but it is an unfolding narrative. The full understanding, if this is ever achieved, requires the continued researching of the issues raised here and in particular the listening to student voices and experiences that contribute not just colour and human interest to the narrative but an essential counter balance to the dominance of human capital and knowledge-based economy perspectives.

Learning and Teaching and Non-traditional Students in Higher Education

Andrew Loxley, Ted Fleming, and Fergal Finnegan

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the domains of teaching and learning (T&L) in relation to non-traditional students in two main ways. Firstly, we outline some of the major structural and institutional changes that have been occurring across HE generally. Secondly, we consider the nature of pedagogical encounters and practices and more specifically, how these might be re-constructed in a way that supports access and widening participation in a theoretically and critically informed manner. Like other aspects of the ‘non-traditional’ story we have discussed so far, empirical research concerning either pedagogical practice (from the perspective of lecturers) or the experience of students is limited and seems to cover either matures and students with disabilities only (see Jennings 2005; Hanafin et al. 2007; Berry 2011; Moran 2015; Donnelly 2007; Munro and McMullin 2008; Evans et al. 2007; Evans 2014; Nolan et al. 2014; Kearney & O’Leary 2011; Kubiak 2015) More generally, the research work that has been done on T&L in Irish HE has largely treated students in a fairly undifferentiated manner as far as the equity groups are concerned. This work (and there has been a lot of it undertaken) has tended to focus on knowledge and disciplinary domains and/or pedagogical or curricula techniques or the functional dimensions of T&L—this we will come back to later. Research done with equity groups has mostly, but not exclusively, focused on the socio-cultural experience of being in HE,

rather than one that explores the pedagogical dimensions of this experience in much detail (Keane 2011; Doyle et al., 2013; Fleming and Finnegan 2011; Mc Guckin et al. 2013; Giblin 2015; RANLHE 2010; Loxley and Kearns 2012; Darmody and Fleming 2009; O'Brien et al. 2009; Farrelly 2010; see also Eurostudent surveys). Much of this work is highly insightful and informative, but it paradoxically, while advocating the need for inclusivity, does not really speak to (or even of) different 'types' of student in relation to pedagogical and curricula experiences.

This, we would argue, is another gap in policy and research that needs scrutinising and this should be linked to an immanent critique of current practice. We have in much of this text, been critical of the way in which HE has become 'colonised' by and through an economic logic. This is easy to see in the changes in management practices, the desire to create partnerships with industrial and commercial sectors and the posturing vis-à-vis Key Performance Indicators and the near-endless declarations of 'excellence'. We think this is also affecting the contours of T&L in profound ways. *How* this culture works its way into the fissures of T&L and normalises such values should be of great importance to academics uncomfortable with this creeping myiasis. T&L can offer critical experiential and 'existential moments' (cognitive, social and cultural) for students (and hopefully academics as well). It is through the emergent, incremental and cumulative engagement in and through the micro-rituals of T&L that the purpose and role of HE becomes instantiated as well as continually reconstituted. However, it is also a dialectal process; students are knowing subjects, as they bring with them experience and knowledge and a cluster of intentions and motivations, which are woven into their curricular experiences. As is well rehearsed in the literature, curriculum and pedagogy represent an ideological intervention into the lives of those who not only work with it as practitioners but also those who are 'worked' by it (Freire 1970; Giroux 1981, 2004; McLaren 1986; Hooks 1994; Fleming 2014). As Berger and Luckmann (1966) would characterise it, curricula and associated pedagogical activities within HE form a semantic field, in which students come to understand, as well as act in the world. The formation of different and differentiated subjectivities is part of the way in which pedagogical knowledge/power as a mode of practice operates (consider the role of assessment regimes, programme choice and HEI affiliation in this context).

The liminal and informal learning spaces outside the lecture theatre, tutorial and seminar rooms are equally part of this process (see Nespor

1994). One of the key features of HE is that it is a fluid and indeterminate space in which significant transitions often occur (Barnett 2007). It is capable of generating critical transformative self and group identities, as well as reinforcing and reproducing long-held patterns of cognition and behaviour. From what we know of students' experience (and particularly mature students and other non-traditional students), these questions of how T&L shapes notions of self, agency and volition are key dimensions of their engagement, whether positive or negative, in HE communities (see RANLHE 2010).

STUDENT SURVEYS, ACADEMIC DEVELOPERS AND BUREAUCRATS: REDEFINING INSTITUTIONAL CULTURES, STRUCTURES AND CONTEXTS

Not dissimilar to the flurry of activity around access policy and related initiatives, which we discussed in Chap. 3, the issue of T&L was also added to the 'mix' during the same time period. Not unsurprisingly the same 'drivers', massification, human capital intensification, post-industrialisation and the implementation of a social inclusion agenda also affected the way T&L is described in policy. However, behind this part of the tale lurked a moral panic over the quality and appropriateness of T&L in HEIs to meet (as the cliché runs), the challenges of the twenty-first century. As part of this panic, much grinding and gnashing of teeth could be heard regarding the need for greater use of information and communications technology (ICT) in T&L, the requirement to embed generic and transferable skills in all facets of undergraduate and post-graduate curriculum design and lastly (and somewhat tellingly), there were the policymakers and HEI management fetish around the inculcation of 'entrepreneurialism' as a highly desirable personality trait. This is of course part of 'the restoration narrative' we discussed in Part I.¹ In the wake of the economic recession post 2008, HE has been placed centre stage as a vehicle for economic renewal and not just in the brute production of knowledge as per the demands of a knowledge based economy, but the concomitant socialisation of students into being carriers of entrepreneurial values and dispositions (Loxley 2014). While we would argue this attention to T&L was long overdue, it nonetheless has a particular underlying logic to it which draws us back to the process of individualisation in society and the pervasive influence

of human capital theory in the way skills are understood and accreditation is used.

Two Out of Ten for Effort: Could Do Better—Hunt and T&L

Entwined within the effects of these larger ‘forces’, the T&L field (in borrowing from Bourdieu) has been reshaped into four distinctive, yet interconnected dimensions. First, there is the changing and changed nature of academic work, which has for the past two decades been well documented both nationally and internationally (see Benchly et al. 2013; Clarke et al. 2015; Lynch et al. 2012; Loxley 2014; Fumasoli et al. 2015; Teichler and Hölhe 2013; QQI 2016). Second, an attempt at the re-professionalisation of the academic *teaching* role via some form of accreditation to signify credibility—seen for a long time to be a major impediment to quality. The most visible markers are obviously the certificates, diplomas and masters in T&L offered by HEIs to their academic staff. Additionally, we can also add to this the Irish National Forum for T&L’s plan for a national framework for continuing professional development (NFETL 2015a), which can be seen as an attempt to construct a ‘metanarrative’ around the content and trajectory of HE pedagogy. Third, the colonisation, and to a certain extent the centralisation, of practice by academic development units as to what constitutes appropriate modes of T&L. Last, the bureaucratisation of T&L through a myriad of institutional and supra-institutional quality control and assurance instruments and processes.

This bricolage of elements is captured in the Hunt Report’s (DES 2011) bombastic declaration that:

[all students] must have access to teaching that has been kept up to date and relevant through scholarship, research and professional development. Academic staff should make full use of the range of pedagogical methodologies available to them and be qualified as teachers as well as in their chosen discipline. All research and scholarship in higher education institutions should enhance the quality of undergraduate and postgraduate teaching. (DES 2011, p. 13)

As a statement, it marks a significant shift in the state’s orientation towards academic teaching; though not necessarily content as this falls under the remit of academic freedom as per the University and IoT Acts.² This notwithstanding, Hunt’s assertion represents a considerable

intervention by the state into what was previously seen as discretionary and autonomous professional space. It also works on the presumption (and the report put forward no evidence to support its position) that the quality of T&L is poor, which also necessitates intervention by the state. If anything, the evidence generated by the Eurostudent surveys and of the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE)—which was initiated in 2014—indicates a reasonable degree of satisfaction by students (see ISSE 2015).

