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Synopsis of Part-time Education Policy within The Dublin Institute of Technology

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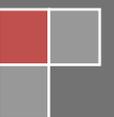
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Synopsis of Part-time Education Policy within The Dublin Institute of Technology

Detta M. Melia



Abstract and Terms of Reference

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the nature of part-time student provision within DIT, using policy and strategy documents. The purpose was also to investigate the needs of part-time students and following these considerations provide recommendations for the future development of part-time student education at DIT as part of the Masters in Education - Education Policy Module.

The first section of this paper examines the background and context of part-time and flexible learning opportunities in the literature. It makes comparisons between the numbers following part-time education programmes as opposed to full-time education programmes and highlights that only 18% of students studying at DIT in 2010 – 2011 were studying part-time.

The next section analyses the opportunities and challenges in the provision of part-time education and suggests that there are a number of avenues available in the delivery of part-time education which include; the time it takes to complete a programme of study, blocking of modules, and summer schools as opportunities. However, this paper also presents the challenges impacting on part-time education and reviews the challenges for students and the challenges facing the Dublin Institute of Technology in the provision of part-time education. The deepening recession, lack of resources and the financial constraints appear to be major challenges.

Section three presents the needs of part-time and life-long learning students and highlight the profile of the typical part-time student at DIT. This was carried out from an analysis of existing literature and from a number of research studies carried out on part-time education in DIT. The reasons students partake in part-time education are documented and include the need to develop skills to enhance a career, develop skills to change career or to begin a career as driving forces for returning to part-time education. The circumstances where students' needs are not met are highlighted in this section. An analysis of the benefits of part-time education is also highlighted.

Conclusions are drawn to this research paper and some future recommendations are provided where it is suggested that an integrated application and registration systems platform be developed for part-time students, a dedicated registration desk be open on each campus during the first month of study for part-time programmes and that a timely implementation of the communications plan for part-time programmes be carried out.

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1. Introduction: Background and Context

Part-time and flexible learning opportunities are essential to increasing access to higher education by adults who need to combine study with work or caring responsibilities (HEA, 2012). According to the Department of Education and Skills (2011) part-time and flexible learning is also necessary in order to support those who have become unemployed and who may need to develop new skills and qualifications while remaining available for work. The department also advocates that Ireland needs to raise levels of life long learning and higher education attainment and that more is needed in terms of increasing flexibility and innovation, broader routes of access and a model of funding that supports all full and part-time students equally. However, the educational landscape in Ireland has changed considerable since 2007 (O'Rourke, 2012) when the Institutes of Technology and DIT submitted proposals on flexible learning to the Higher Education Authority.

In 2007 seven percent of all undergraduates were participating on part-time programmes. A target of 12.5% was set for 2010 and a target of 17% by 2013 (HEA, 2010). These targets have been exceeded as a result of a number of factors:

1. An emphasis on national and European policy to increase lifelong and flexible learning (Department of Education and Skills, 2011)
2. Targeted funding (Strategic Innovation Fund)
3. Flexible learning portals such as Bluebrick (www.bluebrick.ie, 2012)
4. Recognition of prior learning and work based learning (EINE and REAP projects) through the Institutes of Technology and three of the Universities in Ireland (Department of Education and Skills, 2011)
5. Economic Imperatives to support skills development and continued professional development (CPD) in declining and emerging sectors and the educational needs of the unemployed (Springboard, 2012)

This progress is to be commended; however, the focus to date is still on full time education and on school leavers (National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, 2011). Table 1 provides a breakdown of part-time and full-time numbers in higher education in Ireland in 2010-2011.

