2003-11-01

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"Lifelong learning includes progression, credit accumulation, diversification of provision, and flexible routeways between home, work, and education. It is lifelong, lifewide, voluntary and self-motivated."

White Paper on Adult Education – Learning for Life, Department of Education, Dublin: Department of Education and Science, 2000.

This paper examines the current position of mature students in the Dublin Institute of Technology, the largest third-level institute in Ireland. It also deals with the treatment of mature applicants, and the position of mature students in the Republic of Ireland in general. The focus of the paper is on equity issues, and in all discussions of equity the underpinning principle is equality of opportunity. Where places on a third-level course are limited, for example, all applicants must be treated equally and the places allocated in a 'fair' manner. This does not mean that one cannot discriminate in the true sense of the word but that there should be no 'unfair' discrimination. Fair can be taken to mean that the criteria used to discriminate between applicants are appropriate and not arbitrary. For example, a given criterion, such as proficiency in a particular language, might be appropriate in one context and arbitrary in another.

Background

Access to third-level education in the Republic of Ireland

The Irish third-level system is characterised by a demand for places which exceeds supply, in particular for 'prestige' courses such as medicine. To deal with this situation, places are allocated through the Central Applications Office on the basis of points, which are calculated from results in the Irish Leaving Certificate examinations (CAO, 2003a). In a small number of courses, interviews and/or portfolios also earn points for applicants. Equivalence tables exist to calculate points for applicants who undertake other school leaving examinations such as GC(S)Es (CAO, 2003b). In addition, applicants have to meet 'minimum entry requirements' for each course – typically a certain grade in mathematics, and Irish or English, as well as foreign languages and subjects directly relevant to the course in question. The first batch of standard places, in what is called Round 1, are allocated shortly after the publication of the Leaving Certificate results each August (CAO, 2003a). Medicine and dentistry, for example, are filled almost entirely by applicants who have obtained straight A1s, or close to it.

There is also a system for dealing with so-called non-standard applications: mature applicants, applicants with disabilities and applicants with other relevant qualifications or experience. Often these are called to interview by the colleges they have applied to, and they can be offered places in advance of the August Round 1 offering in what is known as 'Round 0'. These offers may be made even if the applicant has not met the minimum entry requirements for the course (CAO, 2003a).

Although in general the points system has been accepted as a fact of life and a necessary evil by applicants, it has come under increased criticism in recent years., Each August sees cases of applicants missing courses by just a few points or – worse still – missing courses due to random selection among applicants with the same number of points. The criticism tends to focus on the harshness and inflexibility of the system. What is rarely questioned is the equity, or even the purpose, of the system. It is assumed to be fair, in that the same criteria are applied to all applicants, but the criteria themselves need to be examined. What is the purpose of a system for allocating places? Is it to allocate places to those who are likely to perform best; or to those who deserve the place most; or those who will benefit most from the place; or who are most likely to use the qualification? Does it take into account competing economical, individual and social goals? The question must be asked whether the current system is 'fit for purpose'.

The points commission

In October 1997 the then minister for education and science, Micheál Martin, set up a commission to examine the points system. Chaired by Professor Áine Hyland, the commission was charged with reviewing the points system 'having regard to the necessity of ensuring a transparent, impartial and efficient system for entry to third-level institutions' (Department of Education, 2002).

The commission invited submissions, published a background document as a basis for public consultative meetings, and commissioned research. The final report dealt with many of the issues of concern, including the

impact of the system on second-level students, characteristics of selection systems and the predictive validity of the system. It also dealt in detail with mature students (Points Commission, 1999). In particular it found that:

- Mature applicants do not typically have access to the types of guidance and support available to school leavers in making decisions about third-level. The commission endorsed an existing recommendation that 'a comprehensive guidance service for adults be provided' (Department of Education, 1998). This is especially important where applicants are unsuccessful and require feedback in order to improve their chances in a subsequent application (Points Commission 1999, pp. 104, 114–5).
- Provision for mature students varies greatly from institution to institution, but that the 'number of places reserved for mature students in third-level institutions is quite limited compared to other countries', and went on to recommend that 'by the year 2005, each institution should set aside a quota of at least 15% of places for students entering at age 23 or above' (ibid., pp. 109–10).
- There is a need to question, or at least to debate openly, 'the pervading culture in Ireland… that school leavers have an automatic right to continue to third-level and that their rights outweigh those of other groups" (ibid., p. 112). The commission felt that this emphasis on entry to third-level directly from school based on a single terminal examination increases the pressure on school-leavers: increased provision for mature students would reduce this pressure even for today's leavers by holding out the prospect of a real alternative opportunity later on (ibid., p. 113).