As one of the Hunt Report's 'big ideas' when it came to addressing the issue of student evaluations of T&L, the ISSE represented one of two approaches. The first was predicated on some mode of internal surveillance, in that 'higher education institutions should put in place systems to capture feedback from students, and use this feedback to inform institutional and programme management, as well as national policy' (p. 63).³ The second, was the national student survey. The ISSE follows international trends in this regard and does not represent anything new; indeed it shares its 'DNA' with instruments used in the United States, UK, New Zealand and Australia (ISSE 2015).⁴ This appears to be a deliberate strategy in order to generate data by which to 'benchmark' Irish practice with other systems that also use the same tool. As well as embroiling itself in the obvious methodological quagmire regarding cultural and contextual comparability, benchmarking also signals an attempt to homogenise and normalise the student 'experience'; nationally as well as internationally. The six so-called engagement indices and five outcome indices are self-evidently what the designers consider to be the optimal forms of T&L, which *should* be happening in HEIs and will, undoubtedly, like all auditing procedures rapidly move from description into prescription (Power 1999).⁵ Despite the ISSE's warm and inclusive language around the need to create supportive learning environments (2015, p. 6), there is at the centre of this policy tool, a strident and managerialist instrumentalism that slips out in the following statement:

The survey seeks to collect information on how students engage with their learning environments. The results of the survey are intended to add value at institutional level, primarily by enabling institutional leaders to consider the experiences of different groups of students within that institution and by demonstrating to students that their feedback is being heard and acted upon (ISSE 2015, p. 8).

However, whether the ISSE represents a form of mass partnership or mass surveillance (or a bit of both) we will have to wait and see how it will get woven into institutional life.⁶ But whatever the aspirations might be, the ISSE as a tool reinforces and is indicative of what we described in Chap. 5 as the lack of sociological imagination in how students are invited to reflect on and share their experiences within a ‘space’ of mutual respect and recognition. The numbers are useful, but in essence what the ISSE has done is potentially create a fetter upon which practice is built around and assessed. As so-called institutional leaders become skittish around the (market) disciplinary affects of the ISSE (and other such tools), it imposes nationally, upon all HEIs a particular ‘vision’ of what the student experience should be, and potentially shuts out any alternatives. In particular, ISSE strengthens the orientation towards ‘employability’ within the indices, but also captures a zeitgeist around ‘active learning’ and ‘higher order thinking’. Though if we were to be critical, these too can be seen as traits deemed desirable by employers rather than students (see EGFSN 2015). We shall return to this in more detail later.

Attending to Pedagogical Hygiene: Enter the Academic Developers

Along with the advent of massification in the mid-1990s, Irish HE saw the emergence of the academic developers and academic development units. The well-meaning but ramshackle and idiosyncratic pedagogy, which allegedly characterised the pre-1990s system that on the whole resembled a ‘Butlins for the bourgeoisie’ (Loxley and Kearns 2012) was no longer fit for purpose and in need of reform. However, for this to happen, a new set of discursive practices needed to be introduced to show up the errors of the ‘old ways’ and persuade academics to attend to their pedagogical practice. Boyer’s (1990) oft-cited call for a ‘scholarship of teaching and learning’ was a rallying cry to those in HE who long argued that the prioritising of research was detrimental to the other core mission of HEIs; that of teaching. The dominance of research, in particular within the universities, was undermining the quality and attention that should be paid to teaching and learning (Boyer 1990; Brew 2010; Brew and Jewell 2012; Brew and Cahir 2014; Healy and Jenkins 2004). Also linked to this have been a cognate set of debates around, for example, ‘signature pedagogies’ (Schulman 2005a, b) and ‘threshold concepts’ (Meyer et al. 2010), which have also begun to redefine the T&L discursive landscape. Shifting it away from arcane notions of ‘transmission’ and onto more sophisticated

models of pedagogy, which draw on theories of learning that have been largely, though not exclusively, developed by psychologists (see, for example, Wearing and Evans 2013). The lack of space precludes offering a detailed genealogy of academic development work in Ireland, but what is important to note is that it has been given a much more prominent place in HE since the mid-2000s—though it has been around in Australia and the United States since the 1960s and in United Kingdom since the 1970s (Moses 1987).

Mainly under the auspices of the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) (see Chap. 3), a number of high-profile T&L projects were established.⁷ The National Association for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (NAIRTL) was set up in 2005, which had as its focus the development and dissemination of ‘best practice’ at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels; it also saw itself as a forum for critiquing and informing policy in relation to ‘student experience’. This also needs to be seen along with the 2007 Learning Innovation Network (also a progeny of the SIF), which works with the IoT sector. Unfortunately, NAIRTL’s existence was short-lived, becoming a victim of the cut in SIF money in 2010. Nonetheless during its brief lifespan, NAIRTL, through its annual conference, varied publications and workshops did begin to raise awareness of the role of not just academic development, but pedagogic practice more generally (see O’Sullivan et al. 2015, p. 23). However, this ground work was not be wasted, as from out of the Hunt Report came the National Forum for Teaching and Learning (NFTL), which was launched in 2013. It is probably worth noting that the 2011 HEA consultation document concerning the establishment of the ‘The National Academy for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education’ remarked that ‘€33.5 million since 2000 has been invested in teaching and learning’. It is useful to note that over roughly the same period (1998–2013), €1.4 billion was spent on the state-funded Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions; we shall leave the reader to draw their own conclusions. As argued by the HEA:

It is [our] intention to establish a National Academy in early 2012 with the key objective of building on the investments and the achievements of the recent past in order to support the continued enhancement of quality in teaching and learning in Irish higher education (HEA 2011a, p. 2)

From out of this modest proposal, the NFETL was launched in 2013 encompassing state-supported and non-state supported institutions. Modelling

itself on the UK's Higher Education Academy, the Forum's range of activities as well as its intended reach is ambitious. The Forum's self-styled 'work-plan' is arranged around five activities (Professional Development, Building Digital Capacity, Scholarship in T&L, Partnership and Collaboration, and Learning Impact Awards) centred on 'Enhancing Teaching and Learning'. The latter has been given over to specific themes: 'Teaching for Transitions' in 2013–2015 and 'Assessment' in 2016–2018. Interestingly, there is also a strong emphasis on pedagogical performance with their 'teaching hero' and 'teaching expertise' under the Learning Impact Award. This array of T&L domains (which decompose down into a further twelve sub-themes) is also reflected in the Forum's attempt to promote research via its funding of projects and individual scholarships and provide a repository of resources for passing and/or interested academics.⁸ There has also been, since the NFETL's inception, an annual 'national summit' and 'national seminar series' intended to map onto the Forum's biennial themes. These have ranged from curricula design, transitions, pedagogy, the first year experience, academic writing and assessment.

In terms of appraising the NFETL's impact either nationally or locally, it is too early to make any assessment as they do not appear to have built into their extensive work plan any capacity for self-evaluation. Nor does there appear, at the time of writing, any intention on the part of the HEA to review the forum in the same way as other policy initiatives. We await the international panel of experts. As well as the NFETL, we should also be mindful of the academic development units or centres who do much of the implementation work within their own HEIs. Again, space precludes a detailed discussion of this work, but suffice to say their role has been influential in promoting engagement in the scholarship of T&L.⁹ Politically as well as culturally, they occupy an unusual space within HE—the literature for academic developers is replete with articles attesting to an on-going status anxiety over their role and position. As part of this process of re-professionalisation, the NFETL as part of their attempt to design a national Professional Development (PD) framework for academics, undertook reviews of both accredited professional development programmes (certificates, diplomas or masters) and non-accredited activities. In the case of the former, the authors reported that there are some sixty-eight courses offered in twenty-eight institutions (NFETL 2015b). In terms of ECTS 'points', thirty-nine programmes were rated as between 5–10 and fourteen were rated as between 90–120 or masters level.¹⁰ As well as mapping

activities, the authors also asked their participants about ‘motivation’ (in this case a ‘designated contact’ in each HEI), some of whom intimated rather worryingly that ‘for new staff, attending programmes and obtaining credits were mandatory in some institutions not only for obtaining promotion but also to maintain their post on a permanent basis’ (NFETL 2015b, p. 6). The review of non-accredited PD undertaken with the help of ‘learning development officers’ (NFETL 2015c) unsurprisingly offers a more expansive array of activities ranging from ‘Brown Bag Lunches: lunch-time seminars’, ‘themed workshops’, ‘summer schools’ and ‘peer observation and feedback’ (p. 5).¹¹ The conclusions drawn by the authors were quite varied but essentially came down in support of this mode of PD; however, they argued that it needed to be much better integrated into HEI PD structures more generally, as well as institutional strategic planning and be recognised as a valid pathway for academics. However, one finding which is worth highlighting is the reported decline in staff participation in structured activities due to the ‘current climate in higher education’ (p. 25).