Table 1: Part-time and full time numbers in third level education 2010 – 2011

	Institutes of Technology	Universities / Colleges	All HEA	Other Private HEIs	Total
Undergraduate					
Part-time	18%	11%	14%	34%	15%
Full-time	82%	89%	86%	66%	85%
Total UG	73,004	86,451	159,455	10,084	169,539
Post Graduate					
Part-time	49%	35%	37%	32%	37%
Full-time	51%	65%	63%	68%	63%
Total PG	5,376	29,364	34,740	2,172	36,912
Total	78,380	115,815	194,195	12,256	206,451

Source: HEA (2012)

Table 1 highlights the breakdown between part-time and full time levels of participation with for example, in the Institutes of Technology part-time participation is 18% and full time is 82% for undergraduate programmes, however, this in comparison to 49% part-time and 51% full-time at post graduate level. Breaking this down further to the Dublin Institute of Technology, the ratio of part-time to full time is 20:80. The research further highlights that 47% of part-time undergraduates are studying level 6 and 7 programmes (National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, 2011). The research also indicates that there is a higher participation of part-time level on post graduate programmes. DIT registered 1,740 part-time students in 2012 / 2013 on first year programmes compared to 1,169 in 2010 / 2011, an increase of 32% (DIT Registration return to HEA, 2012). This figure does not include students on part-time research programmes, apprenticeships or junior music studies.

There are clear criteria which sets the designation for Technological University status centring on part-time and life long learning. Programmes from level 6 to 10 are required to meet local, regional and national demand (HEA, 2012). In addition, a combined minimum of 30% of all students in the applicant Institution will be lifelong learning students enrolled on professional focused programmes and industry up-skilling, including part-time, work related programmes and work-study programmes and / or mature learners. This does not include those students' part or full time studying apprentice programmes (HEA, 2012; Department of Education and Skills, 2012; College of Engineering and Built Environment, 2012).

Achievement of the 30% target presents challenges, however, with the strategic alliance with the Institute of technology Tallaght (ITT) and the Institute of Technology Blancherstown (ITB), flexible and blended learning initiatives, distance learning initiatives, off campus provision, outreach programmes, working with local businesses, collaboration with professional bodies, development of CPD, provision for CPD modules to contribute to a certificate or degree, more flexibility in availability and access outside the normal working week, and a clear communication plan will assist the achievement of this target (Technological University of Dublin Alliance, 2012). This will, however, involve a DIT wide need for an integrated technological and administrative support platform. Highlighting DIT's unique selling points such as the wide variety of programmes, own awarding body and reputation will also assist the achievement of this target.

The next section addresses the opportunities and challenges in the provision of part-time programmes

2. Opportunities and Challenges

Research carried out by the HEA (2009) suggest that significant advances have been made by Irish higher education institutions in the innovative use of technology and virtual learning environments, providing opportunities for inclusion of a far greater cohort of students who would be unable to participate because of location, employment, disability or income. Indeed, there are opportunities to grow part-time participation in education through working with local and national business stakeholders, collaboration with employers, County Enterprise Boards and area partnerships. According to the research (HEA, 2009) road shows and open evenings are two initiatives focusing on part-time study which are deemed to be highly successful. Other supports that would facilitate part-time study include scholarships and Springboard projects. Research carried out by the HEA (2009) indicates that there are different strategies to assist part-time students such as modular study, specific technological support and out-reach programmes. Flexibility in terms of the time it takes to complete a programme of study, block modules and summer schools are also initiatives worthy of consideration. In addition a dedicated part-time administration desk is available to students in one particular institution (College o Engineering and Built Environment, 2012).

While opportunities abound there are many challenges to part-time study both in terms of the student experience and the delivery of part-time programmes. Research carried out by the EUROstudent Survey (2009), survey of Springboard applicants (2011) and feedback from the National Access Office Advisory Group (2010) suggest that there are barriers and challenges to part-

time education delivery and participation. Table 2 outlines some of the challenges identified from the literature.

