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CONTINUING EDUCATION IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION: A NEW ERA AHEAD?

Frank McMahon

Introduction

This paper reports on an Action Research project being undertaken in the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) to improve the provision of Continuing Education (CE). It reviews the relatively undeveloped state of CE in Ireland and identifies factors which may increase CE in future. Within DIT, a research-led project commenced in 1997 which seeks to improve the situation of CE; this research included staff and student surveys, the results of which are informing the implementation of change in the institute.

Here the term CE is used to refer to learning opportunities taken up sometime after initial education has been completed. CE at university level is seen by many to be of increasing significance in a world which emphasises the need for education and training to continue throughout life. International experience supports the view: by 1996/97, one third of all higher education students in the UK were part-time students (Times Higher Education Supplement, 1998). The growing importance of CE was recognised by the European Commission when it declared 1996 to be the year of lifelong learning. The term lifelong learning now resonates in both educational and political discourses, giving hope that it may become a reality. Reasons for the growing acceptance of the importance of the concept include the recognition that in fast-developing fields there is need for frequent updating. But for others, lifelong learning is seen as part of the necessary framework to ensure true democracy and social justice. In both the UK and Ireland, adults over the age of

twenty-five, the lower social classes and ethnic minorities are still substantially under-represented in universities.

CE in Ireland

A preliminary assessment of CE in Ireland and the UK suggests that CE is much less developed in Ireland. Lynch (1997, p.83) has estimated that only five per cent of entrants to full-time higher education in Ireland in 1993/94 were mature students; in 1992/93 in Britain, thirty three per cent were mature. My own calculation for the in-take of students to Irish universities for the academic year 1996/97, shown in table 1 below, is that only six per cent of whole-time students were mature (over 23 years of age) on entry. This table is based on enrolment data supplied by the universities to the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and internal DIT data to which I had access.

Table 1 – Admission of whole-time mature students to Irish Universities and DIT, 1996/97

University	Total First Year	Mature First Year	%
DCU	1,226	65	5
UL	2,270	146	6
Maynooth	1,053	104	10
TCD	2,119	173	8
UCC	2,272	215	9
UCD	3,379	113	3
UCG	1,614	73	5
Total	**13,933**	**889**	**6**
DIT	4,075	112	3

The definition of "mature" differs between the countries, being twenty three years and over in Ireland and twenty one years and over in Britain, but this difference would not account for the large difference in participation rates of mature students in the UK and Ireland. Lynch (1997) has pointed out that the differences in participation rates between Ireland and Northern Ireland are similar to those between UK and Ireland, despite the fact that the demographic profile is not that dissimilar. The Higher Education Authority (1995, p.81) has commented that the percentage of mature students entering higher education in Ireland is quite low by comparison with that in Britain and has also noted that the comparison is even more unfavourable with such countries as Sweden, USA, Germany and Australia. Donaldson and Ross-Gordon (1992, p.22) have quoted that thirty-nine per cent of US college students in 1988 were aged twenty-five years or over, and went on to forecast that by the year 2000, fifty per cent of higher education students will be over age twenty-five. In Canada, "adult learners form an overall majority of the higher education student population" (Tight, 1994 p.196).

Part-time Students

A second major component of CE is the provision of part-time courses in universities to enable students to gain degrees and other qualifications whilst employed. In many countries the part-time student population has grown to exceed the full-time student population, but this is not the case in Ireland. Table 2 below, based on statistics provided by universities to the HEA, shows part-time undergraduate students constituted only six per cent of the total university student population in 1996/97. This is extraordinarily low when compared with other countries, for example, in the UK in 1997/98 part-time students were about one third of HE population (Times Higher Education Supplement [THES] 1998).