The Rubbery Cages of Bureaucracy

Finally, massification has also brought with it an institutional propensity to create an intricate array of post-Fordist and neo-Taylorist structures and systems not only to accommodate the increase in students but also to re-orientate themselves towards its new role as the fountainhead of social mobility, social coherence, economic wellbeing and human capital development *par excellence*. To paraphrase Marx, teachers may teach what they want but they do not do so as they please ‘but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past’; well mostly. In the Irish context, the progenitor of this new curriculum and assessment architecture as well as the overt systematisation of T&L is the 1999 Bologna (European Ministers of Education 1999) agreement to harmonise the structures of undergraduate and postgraduate (masters and doctorate) degree provision across the European Union, European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area to promote mobility of students and graduates, as well as to allow for the comparability of awards.¹² This brought into the Irish system a new discourse and associated practices around for instance ‘modularisation’, ‘semesterisation’, ‘diploma supplements’ and the use of ‘learning outcomes’ to fit the requirements of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Alongside the Bolognaisation of the system there was also,

at the national level, the development by the (now defunct since 2012) National Qualifications Authority of Ireland of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Launched in 2003, the NFQ is comprised of 10 levels of descriptors ranging from level 1, which would encompass basic literacy and numeracy, to level 10, which covers the criteria for doctoral work. Although the universities and most of the IoTs have award-granting powers, all programmes are required to be plotted onto the NFQ.¹³ Alongside this process of programme and curriculum design that has to map onto Bologna and the NFQ, there are also the quality assurance (QA) mechanisms and procedures. The function of these according to the European Standards Guidelines (of which Ireland is a signatory) is to promote ‘accountability [and] enhancement . . . to create trust in the HE institution’s performance’ (ESG 2015). This aspect of Irish HE is worth a chapter in its own right, but in brief, HEIs are legally responsible for their own QA as delegated to them by the 2012 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act. In turn, their procedures are open to periodic review by the Quality Qualifications Ireland (QQI; QQI 2016), which was a role previously undertaken in the universities by the Irish Universities Quality Review Board and the Higher Education Training and Awards Council in the IoTs and colleges (state and non-state supported). This responsibility for QA is also built into Universities Act (1997)—see Section 35—though not the IoT Act (2006). Reviews are undertaken by panels of ‘experts’ and are publicly available on the QQI website; they make for interesting reading in relation to evaluations made of institutional practices.¹⁴ In addition to the institutional reviews, there are also within the universities, periodic school or departmental reviews undertaken by external panels, which again link into an individual’s HEI’s QA procedures. This review process also ‘drops down’ to the individual programme level, whereby external examiners are appointed to provide QA for either new or on-going programmes. Added to these statutory obligations, there are also the professional accreditation bodies such as the Teaching Council of Ireland, the Nursing and Midwifery Board, Engineers Ireland, Irish Medical Council all of whom have a significant affect on T&L practices and requirements. This very brief sweep of the regulatory context, gives us a sense that academics (as well students) work in a labyrinthine network of obligations and commitments that are articulated as well supervised by clusters of exogenous and endogenous agencies. It also reinforces the notion that autonomy in T&L is variable, contingent and highly contextualised.

SPACES, RESOURCES AND RELATIONS IN PEDAGOGICAL ENCOUNTERS

T&L in HE is far from a romanticised autonomous activity; rather it is subject to a wide range of forces, which give it its particular shape and form. Teaching and learning are, as we have seen, being remoulded by neoliberal managerial policy reform. Of course, it is also affected by the availability of resources, institutional cultures, disciplinary training, conceptions of education, sensitivity to student diversity and pedagogical awareness. Following the discussion of student experience in [Chaps. 6 and 8](#), we can also say that widening participation in a meaningful fashion in the future entails a rethinking of T&L alongside the development of new lines of research and changes in governance and policy. In the latter part of this chapter we want to begin to map out some of the contours of what this might entail based on empirical research and recent development in critical pedagogy.

Before we do so let us pause and consider what has already been achieved. Lecturing staff have contributed hugely to dealing with a fast changing student cohort with few additional resources and often with less, due to austerity budgets. Research on working conditions indicates that many HE staff now have increased workloads and face greater precariousness. Pedagogy is also been affected by decrease in staff and rapidly worsening student/educator ratios ([Courtois and O’Keefe 2015](#); [Clarke et al. 2015](#)). As a consequence, Irish HEIs have been falling in international university rankings. But more to the point this of course has a detrimental effect on staff and students. As noted in [Chap. 6](#) though, HE frequently has major significance in the lives of non-traditional students as something unforeseen, historically unavailable and therefore much valued. Many of these students come to HE with high expectations and a passion for learning but also memories of dissatisfying and even awful prior experiences in compulsory education. Responding to this particular cluster of hopes and fears takes pedagogical tact, time and space and in highly bureaucratic, marketised and creaking HE system these things are often in short supply.

Research conducted with both non-traditional students and teaching staff has explored the question of T&L in relation to non-traditional students in some detail ([RANLHE 2010](#); [Fleming & Finnegan 2011](#)). This research strongly suggests that individual lecturers’ attitudes and behaviour can make a significant difference to their studies; and while the actions of individual lecturers can make a considerable difference to how students see themselves and their studies at any stage of their course, first year students

particularly benefit from such personal contact. Informally, being able to approach and speak to lecturers really matters to many students. More formally, student progression can be supported by prompt and effective feedback on performance. Such support is increasingly difficult to provide in a mass system that is seeking more cost effective ways of teaching.

The research also indicates that there are high levels of loyalty and commitment among staff to their institutions and most, but by no means all, are very supportive of non-traditional students, widening participation and access. For a number of professional reasons, staff are anxious to see students progress through their courses. According to the students we spoke with, it is quite rare to encounter staff have attitudes to students that are dismissive or completely thoughtless.

But while HEIs are rhetorically and organisationally orientated towards retaining students, this is not always reflected in systems of evaluation or most significantly in pedagogy. Needless to say the institutional culture remains a crucial aspect of the learning environment. It not only influences the experience of students but it also affects the teachers, and the rituals and traditions of staff, and their self-image as educators, which are an important part of that milieu. There is a strong tendency for staff, in describing their work as teachers, to foreground the criteria of their own individual disciplines and career interests. Understandable as this might be, belief in the self-evident value of a discipline, and therefore its absolute priority in pedagogical matters, can mean that the relational and contextual aspects of pedagogy are undervalued. This can be very corrosive when it is combined with a deficit model of non-traditional students. It appears that staff with a background in the applied so-called soft sciences (which have a broader political interest in equality) are less likely to approach non-traditional students in this way.

THE BURDEN OF RECOGNITION IN PEDAGOGY

Students' learning biographies and the forces that shape them such as class and gender, need to be acknowledged, understood and properly contextualised within HE. In practical terms this requires pedagogy and curricula that speak directly to the diverse social and life experiences and needs of non-traditional students. This requires, to paraphrase Marx, that the educator is educated by their students about their lifeworlds and their expectations time and space is a necessity if learning relationships based

on dialogue are to develop and flourish. The schedules of both staff and students and the dependence on large-scale teaching methods (i.e., large lectures) make such interactions quite unlikely although not entirely impossible. Learner identity is profoundly relational and contextual, mastering codified academic knowledge is tricky and time consuming and deep learning is often personally challenging. But large-scale ‘transmission’ of knowledge ignores these dimensions of learning.

The limits of the ‘knowledge factory’ approach are encountered by all students. But our research suggests that many non-traditional students do enter HE with concerns about belonging and capability. This is part of the reason why recognition by peers and university staff in the early stages of study or a course is so crucial. Many non-traditional students are looking for signs that they do or do not fit in at this point. Clear and comprehensive feedback as early as possible about the nature and form of academic knowledge is important as well as approachable teaching staff. These students also spoke of the importance of peer learning and in poorly resourced HEIs where disciplinary knowledge is more prized than pedagogical nous and measurable outcomes are the order of the day, this is precisely the aspect of good pedagogy that often gets lost.

TOWARDS A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION

Much of the material on teaching and learning is clearly from the supply side of the HE institutions where little or no importance is given to what is the demand side or the ‘experiential moment’ mentioned earlier in this chapter. When students’ voices are listened to rather than surveyed, the students have a great deal to say about their experiences of teaching and learning. When students give an account of their experiences they talk in very positive terms and appreciate the teachers they encounter, especially those who teach with great care, in a clear and well-prepared manner and who take time to engage with them and answer their questions. This is frequently in contrast to their experiences at school where even younger mature students still speak of school as a cruel place! A surprising element of the student experience is the frequency with which they speak about particular teachers (though only a very few in number) who were not helpful. Too many can name the single careless, thoughtless one whose language or attitude was to close questions and cut off encounters about academic matters. Their slights are experienced in a way that is out of proportion to the intent but nevertheless of significance. When we keep in

mind that these are non-traditional students, their experiences highlight an element of educational habitus that continues to be difficult for them to navigate and for institutions (and their PD programmes) to negotiate. It also highlights the vulnerabilities that exist alongside an otherwise resilient student body. Better teaching is also good for retention.