Table 2: Challenges Facing Part-Time Study Participants

<p>Different treatment of part-time students</p> <p>Support facilities weak</p> <p>Full time students are the priority</p> <p>Lack of resources</p> <p>Lack of administration, services and supports particularly at night and at weekends</p> <p>Gaps in information and guidance</p> <p>All part-time students must pay fees and are not eligible to apply for maintenance grants (some labour market initiatives now being activated but they are limited)</p> <p>A narrower range of programmes</p> <p>Lack of clarity in application and admission processes</p> <p>Part-time students with disabilities do not have the same access to services as full time students</p> <p>Work and workload (participation is part-time but the work and workload equates to full time study)</p> <p>Part – time students doing same modules to the same standard with less contact hours / sit the same exams / focus is on the full time students and they get the better resources</p> <p>Funding Education</p> <p>Balance of Work / personal life / college is difficult</p>

Sources: HEA (2009: 2012); OECD (2004); National Strategy for Higher Education (2012) Springboard (2011); EUROStudent Survey (2011); National Access Office Advisory Group (2010); Darmody and Flemming (2009).

Challenges facing the Dublin Institute of Technology in providing part-time programmes include a number of constraints. Table 3 highlights those constraints.

Table 3: Constraints in the Provision of Part-Time Programmes

<p>Financial Constraints</p> <p>Access to buildings at night and at weekends</p> <p>Access to resources outside the 9-5 schedule</p> <p>Facilities not available to part-time students at night and weekends includes canteens</p> <p>Communications</p> <p>Lack of an integrated technological support service and system / WiFi / Blended learning platform / WebCourses</p> <p>Struggle to provide the flexibility required by part-time students because of cutbacks/ willingness of staff and financial constraints</p> <p>Difficulty in paying overtime or incentivising staff to participate outside of normal 9-5 working hours in order to facilitate part-time students</p> <p>Provision of support services at each campus is problematic because of centralisation and reduced staff levels</p> <p>Provision of shared modules and support module is problematic because of the location of the different campuses</p>
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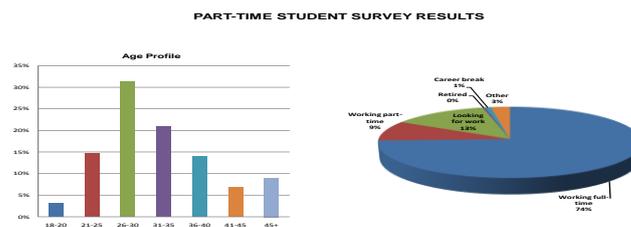
Source: Directorate of Academic Affairs and Registrar (2012)

3. The Needs of Part -Time and Life Long Learning Students

This next section analyses the needs of part-time and life long learning students. Further, it examines the reasons students return to study, why they choose a programme and highlights circumstances where students needs are not met.

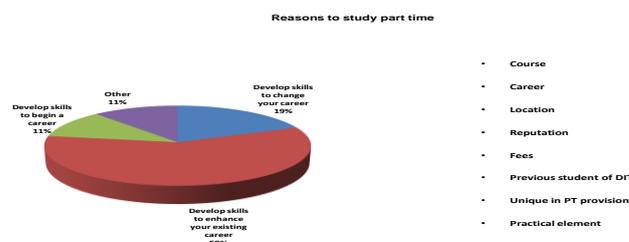
Research carried out indicates that the profile of the average part-time student is aged 23 or older, 53% are female, are from skilled, semi skilled, and unskilled backgrounds and less than 50% have a second level education (HEA, 2012; Russell, 2012). Seventy Six percent of these students are in full time employment, 9% are working part-time and 13% are seeking employment (Russell, 2012). In addition, the research indicates that part-time students on level 6 and 7 programmes have a higher retention rate than those on level 8 programmes (HEA, 2012). Research carried out by Russell (2012) provides a breakdown of the age profile of part-time students. Figure 1 reflects this profile.