Table 2 – Total and part-time student enrolments, 1996/97

University	Total Students	P/T U/Grad Degree	PT/ U/Grad Non-Degree	%
DCU	6,058	329	266	10
UL	9,748	69	338	4
Maynooth	4,410	189	271	10
TCD	11,552	468	417	8
UCC	10,750	238	264	5
UCD	17,105	448	387	5
UCG	7,503	203	195	5
Total	**67,126**	**1,944**	**2,138**	**6**

Note: Part-time post-grad students are included in "Total Students" but not in the categories of part-time students shown

The figures seem to indicate little emphasis on CE by Irish universities. Irish universities have long been lukewarm to the notion of part-time degrees. The Commission on Higher Education, which deliberated for seven years before issuing its two-volume report in 1967, felt that part-time degree courses were unsatisfactory as they did not allow for adequate participation by the students in the full life of the university (Vol.1, p.665), re-echoing Newman's view of a century earlier. They also opposed part-time courses which imposed additional teaching duties on university staff at the expense of opportunity for private study and research. However, the commission agreed that there was a need for part-time courses and recommended that these be provided by institutions other than universities.

DIT, with more than 7,000 part-time students, of whom 2,205 were enrolled on degree or diploma courses, is the biggest provider of part-time courses. Following its formation by the merger of six colleges in 1993, considerable effort went into deciding the future organisational structure of the Institute. It was decided to replace the colleges with six faculties and a Centre for Continuing Education, each headed by a Director. The Department of Education agreed to the appointment of faculty directors but refused to sanction a director

for CE, despite the fact that DIT had over 7,000 CE students. The rejection of the proposed post may be significant as an indicator of the status accorded to CE at Department of Education level.

In summary, there is significantly less emphasis on CE in Ireland than in the UK and other countries. This is evident in respect of both mature student enrolment and the provision of part-time degrees and diplomas. It is not because there is no need for greater access: problems of social exclusion of the disadvantaged communities of Cork and Dublin have been well documented by Forde (1996), O'Fáthaigh (1998) and Clancy (1995). Higher education institutes are well aware of these disparities and, in respect of the Dublin problem, DCU, DIT, TCD and UCD have all established direct entry programmes to address the issue. But the number admitted through these programmes has been small.

Factors Which May Increase CE: Four Sources of Pressure

To some extent, the Universities Act, 1997 addressed the situation. The objects of a university were defined to include "facilitate lifelong learning through the provision of adult and continuing education" (Section 2.5.2). These objects also required the preparation of a statement of the policies of the university in respect of access to the university ... by economically or socially disadvantaged people (Section 36. 1). To date, I have seen no such statements of policy, although they may, of course, exist. The act imposes no obligation on a university to publish its policy statement though it does require the university to implement the policies set out in the statement.

The Green Paper, published under the title *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning,* in November, 1998, reminded universities that one of their objectives is to "facilitate lifelong learning through the provision of adult and continuing education". It also hinted at the possibility of quotas for mature student in-take, mentioning a figure of sixteen percent as a possible target (p.48). Such a target would be extremely challenging for Irish universities, which are currently at six per cent, and an even bigger challenge for DIT from its present base of three per cent.

A third source of pressure to induce action in regard to lifelong learning was contained in the Report of the International Review Group on the DIT Application for Establishment as a University (1998). The Report recommended that DIT become a university, subject to a number of conditions including that "the institute develops further in the area of Lifelong Learning and the broadening of access to third-level education to all sectors of society" (p.40). Since the review group consulted widely, its condition regarding lifelong learning and access may well reflect official thinking. However, the fact that the HEA effectively rejected the advice of the Review Group and that the Minister accepted the HEA view, casts doubt over the acceptability of the Review Group's views.

A fourth potential source of pressure on HEIs to increase their intake of non-traditional students will arise from the demographic situation facing Ireland. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s there was a steady flow of school-leavers seeking places in higher education. But the fall in birth-rate after 1980 has already reduced the number of school children coming through the education system. There is likely to be a fall in the number of 18 year-olds from 74,338 in 1998 to 47,929 in 2012 (Department of Education and Science (DES), 1998 p.28). The inevitable fall in Leaving Certificate candidates will shrink the recruiting area for higher education institutes and force them to look to non-traditional sources for student numbers. There is plenty of scope: as the Green Paper (1998, p.30) pointed out, the percentage of older students enrolling in Irish universities is well below that of other countries. Figures given in the Green Paper indicate that the percentage of new entrants to university who are over twenty-six years is only two per cent in Ireland but is much higher in UK (23%), Germany (16%), USA (17%) and Canada (19%).