In engaging in a critique of T&L in HE it is also important to at least suggest an agenda for teaching that goes beyond the functional, instrumental and problem-solving methodologies (e.g., critical skills, small group teaching, writing workshops, presentation skills and giving feedback) so encouraged in the T&L programmes. Frequently, the only reference to a teaching or educational philosophy is that it is student centred, without giving any sense about whether or how this is understood. The desertion of any philosophy of education and the amnesia shown towards any theoretical underpinning of pedagogy in this provision means that T&L are not tied into any philosopher that might be considered among the best educators—Dewey, Freire, Mezirow. The link with strong and credible educators about the nature and purposes of education is sadly missing. This leaves the entire field open to approaching education as if it were a domain of common sense and of applied techniques and reduced to a identifiable and delimited set of effective processes or skills (Biesta 2010).

In proposing an educational philosophy in an earlier chapter, it was suggested that in analysing the ‘story behind the story’ of widening participation, a number of allies would be referred to. It is an opportune moment to return to two of these allies and identify possible implications of having such a set of ideas that go beyond the functional and technical—in fact that critique and raise questions about what is taken for granted in the dominant model of staff development (Fleming 2014). Our allies in this moment are the well-known critical theorist Axel Honneth (1949–) and the adult educator Jack Mezirow (1923–2014).

In order to engage in the critical discourses associated with transformative learning, we now assert that the formation of democratic discussions requires three forms of self-relating. We need caring and respectful teachers. It requires recognition of the reciprocal nature of legal rights. A democratic discursive society, a model learning group or university seminar requires the reciprocal recognition provided by work and solidarity. This ‘recognition turn’ of Honneth (in addition to the communicative turn of Jürgen Habermas), suggests strongly that the high rationality of the critique required by disciplines in HE and in adult

education are ‘softened’ by this understanding of the interpersonal recognition that underpins the democratic discourses of a learning environment. Teaching might usefully address the students’ struggles for recognition as motivations for learning. Without altering the importance of critical reflection for adult learning there is now the understanding that rational discourse is based on an interpersonal process of support and recognition that builds self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. Mezirow (and Habermas) see democratic participation as an important means of self-development that produces individuals who are more tolerant of difference, sensitive to reciprocity and better able to engage in discourse (Mezirow 2003, p. 60). It is important not to sink into a sentimental subjectivity here but build on this understanding; this is a precondition for rational discourse without losing rigour or the ambition to remain within the emancipatory agenda of critical theory (Fleming 2016).

The emphasis on whether learning is individual or social can be re-configured similar to the way Freire reconfigured the dualisms of subject/object, teacher/learner, best expressed in his concept of praxis (1970, p. 75). The individualism of much learning can be reframed as a fundamentally intersubjective process based on mutual respect and recognition. These relations of mutuality are preconditions for self-realisation and critical reflection and indeed democracy. Recognition and emancipation are connected; recognition becomes the foundation on which emancipatory learning and social change are based. This implies that learning in the lecture halls and seminar rooms of universities is best supported by interactions that are not only respectful but that explicitly recognise the individual worth of each individual along with the aspirations and dreams that prompt their struggle for recognition. Otherwise critical reflection is not possible and so too freedom and democracy, and promises of education, are also not to be realised.

Finding Recognition?

One of the stages in the learning process involves making connections between one’s own individual problem (that may have prompted learning in the first instance) and broader social issues. It is clear that personal problems are intimately connected to broader social issues. The connection is not just an empirically grounded finding but is a philosophically important and essential step in interpreting the world. The personal is

indeed political (as many have acknowledged for some time, e.g., feminists) but the political is also personal and the learning process necessarily involves making this connection. At an obvious level teaching in university requires the ability to perceive the world in this way—the personal and political and social are connected.

Transformative learning, at least as articulated by Mezirow, has always been grounded in critical theory with its priority for understanding society with an emancipatory intent. Emancipation is also the aim of transformative learning. Social freedom becomes a well-founded aim of education for adults in family relationships, in communities, in legal and public policy contexts and also in the world of work and business. This enhances the emancipatory agenda so that lifelong learning now becomes a learning project with the practical intent of increasing freedom, justice, care and equality in the spheres of family and work, and it involves transformation not just of the individual but of society too. In this way, HE can offer not just a partial version of what learning is possible.

It is important to attend to pedagogy as a process of mutual recognition between teacher and learner. Teaching that is informed in this way has the potential to strengthen identity development. With the current emphasis on functional learning, competency and behavioural outcomes in education, and a neo-liberal inspired valorisation of the market as the ultimate supplier of all needs, these ideas take seriously the contribution of intersubjectivity as important for teaching, learning and transformation. The motivation to engage in learning becomes less economic, functional and instrumental and more communicative, social and potentially democratic and emancipatory. This is achieved not just by an emphasis on critical reflection but on the always presupposed imperative of interpersonal recognition. It is possible to assert again the Kantian imperative that learning is for autonomy—and to understand this project again, as reclaiming an emancipatory potential of HE that has the long standing intention of bringing about a better society in which to live, grow—and not a society as a place to work.

In an EU-funded study of non-traditional students returning to third level studies carried out across member states the concept of recognition was used as a sensitising concept to interpret the narratives of non-traditional students (RANLHE 2010). The longitudinal study in Ireland collected over 100 narratives of students' experiences and the learning journey often commenced long before going to college. The narratives told of having been systematically *mis*-recognised in school and told of deeply felt and tangible desires and ambitions to seek out HE as a place in which their

intelligence might be recognised. They hold such places (HE) in high esteem and value the learning and qualifications provided to such an extent that the researchers were able to conclude that HE was a real and legitimate and almost always a realised achievement of their recognition needs (Fleming and Finnegan 2010, 2014).

The critical role of all education is to work in solidarity with citizens to insert democratic imperatives into the system world. People may well have exchanged an active participatory role in the market place and in politics for the greater comfort and occupational security offered by capitalism, which legitimates the social order in this way. This is a form of socially constructed silence and what is needed is a new ideology critique addressing this mis-recognition and systematically distorted communication. The very foundation of democracy is under threat from the monopoly of technical reason. The forces of technical control must be made subject to the consensus of acting citizens, who in dialogue redeem the power of critical reflection and of intersubjectivity. Educators have found in Habermas a social critique with which to analyse the dominance in education of technique and instrumental rationality. The preoccupation, as a result of such critique, shifts from prioritising how to get things done to realising genuine democracy as a participatory process. By recognising the struggle of people to exercise their rights to learn is developmental and a necessary condition for both emancipation and transformative learning. The psychologisation of education as an individual subjective learning process is a danger, and the reliance on Honneth is mostly about securing a theoretical base for concepts and educational aims that are intersubjective, political and social.

These ideas prompt us to see the university as a community of discursive reason and we are most rational when we participate in communities characterised by free and unconstrained discourse, that is, democratic discourse. Critical reflection about assumptions and practices in various disciplines is central to this. For self-understanding to be reached in dialogue, democracy is necessary and for democracy recognition is necessary. To do its work of critique the university is creating the very conditions necessary for a democratic society.

What would such a university look like? This was asked in [Chap. 2](#) and this is an opportune moment to briefly recall that vision. There would be greater emphasis on participatory decision-making, on dialogue and a clear priority made for social justice. Pedagogy would be infused with social analysis and critical reflection. The teacher–student relationships would

involve both parties co-investigating reality and acknowledging the mutuality of the teaching/learning process. Education would be an exercise in democracy that *teaches* democracy and aims to reproduce democratic classrooms, communities, work places and society.

Democracy is therefore seen as an ethical, political and practical project in which universities are seedbeds of practice and exploration. The ultimate goal is to move towards a society in which citizens have ‘equal, effective possibility of participating in legislating, governing, and judging, and in the last analysis, in instituting society’ (Castoriadis 2010, p. 3). It is perhaps useful to think of this form of democracy as open-ended and as a set of practices and ideas that call for ‘perpetual work of self-correction’ (Rancière 2007, p. 42). As Dewey (1966) suggests, this means democracy is, above all, an experimental form of social cooperation in which institutions evolve and change. An integral part of this work of deliberation and self correction is to seek out and break down social, cultural and economic barriers to citizens’ full participation. Access is therefore about creating spaces where this can be effectively done in education.