Figure 1: Age Profile of Part-Time Students



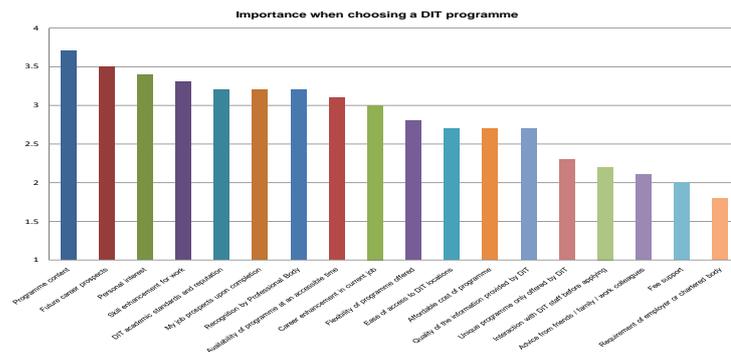
There are a number of reasons for students returning to part-time study which include economic, personal, civic and social reasons (HEA, 2012). However, Russell (2012) suggest that 59% of students return to part-time education to develop a skills to enhance their existing career, 19% return to develop skills to change career and 11% to begin a career. Figure 2 outlines the findings of Russell’s (2012) research.

Figure 2: Reasons to Study Part-Time



Research has also highlighted that there are a number of factors that are important when choosing a DIT programme to study part-time. The most important being programme content, future career prospects, personal interest, skills enhancement for work, DIT reputation, Job prospects upon completion and recognition by professional bodies. Figure 3 highlights the factors.

Figure 3: Factors of Importance when Choosing a Programme



Source (Russell (2012))

Research carried out by Johnson and Melia (2013) suggest that the majority students returned to part-time education on the level 6 Hospitality Management Programme because of a need to gain a qualification, to achieve a promotion or to start their own business. The majority of the students responding to the research also indicated that they would continue to the degree or level 7 programme on a part-time basis. The 2011 – 2012 cohort of students (40) were asked to indicate how they were informed of the programme and the following are the results of that research (Johnson and Melia, 2012):

- Sixteen (40%) were searching for the right course and found the information on the website
- Five (12.5%) students heard from supervisor / manager / Part of their training within their own organisation
- Seven (17.5%) students heard through word-of-mouth / Past Students / Colleagues at Work
- Six (15%) received the information from the College / Lecturers on the programme through their workplace
- Six (15%) got the information through their organisations / association websites

The research also indicates that the needs of the students are not met in certain circumstances. Table 4 highlights those circumstances.

Table 4: Circumstances where Students Needs are not met

Poor induction
Programmes mirroring full time programmes – lack of relevance
No integrated approach of flexible learning using technology – it depends on the skills of the lecturer
Help desk for students is non-existent
Poor communication for registration and support services
The expectation that technology and distance learning is acceptable to part –time students
WebCourses is not an easy portal to access or use
Timetabling changes are problematic
Assessments need to be scheduled across the programme not by module alone
Teamwork on assignments is difficult when in fulltime employment
Standard of some lecturers / content / notes are not high / dated
Access to WiFi is not satisfactory for students
Closing time of buildings does not correspond to timetable
Administrative support is not accessible
Cleanliness of buildings
Sense of being ignored by DIT
Registration for part-time students is very difficult
Canteen facilities are very poor / not open at night
Equipment in some classrooms is very basic
Technology doe not always work in the classrooms
Levels of heat / cold vary in classrooms
Quality of assessment not quantity
Group and large team assignments do not work for part-time students because of the difficulty of getting together to work
Getting credit for past study is inconsistent and takes a considerable amount of time / often the module is complete or nearly complete

Source: HEA (2012); Russell (2012); Johnson and Melia (2013)

The research has also highlighted that the need to collaborate with fellow students' face to face is an important learning tool and the needs of mature and part-time cohort must be considered in terms of engagement in the classroom with peers and lectures. Part-time students have a better attendance record and have chosen to return to education to meet with like minded people. This cohort do not want to be isolated doing a distance learning course / need the support of technology to provide access to material and delivery but want the face to face contact and a sense of belonging / a balance of both (Thomas, 2012). However, consideration must be given to the ability of the learners (undergraduate cohorts may be early drops outs from 2nd level education and do not always have the skills / abilities / resources for distance learning support, however, post graduate students have the ability to embrace technology to support their learning (HEA, 2012).