Research For and About Continuing Education

A Report on Adult Education in Ireland (Murphy, 1973 p.39) recommended the establishment of departments of adult education and community development in each higher education institute (HEI). The report noted the lack of acceptance by some HEIs that higher degree and diploma awards can be achieved by means of the accumulation of credits over a number of years. In 1983, the Commission on Adult Education chaired by Ivor Kenny issued its report which it entitled *Lifelong Learning*. It identified the particular

contribution which third-level institutions could make: "provision of part-time undergraduate programmes, ... continuing professional education, training of adult educators and research into adult education" (p.146). It recommended that HEIs be more flexible in regard to entry requirements for mature students and that modular credit systems, accreditation of prior experience and credit transfer be introduced. These measures, if implemented, would have greatly facilitated the development of CE; but the advice was largely ignored.

The development of CE in universities is not unproblematic. An area for concern is the motivation which underlies the involvement of universities in continuing education. It is significant that not all universities have developed their provision of continuing education; in the UK, there has been much more activity in the new universities (former polytechnics) than in the older universities. Is the provision of CE largely a matter for the less prestigious universities? Does the development of CE provision become a priority only when the flow of "A-level" school-leavers becomes insufficient?

It was noticeable in Duke's (1992) account of UK developments that interest in CE quickened when the University Funding Council invited tenders for substantial funding for CE. More recently, Haselgrove (1997, p.131) commented on the fact that CE is being courted for its income earning capacity. In Ireland, universities have not yet greatly developed their part-time provision: perhaps they are awaiting the incentive of extra funding, as occurred in Britain in the early 1980s.

Jonathan (1983) warned of the danger of CE becoming part of a new agenda, based on the presumption that education provided by the state should serve the interests of the state, viewed primarily as an economic collective. Such a view advocates the provision of lifelong learning options, predicated upon the individuals' needs to equip themselves for the series of distinct and unrelated careers to which they will need to adapt in the course of a working life. Jonathan remarks that if educationalists leave the descriptive meaning of "self-evidently desirable but vacuous" terms like "lifelong learning" and "relevance" unspecified, "the prescriptive gaps will be filled by particular pressure groups urging their own conceptions of relevance and usefulness" (1983, p.3). CE is in danger of being unwittingly used as part of this process.

Research-led Development of CE in DIT

In 1997 I commenced a research project, using an Action Research (AR) methodology, to examine the provision of CE in DIT, with a view to improving the situation. After some initial research and reflection, I sought to involve more colleagues through a broadly based committee of inquiry representative of all faculties and central services departments. I was conscious that such a committee had the potential to be bureaucratic and to slow down my work but also that it had the potential to improve the quality of the research and to increase the possibilities of acceptance within DIT of any improvements which were proposed. Other researchers have concluded that it is important that teachers are agreed on where they are heading; and that purposes cannot be given to teachers, they must come from within (Fullan, 1993; Hargreaves, 1997) .

I started from a belief that staff are ultimately responsible for the policies that are implemented, even if it appears that policies are handed down to them to be implemented. As Trowler (1998 p. 56) put it: "Policy is not passively received and automatically implemented, rather it is actively interpreted, decoded, and responded to in complex social and cultural contexts".

The methodology I chose included the use of a detailed questionnaire to staff and questionnaires to three groups of CE students, namely whole-time mature students, in-service students and part-time students. I organised a seminar on policy for staff and mature students. Meetings were also held with individual and groups of whole-time mature and part-time students who voiced their opinions on life as a DIT student. And finally, an Information Day was organised for potential mature students.

Data from Staff Questionnaires

The staff questionnaire elicited almost 200 returns and 30,000 words of comments. The majority of respondents (seventy one per cent) were permanent whole-time staff but temporary (three per cent), contract (nine per cent) and part-time (seventeen per cent) lecturers were represented. Space restriction does not permit a detailed description of the findings other than to say that staff were highly

enthusiastic about part-time students. They considered them to be more highly motivated about their studies, to be better attenders and to ask more questions in class than full-time students. They did not consider them stronger academically but felt they were more likely to pass their examinations.

Seventy-three percent of the staff were in favour of expanding the provision of part-time courses, even in a position where no extra funding is provided. They favoured concentrating on courses that led to awards. A clear majority wanted the introduction of access courses.