The aim of the university is to develop and respond to the needs of a democratic society. For Habermas, the university is colonised now by the economy and state, in need of decolonisation by having particular kinds of free, open, critical conversations. For Honneth, it involves the recognition of student desires for very personal, and also political, recognition of their desires and learning aspirations through which they wish to live the good life—and not just the good economic life. Such a university would create a democracy and in the process teach democracy and create in turn a democratic society—not just an economy. It would in that pedagogic process redefine lifelong learning. In this it would reclaim and redeem in a way fitting for a new era the age-old scholarly ambition of universities and make a new contribution to a society in danger of being overwhelmed by neoliberalism. Even Kant might agree. Not to mention Dewey (1966, 1938), Newman and Humboldt.

NOTES

1. For one of the more flamboyant examples of this mode of thinking about the role of HE, see the ‘Tony Ryan Academy for Entrepreneurship’ located on the campus of Dublin City University, who also humbly refer to themselves as ‘Ireland’s University of Enterprise’. Lesser examples are TCD’s ‘Launchbox’, which describes itself as ‘Trinity’s student incubator,

a three-month accelerator programme open to teams of Trinity students with early-stage business ideas and investor-ready ventures’.

2. However, much concern has been exercised by the DES and the HEA over the proliferation of undergraduate degree programmes and a desire to see a thoroughgoing rationalisation.
3. For example, the use of national student surveys have become an established annual feature of the Australian and New Zealand HE systems since 2007, the United Kingdom from 2005 and the United States in 2000. See <https://www.acer.edu.au/ausse> or <http://nsse.indiana.edu/> or <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/nss/>. The Irish variant has been modeled on Australian instrument, which in turn was developed from the US questionnaire.

However, as we know from other research that when ‘controlling’ for exogenous factors (such as choosing the wrong programme, incurring financial or familial issues), student progression and retention can be mediated through pedagogical experiences.

4. The ISSE is operated by a consortium made up of the Irish Universities Association, the Union of Students Ireland, the Institutes of Technology Ireland and the Higher Education Authority.
5. The *engagement indices* are: (1) Academic Challenge, (2) Active Learning, (3) Student-Staff Interactions, (4) Enriching Educational Experiences, (5) Supportive Learning Environment and (6) Work Integrated Learning. The *output indices* are: (1) Higher Order Thinking, (2) General Learning Outcomes, (3) General Development Outcomes, (4) Career Readiness and (5) Overall Satisfaction.
6. The National Forum for Teaching and Learning has held discipline-specific workshops around the interpretation and use of the data.
7. See ‘National Academy for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning: *Consultation document*’, Appendices 1 and 2 for a full list of projects funded under the T&L category.
8. One of the funded projects conducted a mapping of the Irish literature on T&L research and identified some 2,240 items (45 per cent were journal articles, 16 per cent conference papers, 27 per cent conference proceedings and 7 per cent book chapters) generated between 1990 and 2015 (O’Sullivan et al. 2015). They also note that 2008 represents a ‘take off’ point, with a marked increase in publications. However, what is telling is the disciplinary locus of the papers: 34 per cent from the health sciences, 35 per cent from the STEM areas, and just 14 per cent and 8 per cent from the social sciences and humanities, respectively (O’Sullivan et al. 2015, p27). What is also telling is their identification of some 663 outputs that have as their focus ‘technology enhanced learning’, the next largest was 390 on ‘theories of learning’, 356 on ‘student experience’ and 229 on ‘workplace and employability skills’ all of which gives an insight in what is deemed pertinent in research terms.

9. The 'Educational Developers in Ireland Network' list thirteen partner institutions (all of the universities and six of the IoTs), which operate in this space. As a group they seem to be much the poor relation, and rather swamped by the pomp and swaggar of the NFTL.
10. In their analysis of individual programme learning objectives, they categorised them into four domains and ranked them according to frequency: 'Generic Teaching Skills and Knowledge' were mentioned eighty-six times, 'Development as a Reflective Practitioner' fifty-five times, 'Development of Research Skills' thirty-seven times and lastly 'Development of Digital Capacity' thirty-seven times'.
11. In an attempt to define this mode of CPD, the authors usefully classify them into three types: Structured (organised activities such as summer schools), Unstructured (usually individual activities such as 'reading' or 'reflective journaling') and Collaborative (discussions with colleagues, peer reviewing). Although they do not quantify participation rates, they found in relation to content that 43 per cent of activities were related to 'building digital capacity' (e.g., specific software, enhancing teaching), 28 per cent 'pedagogy' (e.g., developing student competencies, dealing with diversity), 15 per cent 'academic development' (e.g., focus on standards, research supervision) and 5 per cent on curriculum design.
12. See Mahon (2014) for a concise history of the Bologna process and its impact on Irish HE. See also the recent 'Europass' initiative.
13. The quality assurance role is undertaken by Quality Qualifications Ireland, established in 2012.
14. They provide a much richer source of insights than the desperately crude and self-serving 'ranking' indicators provided by publishing corporations, which cause much discombobulating to status seeking 'institutional leaders'.

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Retention in Ireland's Higher Education Institutions

*Ted Fleming, Fergal Finnegan,
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As the access story unfolds, various plots and sub plots emerge in the narrative. But not all who gain access complete the journey. In this chapter we will discuss how retention is linked to access and equality, review what the research indicates about student retention, completion and persistence in general and then conclude with an outline of what the research says about retention and specific groups of non-traditional students.

RETENTION AS AN ACCESS AND EQUALITY ISSUE?

An explicit link between access, equity and retention was made by Skilbeck (2001) in his influential policy paper on access. Student retention has in recent years become a key performance indicator for HE systems. According to the European Council (EC 2014, p. 14), in a decision reached in 2010:

In a social and economic environment where skills and competences acquired and refined through higher education are becoming more and more important...it is a societal imperative to expand opportunities to higher education as broadly as possible, by providing, 'equal opportunities for access to quality education, as well as equity in treatment,

including adapting provisions to individuals' needs', so that 'equitable education and training systems . . . are aimed at providing opportunities, access, treatment and outcomes that are independent of socio-economic background and other factors which may lead to educational disadvantage'. (EC 2014, p. 14)

This suggestion that retention is also an equity issue is usefully elaborated upon by Gazeley and Aynsley (2012, p. 15):

Although retention is a key performance indicator it is actually a matter of social justice to ensure that those brought into higher education as part of the widening participation agenda are actively protected from the psychological, financial and/or emotional costs of non-completion in those cases where it is not a positive choice made by the individual concerned.

As pointed out by Quinn (2013a, p. 60), 'drop-out' is limiting to focus on student characteristics and institutional practices as retention is influenced by social factors and the socio-economic background of the students as well as by HE policies and practices. Indeed, the existence of national policies on HE as well as the adoption of concrete measures are vital steps on the way to reaching the envisaged goals of successfully widening participation in HE (EC 2014, p. 29). Access is seen then as a process on getting in, staying on and moving forward. As we have noted in Chap. 5 we only know part of this story in Ireland and understanding student persistence is one of those things that, despite the fact it is widely discussed, is not well understood.

THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT: TERMS, THEORIES AND MEASUREMENT

Across Europe there is little coherence in terms of framing retention. The term drop-out is not used as it denotes a negative event or negative student experience—it is often not so and frequently it is a positive decision not to proceed. Across Europe a variety of terms are used to describe retention including completion, persistence, results and continuation. All have slightly different meanings and all refer to slightly different realities. For instance, in an international comparative study of retention commissioned by the UK National Audit Office (Van Stolk et al. 2007) noted that in Ireland the various ways of calculating completion, graduation and

survival rates often yield confusing and apparently contradictory evidence. This is widespread across Europe and behind the seeming clarity of headline statistics on retention lies a surprising degree of methodological and conceptual disagreement and a degree of murkiness.

Both the European Union and the OECD (2007) give statistics for retention and having looked at the ways in which countries arrive at their statistics it is clear that it is very difficult to know if they actually compare like with like (RANLHE 2010). Across Europe, the average rates of survival in HE are approximately 70 per cent—with some countries, and some institutions and some disciplines, departing significantly from those figures on either the plus or negative side. In addition, politics and optics complicate the amount of transparency that is tolerated. There are different completion rates for part-time and full-time students and for entrants with different qualifications. Rates also differ widely depending on the course. There is some evidence that some groups of non-traditional students tend to drop-out more than traditional students, although this may be connected as much to the practices of the institutions that recruit them as on the characteristics of the students.