The research carried out by Johnson and Melia (2013) has also indicated that the mix of semesterisation delivery, block delivery of modules and projects worked well for students and suited their work schedules. Students chose the level six programme as the most suitable route to returning to part-time education because it allowed them a clear progression path to a level seven qualification but also provided them with a distinct qualification after two years and provided a number of modules that were totally suited to their industrial and work needs (Johnson and Melia, 2013).

The next section draws some conclusions to the literature research.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the nature of part-time student provision within DIT, using policy and strategy documents. The purpose was also to investigate the needs of part-time students and following these considerations provide recommendations for the future development of part-time student education at DIT.

The research showed that while part-time education is an important element of education at DIT, the focus is still on full-time education where the students get the better resources and attention from administration. However, it is evident from research carried out that a strategy for part-time education is being developed as one of the targets for Technological University status is 30% of the combined student population.

The research suggests that significant advances have been made by Irish higher education Institutions in the innovative use of technology and virtual learning environments. However, the research also suggests that DIT are finding this to be a challenge and that students perceive that the use of innovative technology is piecemeal and the level of usage depends on the skills of the lecturer, a worrying finding.

It is apparent from the research that there are different strategies to assist part-time students such as modular study, specific technological support and out-reach programmes. It is also apparent that in order to increase the numbers studying part-time there is a need to work with local and national business stakeholders and collaborate with employers, County Enterprise Boards and area partnerships. The development of DITs unique selling points such as the wide variety of programmes, its own awarding status, and reputation will assist in the growth of part-time numbers for the attainment of Technological University status.

It is possible to suggest that the challenges facing DIT in the development of part-time education are many and varied and are indeed stumbling blocks that are making it difficult to develop this aspect of its provision. It can be concluded that the lack of administration supporting part-time education provision is one of the major concerns and that the lack of an integrated technological system and platform / WiFi / Blended learning platforms and WebCourses are inhibiting growth of part-time education. Constraints such as financial, access to buildings at night and weekends, the ban on overtime, limited resources and facilities available, provision of support services are impacting on the quality and quantity of part-time provision. The provision of a wider choice of modules to support programmes is limited because of the physical location of the different campuses. In addition, a number of issues have been highlighted as presented in table 3. It is clear from the research that student needs are not being met because of these constraints

The research highlighted that the need to collaborate with fellow students' face to face is an important learning tool and the needs of mature and part-time cohorts must be considered in terms of engagement in the classroom with peers and lectures. Part-time students have a better attendance record and have chosen to return to education to meet with like minded people. It is also possible to argue that this cohort of student need technology to support their return to education but do not necessarily want technology to take away from their face-to-face interaction but that it supports their learning.

It is possible to conclude that students find the benefits they gain from part-time education far outweigh the challenges and that more students will return to education on a part-time basis in the future.

This research paper is limited in terms of the research in that it is a secondary research analysis only. Primary research would enhance this paper. A working group and the continued development of a strategy for part-time education is an important next step.

The next section presents future recommendations for part-time education in DIT.

5. Recommendations

This section of the paper presents a number of recommendations for the development of part-time education at DIT. These recommendations are developed as a result of the analysis of the literature.

It is possible to recommend a working group to continue to develop part-time education within DIT or to extend the brief of the part-time programme committee chaired by Dr. Paul O'Sullivan. The commitment to lifelong and flexible learning by the Department of Education and Skills needs to be continued and developed as part of this brief.