Staff were also very positive in their opinions of whole-time mature students; over ninety percent of the staff agreed that mature students are more highly motivated than other whole-time students regarding their studies. They were also considered to ask more questions in class, to be more likely to hand in assignments on time and to have a better attendance record than whole-time students (78%, 68% and 75% respectively). Over half (56%) of the respondents disagreed with the statement that mature students are more likely to drop out than their whole-time counterparts. A vast majority (ninety percent) of respondents favoured mixed groups of mature and younger students, with most favouring an allocation of at least fifteen percent of places to mature students.

In summary, the attitude of DIT staff towards both part-time and mature students was very positive. It seemed to me that the climate was thus favourable to an expansion of CE enrolment and improvement of the educational and support services to CE students.

Data from Student Surveys

The data which emerged from an analysis of the 130 questionnaires suggest that mature students in DIT are largely happy with their course structures. Likewise, two thirds thought the present balance between class attendance and private study was about right, with much smaller numbers wanting more or less of either. Financial cost emerged as the greatest perceived barrier to more adults becoming students, followed by lack of awareness by colleges of the special needs of mature students.

They wrote about their anxieties: one respondent volunteered that "the thoughts of having to integrate with teenagers, to study and to forego ... an income ... filled me with trepidation". A recurring theme in students' comments was the extent to which the first year was the "roughest" as evidenced by "first year a bit difficult to integrate", "first year was the greatest personal challenge", "it was quite difficult to begin in college as a mature student" and "first six months of course very difficult". For several, the problem eased with the passage of time; for example "quite difficult at first but once I'd settled in and made friends things became a lot easier". At least one attributed the easing to changes in the younger students: "I felt it very difficult to settle in with the very young people in the class but they have matured a lot in the meantime".

The quality of the information which they received from DIT before starting the course was criticised, especially information about financial cost. The lack of study skills guidance (only 42% received a study skills course) may well have prompted some students to mention their difficulties in that area: "we [mature students] have all expressed difficulty in writing essays, study skills and doing exams ... " and "more attention must be given to helping mature students come up with ways to study". Particular criticisms were levelled at car/bicycle parking facilities (unsatisfactory for 68%), canteen facilities (unsatisfactory for 53%), arrangements for students to make their voices heard (43%), computer facilities (unsatisfactory for 41%), opportunity to vary pace of study (43%) and feedback to students (37%). There were aspects where DIT scored well, including staff/student relationships (satisfactory for over 90%) and the content of courses.

Using Action Research to Develop CE

The results of the various studies were discussed by the CE Committee and this is a continuing process; in all, data from five different studies have been available to date. There is much emphasis in AR literature on the need for participation in AR projects and the attitude to the researched, who should be seen as participants. A fundamental objection is sometimes raised to the non-democratic nature of much AR because those for whose benefit the project is being undertaken (poor, disadvantaged) make little or no input to the

proceedings. It is assumed that the benefit to be conferred and the method of achieving it are uncontroverted. But they reflect the interests of those who are, and will continue to be, in charge. Hence the need for a participatory model; but one must overcome the problem of enabling the educationally-disadvantaged to participate as equals when the *raison d'être* of the project is that they are not equal.

The CE Committee is continuing its research and its implementation of change. It has devised a new system for the recruitment of mature students which is being implemented this year; information for current and prospective students has been expanded by the production of a Guide for Mature Students. A Mature Students' Society has been formed and Mature Student Co-ordinators have been nominated within each school. A new study skills module is being devised which will be given to all. A radical initiative to change the provision of part-time courses has been formulated. Other issues will be taken up in turn by the CE Committee and the Committee will monitor the improvement which will take place until it is satisfied.

Conclusions

By their nature, AR projects are never finished as they seek continually to improve an educational practice or situations in which practices are carried out. My experience of seeking to implement change in DIT in the project described in this paper suggests that the cyclical and participative nature of the AR approach, with its repeated assaults on problems and its attempts to involve those affected by change, is entirely appropriate. But perhaps the greatest contribution to the long-term success of the project will come from the participation of more than twenty colleagues as members of the Continuing Education Committee and Mature Student Co-ordinators. As the need for further changes arises (from the publication of a White Paper on Adult Education and the promised emphasis on lifelong learning and training in the national agreement to replace Partnership 2000, for example), the availability of a cadre of committed professionals will be a vital resource.

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