Theoretical Frameworks

Much of the literature on retention draws on Vincent Tinto, whose “interactionist model” has been an important international reference point for studying student retention in HE. More recently, Tinto (1993) has identified five conditions for student retention, such as expectations, support, feedback, involvement and learning. First, students are more likely to persist when they are expected to succeed. Students who have been historically excluded from HE are affected positively by a climate of high expectations. Second, students are more likely to stay the course when academic, social and personal support is provided through mentoring, study groups or other integrated supports. Third, students are more likely to persist when frequent and timely feedback is given about their work. Fourth, students are more likely to persist when they are valued as members of the college community. Frequent and quality contact with staff and other students are independent predictors of student persistence. This matters a great deal in the first year of study when student engagements may be tenuous and the commitment to the learning project is being established. Fifth, students are more likely to persist in

environments that foster learning. Students who are actively involved in learning are more likely to learn and, as a result, more likely to stay (Tinto 1993).

Tinto's model is based on the experiences and outcomes of students in the United States and does not specifically address 'non-traditional' students and cannot be treated as a universally applicable model. One critique offered by Yorke (2004, p. 25) cites evidence from a range of studies to the effect that 'factors extraneous to the students' experience in HE exert more influence on older students than they do on younger students, and that these are not strongly represented in Tinto's model.

Working in the UK context, Reay et al. (2005) draw on Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, habitus and field to understand and explain student experience in HE. The following extract summarises a number of key points:

the concept of habitus emphasises the enduring influence of a range of contexts, familial, peer group, institutional and class culture, and their subtle, often indirect, but still pervasive influence on (HE) choices. It foregrounds the power of implicit and tacit expectations, affective responses and aspects of cultural capital such as confidence and entitlement, often marginalised in academic research. (Reay et al. 2005, p. 27)

Social and cultural experiences impact on access and retention. Students from some non-traditional backgrounds experience HE as though they are 'fish out of water' according to Bourdieu. Their HE lives are influenced by factors such as finance, family background, employment history and the ethnic mix of the college. This awareness of the impact of cultural capital and habitus can be extended to retention. Reay et al. (2005, pp. 28–34) argue that when habitus encounters a field with which it is unfamiliar, the resulting disjunctions can generate important change but also disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty. It has been argued that a close match between the cultural capital of the institution and the student is a good predictor of retention (Longden 2004). This poses particular challenges for non-traditional student groups. The tacit knowledge of the student in other words, if it differs significantly from that of the institution, increases the tendency to drop-out (Thomas 2002, p. 431).

In looking for remedies to this it is important not to focus on deficits but rather focus on changing institutions to facilitate new non-traditional students' success. Others (Thomas 2002) focus on the extent to which

institutions are challenging as habitus informs practice in unconscious ways. Thomas concludes that a culture of inclusiveness and diversity is part of the solution and is likely to enhance retention (Thomas 2002, p. 431).

INCORPORATING STUDENT SUCCESS

An increasing number of writers and researchers are choosing to concentrate more on the idea of student ‘success’ (Yorke and Longden 2008). The recent Irish study by the HEA has taken this approach (Liston et al. 2016). Others (Layer et al. 2002, p. 15) stress that success is the ‘prime focus of the higher education student experience and seeks to recognise achievement rather than “failure”, whereas retention places limits on the nature of higher education given the measures used and the assumptions of consecutive study’. Yorke (2004, p. 19) develops the argument in a more sociological direction when he states that retention is a ‘supply-side’ concept, which is important for institutional managers as well as the government and its agencies. In contrast, student success is a judgement made from the student’s perspective. This focus on success seems to be gaining increasing emphasis and it could be argued that success may be about more than retention and that retention is not the only kind of success. However the inclusion of the term ‘success’ can allow a more productive approach to exploring students’ subjective experiences of HE (see also Crowther et al. (2010) for similar arguments linked to adult education).

RETENTION IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION

The past decades have seen major changes in Irish HE (as earlier chapters have illustrated) that have impacted profoundly on the task of providing a successful learning experience for students. Healy et al. (1999) was the first research report funded by the Council of Directors of the Institutes of Technology and called attention to the significant levels of non-completion across three IoTs. Since then others (Eivers et al. 2002) looked specifically at the IoT sector and other reports broadened the research base to include all the HE institutions, including colleges of education. The HEA research report (Mooney et al. 2010) updates a number of the other historical studies (Baird 2002; Healy et al. 1999; Eivers et al. 2002; Morgan et al. 2001) and provides a new benchmark and baseline against which future progress will be measured.

Enrolments are up 14 per cent in 5 years (2010–2015); full-time newly enrolled students number 41,400 (a 7 per cent increase over 5 years). The report looks at how many of the 41,400 are still in college a year later taking the dates of 1 March to 1 March the following year. The most recent research (Liston et al. 2016) looks at success rates and updates earlier key reports (Mooney et al. 2010) that looked at drop-outs. These reports choose to commence ‘counting’ on 1 March towards the end of the first year of study. This alerts us to a problem with the overall outcomes. In other words, the start date for collecting data is 6 months after enrolment. There is an inbuilt fairness in this 1 March date that anyone in management will recognise as it allows time for students and the system to bed down, so to speak. It is however more likely linked to the date at which the institutions submit student numbers for funding by government. The problem arises as the students are already in the HE institution from September to March—a total of 6 months. By our own research (RANLHE 2010), we have found that the 4 per cent estimated by the HEA report as not progressing in the November to March period is broadly accurate, if slightly on the low side. But if we start counting from September we find that an additional 5 per cent leave in the September-to-November period. Some few move to other colleges, and though difficult to track they are not a good reason for ignoring the 4 or 5 per cent who leave (September–November) and the accumulation of even 10 per cent who are already on the exit route by March following first enrolment. This sets a significant challenge for HE as the numbers leaving persist in spite of imaginative and useful interventions by the system. Figures that accurately state the first drop-out figure is 16 per cent across the board may need to be ‘adjusted’ by a very significant 10 percentage, when the first 6 months in HE are included. By any count, an average of 25 per cent drop-out from September of first year to near the end of second year is a frequently hidden statistic.

A pattern of widely varying retention rates between individual institutions and between the universities and IoTs has emerged from a number of studies examining completion and non-completion rates among third level students in Ireland. The most comprehensive research on the topic discovered a high completion rate in universities, at 83 per cent, and a relatively low completion rate of 57 per cent in IoTs (Eivers et al. 2002; Morgan et al. 2001). This may be significant as historically the IoT sector

has attracted a higher proportion of students from a working class background and is seen as being 'on the front line in the widening participation agenda' (OECD 2004, p. 32). However, a more recent study suggests that there is now no significant difference in the completion rate for full-time courses of study in the IoT when compared to Irish universities. Kinsella and Roe (2006) estimated that 87 per cent of degree students and 70 per cent of diploma students finished their course in 2004.

The most recent HEA research (Liston et al. 2016) has moved the debate about retention towards the concept of success and states that the concept of successful participation is now the fundamental premise of Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications, which aims to ensure that the learner is 'able to enter and successfully participate in a programme . . . leading to an award' (Liston et al. 2016, p. 5). Data are now available on an annual basis giving the first- and second-year students' views of their HE experience and this is expected to enhance the evidential base for analysing student experience (Liston et al. 2016, p. 5).

RETENTION AND NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

So what do we know specifically about access students? Researchers who have examined retention in relation to social class have disagreed on how important socio-economic background is to the likelihood of completion (Eivers et al. 2002; Carpenter et al. 1999). Little sustained attention has been given to other types of 'non-traditional' students in this body of research. Similarly, there is conflicting evidence about the importance of gender as a factor in student retention and withdrawal. However, there does appear to be more conclusive evidence that higher prior educational attainment has a positive impact on who 'stays the course'. Subject choice is also important and students studying science, mathematics and computing are less likely to complete their course and those who enter high status professional education such as medicine and dentistry are the most likely to finish their degrees.

Across all sectors, 16 per cent did not progress from 2012/13 to 2013/14 to the second year. Of course these rates varied widely from 26 per cent and 28 per cent at NFQ Levels 6 and 7 to 17, 11 per cent at Level 8 in universities and institutes of technology (Liston et al. 2016, p. 17). Prior educational achievement remains a good predictor and the

Leaving Certificate is a strong indicator of success. The higher the prior achievement, the more persistent the student is likely to be (Liston et al. 2016, p. 19). Some subjects are particularly prone to high attrition rates, especially Construction Studies with fall-out at 29 per cent, but Education has a very high success rate of 95 per cent. In universities, Computer Studies have the highest level of non-progression (Liston et al. 2016, p. 23) and in the Health Care field 18 per cent did not progress (Liston et al. 2016, p. 23). In professional-oriented courses, medicine has the lowest level of drop-out at 2 per cent, while architecture has the highest at 22 per cent.