In terms of funding part-time education; it would be important to focus on Springboard and other funding initiatives and to widen the sources of funding. Targeted funding (Strategic Innovation Fund) needs to be developed further. It would also be important to provide clear information to all students considering part-time education on the funding avenues, eligibility and application.

Continued development of blended learning technologies' and access / resources / platforms is recommended with additional training for all students in their first months of starting a part-time programme. This would also involve an innovative integrated use of technology for off-campus learning. In addition, the use of all aspects of technology should be explored with an investment in cutting edge simulation packages for all programmes.

Easier access to information needs to be considered and that includes a focus on the provision of administrative staff for part-time students.

Recognition of prior learning facilities and resources for administration need to be developed in order that students receive accreditation for prior learning quickly so that they do not have to attend any lectures / complete assignments / sit exams for any module they are seeking APL.

It would be important to update the DIT website for part-time and CPD education which would make it more user-friendly and easier to access.

An integrated application and registration system is an essential requirement if DIT is to increase part-time numbers. Currently a pilot scheme is being tested but this needs to be implemented before the next intake of part-time students. The application system needs to allow programme leaders access to monitor applications and interact with applicants so that they are called for interview in a timely manner following their initial application (where interviews are part of the application process). On-line registration should be facilitated from this system.

The continued development of CPD modules needs to be addressed and managed. Clear progression paths from CPD modules to certificates and degrees are recommended with the information freely available to all potential students choosing the CPD route. Funding for CPD modules needs to be ring-fenced so that this aspect of part-time and lifelong learning can be developed further.

It would be important to provide a dedicated administration desk open for part-time students during their first month in the colleges. This desk should be available at night and at weekends when the students are actually on each college campus.

The timely implementation of the communications and marketing plan for part-time programmes should be actioned with innovative approaches to open days developed to attract additional students. Highlighting DITs unique selling points such as the wide variety of programmes, its own awarding body and reputation should be important elements of the communications plan for the recruitment of part-time students.

It would be important to carry out additional research on how students come to choose a DIT programme as this information would be invaluable for target marketing.

Consideration needs to be given to the method and type of delivery of programmes / modules on part-time programmes. For example programmes of shorter duration, block modules, summer schools, combination of blended learning and face-to-face interaction and project work are possibilities.

The implementation of the recommendations from the HEA (2012) document on Part-time Education and Training in Ireland is recommended. *(Transform systems of guidance and information for part-time and adult learners, Develop proposals on financial support for part-time students, Develop an accessible common application route for all part-time students, provide targeted support for first time mature students in part-time education, strengthen the evidence base on background and routes of entry of part-time students with a view for developing new policy in this area, set national and local targets for flexible and life long learning, develop detailed proposals to promote access for people with disabilities, support excellence in teaching, academic and pastoral supports as part of part-time education).*

The recommendations arising from the College of Engineering and Built Environment report of the Sub-Group on CPD and Part-Time Programmes to College executive (2012) are timely and should be implemented. *(An office and function with responsibilities for part-time and CD studies, a review of programme coordination, specialist marketing for part-time and CPD programmes, funding for part-time and CPD programmes, resources including dedicated resources / classrooms for high profile CPD modules / programmes, a review of the fee structures, delivery strategies and staff training)*

The research has highlighted that there is a higher participation and retention at level 6 and level 7 programmes. It would be important to recognise this and continue to provide these programmes and develop new programmes at these levels with progression paths developed to level 8 and 9.

A well developed induction programme is recommended for all part-time students. This programme should contain elements of: programme details, lecturing and administration team, exemption and APL process, Timetabling and assessment calendar, returning to learning as a part-time student, the electronic classroom, returning to study skills, support services, health and safety and an induction pack / student handbook.

The adoption and implementation of the above recommendations will impact favourably on the achievement of the 30% target of all students to be lifelong learning students enrolled in professional focused programmes and industry up-skilling for the designation of Technological University status.

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