Overall and in all sectors, females are more successful at moving on to the second year of study. Mature students at Level 6 and 7 are more successful than under 23-year-olds, except in universities where mature students are not doing as well as the under 23-year-olds. One category has the widest divergence between males and females: at Level 8 in IoTs, only 59 per cent of males with points in the 205–250 range progress compared to 90 per cent of females. It seems that females fare better even when their CAO points are at the lower entry levels. However, this is not matched in universities at level 8 (Liston et al. 2016 p. 31). In universities when female students score 255–300 CAO points, only 60 per cent progress compared to males who have a 90 per cent success rate. It is hard to extrapolate from such data any solid findings relevant to access groups, although we know that advantaged students tend to achieve higher points.

Non-Irish students in IoTs are more at risk. Of particular interest is the socio-economic group to which a student belongs. Farmers and Higher Professionals are least likely to drop-out (only 10 per cent leave) and socio-economic groups such as Others, Gainfully Employed and Unknown are most at risk of departure rate of 17. Overall, across all the socio economic groups (SEG) there is a small increase since 2007/2008 in the number of students who are not progressing (Liston et al. 2016, p. 35). It may be because of the economic decline in construction as in that period (since 2007) non-completion in construction-related studies has increased three fold to 16 per cent.

Mature students account for 8.5 per cent of all new entrants in IoTs, while in universities the figure is a very low 4 per cent. In spite of targets set and measures introduced over a long number of years, the widening participation and increasing access this is a very modest success indeed (Liston et al. 2016, p. 32).

What Have We Learnt?

The HEA in its most recent report attempts to understand and interpret these findings and the variations associated with SEGs, gender, prior educational attainment, and then by educational sector and course chosen. In this interpretive process there is a relative or maybe even a dramatic absence of Irish sources of analysis that might illuminate the situation. In the final chapter of the report it relies almost entirely on a set of studies that refer to the United Kingdom and Australia (Jocey Quinn, Liz Thomas, Mantz Yorke, Bernard Longden, Vincent Tinto and others), so the question is whether the situation as understood in other countries applies to Ireland is not asked. Qualitative and indeed narrative research would allow the Irish HEA to assert with a bit more confidence why the situation they measure is so. Otherwise we are left with figures and numbers. Accurate and useful as they are, we have no way of asking why do these particular students stay the course or leave the programme with all the economic, social and personal consequences that leaving may have.

The question, why do some students stay and others leave, is one of those really complex questions as so many issues—institutional, personal and especially broader environmental—impact on the ambition of the student to succeed. A matrix of factors, over which students very often have little control, interact with one another making success for many a challenging experience.

MATHEMATICS AND SUCCESS: POST HOC ERGO PROPTER HOC

The HEA report (Mooney et al. 2010) is very careful to map the useful connections between Leaving Certificate points, mathematics and English grades on the one hand and success in HE on the other. However, as those who make a study of these matters, we must be even more careful here. In spite of multivariate analysis conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) on the HEA data, the view is equally convincing from other studies that the Leaving Certificate results when linked with success in HE may be an example of the logical fallacy well-known to Classical scholars as *post hoc ergo propter hoc*—just because something goes before another it may not be the cause.

We do know that grades in mathematics are likely to be indicators of social background (socio-economic and social class) and even of the school the student attended. There is a temptation to favour allocating extra CAO points for mathematics or supporting better mathematics

teaching in schools, neither of which I want to criticise except to say that allocating places or predicting success on the basis of points and mathematics may be a shortcut to saying that those who are advantaged will maintain their advantage in HE. We know this for many years already. There are two ways of stating the implications of this, one is that educational and social disadvantage are reproduced and maintained through HE (but we have known this since Bowles and Gintis [1976]). Or we can assert that there is a connection between the schools where over 60 per cent of students do higher level mathematics (of these 78 are fee-paying) and success at college (Lynch 2010). We also know from many years of policy, practice and research that interventions and encouragements of this kind are generally availed by the middle-classes in a way that is out of proportion to their numbers in society. Disadvantage is also maintained through HE (Fleming & Murphy 2002). So that any intervention that allocates bonus points to mathematics grades in the Leaving Certificate may be a way of rewarding social and economic advantage disguised as a laudable intervention that really rewards and encourages students to achieve high marks in mathematics. Addressing retention and progression through the Leaving Certificate points system must be matched by public policies that address inequalities in the social and educational system. It is not new to stress that access and retention is a task that needs to be addressed by the entire educational system starting in primary (and possibly earlier).

WHAT DO STUDENTS SAY ABOUT PERSISTENCE AND LEAVING?

A great deal. But let us select one item that is right at the top of their concerns and that has very little to do with mathematics, computers, the library or the lecturer. As young people in the transition to adulthood, we have in our HE system tens of thousands of emerging adults preoccupied with many of the tasks that society is happy for them to be engaged with—what will I study? How will I emerge from this as a teacher, lawyer and so on? But the central and personal concern is this: who is my friend? Who am I now in this environment? And who is going to be my ally in the new learning and developmental trajectory? We also have increasing numbers of mature students negotiating life transitions in HE who have similar and other concerns including can I juggle my various social and family commitments with study? Will this help me arrive at better work; what does this mean I am becoming? If the student finds it difficult to negotiate

a satisfactory answer to these questions, it may become a dominating preoccupation. We suggest that if we ignore the centrality of these concerns we will miss what is central to students, traditional and non-traditional, and what is key to their success and progression. An enhanced and progressive policy and practice of creating, supporting and sustaining communities of learners will be a key intervention; we believe it will enhance retention.

In an EU research project, non-traditional students have been interviewed in three Irish HEIs using biographical methods to find out why they stay or go. We have also been able to interview a sample of students who have not continued (RANLHE 2010a, 2010b). Students do not drop-out easily. It is a huge and troubling experience that they do not take lightly. A number of factors are crucial in influencing whether or not students progress or not. A coalition of events comes to bear on what is a determined attempt to succeed but students are confronted with vulnerabilities around every corner. Finance, the ability to select a course or programme that is satisfying and engages the students aspirations, goals and interests and other less-easily addressed problems such as health, are all factors that are not new to anyone here. One factor is particularly striking and needs to be understood. The system has made many important improvements over the past decade. We do not want to itemise all of them but they include changes in grading systems, open days, access courses, modular degrees, semesterisation, other structural changes and a range of Officers, from Access and Mature Student to Counsellors and Tutor Support that have different titles in the various colleges. However, the system, in institutionalising many good ideas into programme, makes very little attempt to find out how the student experiences them and how college is experienced by the student. Once this was raised at a Faculty meeting in one of our own institutions and was greeted with a (loud) chorus that there is widespread use of 'student feedback'. Student feedback is important and also a system mechanism, usually a questionnaire, which asks questions, closed or open, on a Likert scale. This is however a limited form of student involvement. We need to listen in quite a different way to what students have to say and how they experience the learning environment of HE. This involves collecting not just their feedback questionnaires but their stories of struggle for success, retention, progression and sometimes non-completion. Do we really know how and why they walk away from what was a dream, an expectation that this would be a wonderful moment of recognition by the education system which they hold in high esteem?

In addition to this, when we talked to non-traditional students, whether young or mature, those who came through the access programmes were eloquent, insightful and benefited hugely from the firm collaborations, friendships and networks of support they were encouraged to form as part of their struggle for retention in college and universities. We are suggesting that each college could address this issues by restructuring either the first year or first semester so that those students who may feel less sure of the subject they have chosen and/or wish to move into the transitional space (West 1996) of HE more slowly and pay greater attention to their developmental needs might be given an option to undertake a more general modular semester along the lines of a 'taster menu'. This would emphasise a range of liberal arts and sciences with the experiences of collaborative and cooperative learning activities as central to the provision.

One finding that is emerging from the interviews with students who leave early and is in additional to the many complex factors that impact on their plans is that of mental health. It is a finding of our research in Irish HE that we do need to pay attention to the numbers of students who do not complete and who identify mental health issues as part of the equation. Other disabilities have been resourced with supporting structures and staff but this is, I believe, a new finding and needs to be addressed. So that at graduation when the academic leaders (still speaking in Latin) claim that they present these student 'in their knowledge and in their care', that they will know that this includes paying attention to more vulnerable students who find little of support in HE for their distress.

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

children and the social and cultural capital dividend that students are well aware of as they graduate. Having done this research (Fleming et al. 2010), the Irish family (at least for those who are successful at university) is a fully functioning and supportive unit. It supports successful students both emotionally and financially. For those less fortunate in terms of family support, they achieve their success in spite of their families. If career or job prospects are now diminished in the current economic climate, the family remains the main source of support and the beneficiary. In conclusion, the tasks set by earlier reports on retention have precipitated a wide range of system responses over the past decade. Many have been well received by students and have been successful in fostering a better learning environment. There is a great deal left to do.

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Towards a Conclusion

Ted Fleming, Fergal Finnegan, and Andrew Loxley

Widening access signifies a substantial change in the idea of the university. Over the past twenty years, research and policy have made the question of whether Irish HE is representative or democratic a live issue. The impact may not be what has been expected, targets may not have been met but there can be little doubt it carries with it in its more substantive iterations real democratic possibilities. Nevertheless, as we come to the end of our story of widening participation and increasing access of non-traditional students in Irish HE, it is not possible to leave with: “and they all lived happily ever after!” This is no fairy tale with a happy ending, after all even if traditional students are part of a Cinderella tale there is certainly no prince or princess. Neither is it a tragedy, though there are moments, maybe not of suffering, but at least stress and not inconsiderable anxiety – but not enough for a tragedy, as it has no catharsis or resolved ending. It is also not a comedy or romance or science fiction or even a horror story. We suggest that it may have more to recommend it as an epic narrative – it is sufficiently long, celebrates heroic deeds and certainly tells of events that are of significance for the nation or culture! Though those telling the story do not see themselves in the tradition of Homer, Virgil, Dante or Joyce, nevertheless we tell a story of epic importance about the modernisation of the nation. HE and non-traditional students are key *dramatis personae* who are central to its success and failure. But with access we have been mainly occupied with the stage directions.

What can we say then in conclusion – apart from returning to the place where we began and recognise that place for the first time? Our story began with an account of the current contexts in which HE finds itself. As the story concludes, this context continues to make increasing demands on HE to be accountable to the state that funds it and to implement the technologies of that accountability (Walsh and Loxley 2015; Lynch et al. 2012; O'Malley 2012). New funding models are in operation, cutbacks and persistent under funding are creating a great deal of stress and pessimism (Gallagher 2012; Clarke et al. 2015). We hear a great deal about tightening the integration between business and HE with insistent calls from politicians and some business leaders to provide a closer fit between the qualifications offered by colleges and the job market (Finnegan and O'Neill 2015; Loxley 2014). Besides this, we have the restructuring required by the European Union and Bologna and sharp competition in search for international students. More recently, and in addition to all this, an extended period of austerity and the funding crisis in HE makes the future increasingly unknown and challenging.

Again we are inclined to see in the acceleration of time, the push for immediate and measureable results, having to do more with less as this distinct cultural logic is linked to neoliberalism. To return to a theme sounded earlier in the book we think this is linked to the promotion of systemic imperatives instead of listening to the voices of educators and especially students. Nick Couldry (2010) takes this theme up and argues that this:

is particularly important at times when a whole way of thinking about social political and cultural organization (neoliberalism) operates on the basis that for certain crucial purposes voice as a process does not matter. By voice as a value, I shall refer to the act of valuing, and choosing to value, those frameworks for organizing human life and resources that themselves value voice (as a process). Treating voice as a value means discriminating in favour of ways of organizing human life and resources that, through their choices, put the value of voice into practice, by respecting the multiple interlinked processes of voice and sustaining them, not undermining or denying them. (Couldry 2010, p. 2)

This is being lost in the pressure to measure the effectiveness of HE (and indeed all funded public services) and to alter the governance of HE so that it utilises the technologies of quality assurance, targets, indicators, evaluations, strategic plans and compacts that are the machinery of bureaucratic

control. Scrutiny is justified because of state funding but it is a double bind as it impacts on everything – especially those activities and outcomes that resist and defy being measured and quantified.

Surely accountability is a good thing? Many argue that it is and it is only right that HE is more open to scrutiny and accountable to the source of its funding. But our final analysis leads to the conclusion that such intrusive accountability reminds us of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory's "administered world" that results, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, from the all-embracing bureaucracy of modern capitalism (1972, p. x). Mountains of red-tape and the swamping of freedom would result, they said, from the incessant progression of bureaucratic rationality in capitalist societies. Maybe this is what is happening in HE. Technologies of accountability in the form of quality assurance and constant auditing lead to an overweening preoccupation with what can be measured, accompanied by a decline in autonomy. The central characteristics of HE cannot easily escape the all-embracing measuring of bureaucracy. The pressure is to measure everything and value only what can be measured.

Jürgen Habermas is a significant ally in bringing this argument into the debate about the current iteration of the neo-liberal state. His central proposal is to suggest that (in contrast to Horkheimer and Adorno) communicative rationality oriented towards interpersonal understanding can rise above the distorted rationality of modernisation. His two-fold theory of society involving system (state and economy) and lifeworld is of assistance here. The system is that part of society that is oriented towards the exercise of power (the state) as well as the part of society driven by money (the economy). The lifeworld involves the horizon of taken for granted understandings of the world that give meaning to lives.

How does this assist us in coming to our conclusion – it seems like a diversion? Modern neo-liberal capitalism (and even earlier forms of capitalism) have opted for a one-dimensional form of rationalisation through the state and the economy colonising the lifeworld – invading it with their functional and instrumental interests and values. The lifeworld, of which HE is part, cannot reach rational decisions that serve its own interests because of the inappropriate invasion of its space (the public sphere) that has been dominated by values, language and taken for granted assumptions of what is good for us. Socialisation, cultural reproduction and taking care of children are all effected and so it is no surprise if HE and the activities in which it engages are also impacted heavily. What this means in practical terms (and this is useful for our conclusion), is that many decisions that affect our ordinary

day-to-day lives (even in HE) are made as if these decisions are about power and/or money. If this rings true, this is our conclusion.

This is what is wrong with the current context in which WP and access operate. This is the pathology of modernisation. Of course, peoples' dreams and aspirations cannot be measured and many of the learnings and outcomes of the access story cannot be measured in power and especially money terms. This is in fact a form of mis-recognition (Honneth 1995). Peoples' deepest desires cannot be recognised in a totally administered and instrumental world. Managerialism and its technologies of quality assurance are an inappropriate use of technologies and these aspects of all education (but especially HE) are better understood as open to inter-personal understanding.

Though this argument is born in social theory, and critical social theory at that, it is a useful way of analysing the colliding worlds of HE. On the one hand, management and administration with its eyes set on functional imperatives of money and power are increasingly taken in by the promises of quality assurance and, on the other, techniques of accountability and surveillance. We are not suggesting that HE should not be accountable, on the contrary. However, the inappropriate deployment of such mechanisms is destructive of the lifeworld that is HE. The target here is the inappropriate deployment of this regime of accountability. It can be more clearly seen as such when we understand the demand on HE to become more like a business and operate a business model. The danger for our non-traditional students is that the teachers in HE (and the students too) would themselves buy into this form of accountability and assess, measure and deliver teaching in an instrumental fashion. This would be understandable considering the pressures of life and the complex juggling that is involved in teaching or learning.

If this analysis is leading to the conclusion then one more question must be asked: so what can be done? None of the allies on which we have relied in telling this story – Habermas, Honneth, Freire, Bourdieu and Offe would disagree if we replied: the answer is democracy, loads of it! Management, pedagogy and all aspects of HE would become a laboratory and testing ground for democracy. Pedagogy is the core activity that in all its activities valorises and at its best (in many university seminars) practices democracy and participatory investigations so that HE becomes a more democratic space. In this, a public sphere is reclaimed where peoples' real needs can be identified, learned and people taught how to identify them and this rising tide would lift other discourses in society and in communities towards more open, free, democratic and emancipatory activities.

RESEARCH

But as educators with at least one hat in the research arena, there is ample space for research in the story of widening participation and access. Not only do the macro issues and contextual questions need to be researched but so too do the micro issues which centre on questions about student experiences and these also require to be further study. Far too much of what we assert we know, even in public policy reports and papers is based on research conducted in the United Kingdom and Australia. The connect between the micro and the macro also needs further elaboration, as cut-backs (or “adjustments” as they are known in polite circles) do impact on student lives – those in the system and those who may not in the future access an increasingly expensive experience.

The disconnect between policy proposals (e.g., the newly proposed funding model for HE – or fees/loans) and students needs to be rectified. No more should policy be planned or implemented only by those with vested interests in business, the civil service and higher-level management in HE. Again, even modest (as against what is proposed above) amounts of democracy would make a significant difference to the learners’ experiences, not to mention the quality of public policies.

When it comes to particular cohorts of non-traditional learners, such as ethnic groups, immigrants and Travellers, we do not know enough about the experiences or the numbers of any of these important groups. The smaller numbers involved should not deter funding and research. But in the end, the main problem for Travellers is the low levels of take up and of resources for pre-school, primary and post-primary education.

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