Mature students in third-level education in the Republic of Ireland

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) defines a mature student as being 'at least 23 years of age on 1 January of the year of entry or re-entry to an approved course'. There are additional implications in terms of minimum entry requirements (which may be waived), and also for grant aid – as mature students are no longer assumed to be dependant on their parents (although they may be reckoned to be), and may be assessed on their own income alone. There is a 'Back to Education Allowance' available to mature students on Social Welfare (HEA, 2003). The Central Applications Office deals with the applications for most colleges, though some use a direct entry system (CAO, 2003a). In many ways mature applicants have never had so many opportunities in the Irish third-level system. In recent years, a decreasing number of school leavers has meant an increasing number of available courses and places at third-level. This has been reflected in a drop in the overall number of applications to the CAO The CAO figures include mature and other non-standard applicants in the case of most colleges, including the DIT. There has also been a significant increase in the number of courses offered. This means that, even with an increase in the number of mature applicants, the overall number of applicants has actually fallen since 1998, although it has remained quite steady in 2000–2002, as shown in Table 1.

Anecdotal evidence would bear out that non-standard students are often spoken of as filling the gaps left by declining numbers of standard students, rather than as being entitled to those places as of right. Some commentators claim that this interest in mature and other non-standard applicants has more to do with colleges trying to maintain numbers that in offering educational opportunities to under-represented groups.

'There has been a proliferation of access programmes and initiatives (the cynical might say the declining population of school-leavers makes these a more attractive option to colleges now) but the reality is that these are insufficient to make a real difference in term of numbers' (Byrne, 2002).

In spite of these developments there is no evidence that there has been a major improvement in successful participation by mature students at third-level in Ireland. In 2000, only 3.9% of entrants to degree courses, and 4.1% of entrants to diploma/certificate courses, were aged 23 or over on 1January that year (CAO, 2000). The following year, 4.6% of entrants to degree courses, and 4.8% of entrants to diploma/certificate courses, were aged 23 or over on 1 January 2001 (CAO, 2001). By 2002 this had changed to 6.0% of entrants to both degree and diploma/certificate courses being 23 or over on the corresponding 1 January (CAO, 2002). This shows steady, if unspectacular, progress.

There is no room for complacency here, however. At this rate of growth it could be 2010 or later before the 2005 target of 15% is reached. In fact, one study has shown that Ireland falls far behind other OECD countries in participation levels for mature students in higher education (OECD, 2000). This study found that just over 2% of new entrants to university in Ireland were aged over 26. On average, in the countries surveyed, almost 20% of new entrants were aged 26 years or over.

The Union of Students in Ireland

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) has taken a strong campaigning position on improving access to third-level for under-represented groups, including mature students, and has recently published a document on equality of access (USI, 2002). The document was launched by Jacqui O'Riordan, director of the Higher Education Equality Unit (HEEU). Of particular relevance to mature students are the recommendations that:

- The Government should design and implement measures to meet mature-student demand and ensure flexible, innovative responses to their needs.
- Outreach and guidance services be established in order to encourage, enable and facilitate the participation of adults in education.
- Tax relief should be extended to all courses undertaken by employees that are approved by the Department of Education and Science.

USI has also consistently called on the Government to move quickly towards achieving the target of 15% of third-level places for mature students.

The Higher Education Equality Unit

The HEEU at University College Cork was established in 1992 and is funded by the HEA (HEEU, 2003). Its role is to 'promote equality of access and opportunity in Irish higher education institutions, for both staff and students'. It has lobbied the HEA seeking support services, financial provision, further research on attrition rates of mature students, and increased opportunities (HEEU, 1998). In June 2001 the HEEU organised a seminar on research into mature students in higher education, and some of the papers are referred to below.

The current situation in the DIT

The DIT's stated policy in relation to mature students is similar to those of other institutions, and is set out in documentation made available to prospective students. These documents do include many positive and encouraging statements: 'There is no upper age limit'; 'Admissions Office staff and Faculty Staff are always available to provide information and answer queries'; 'Mature applicants are not required to meet the normal minimum entry requirements' (DIT, 1999). In addition, the Lifelong Learning website provides a comprehensive range of resources and links for potential and existing mature students (Kelly, 2003). Applications for each course are sent to the relevant DIT school/department to be examined by the relevant course leader(s) . It has certainly been the case in previous years that this assessment might not have been done as thoroughly as it should have been. In addition, each school designates a mature-student coordinator; however, these are lecturers with a small time allowance for the extra responsibilities, and without specific administrative backup. Historically, little direction or support was given to course leaders in terms of appropriate criteria and selection, and rarely was a decision – either to offer a place or not to offer a place – reviewed. This situation is now being addressed by the establishment of the Lifelong Learning Unit. The continuing problem seems to be with administrative issues, perhaps related to staffing levels in the central Admissions Office, which often result in the applications being sent out very tardily to the schools/departments. In 2002, applications in the Faculty of Tourism and Food arrived on the 13 May accompanied by a covering note requesting that 'interviews be carried out in early May and decisions forwarded in late May'. This occurred despite the applications being with the CAO since 1 February. A similar timescale was agreed for 2003, but again the applications did not arrive in time to meet the first deadline and interviews were held in early June despite a target date of 6-9 May.

About 200 full-time mature students start in the DIT in any given year: 256 in the year 2000, 201 in 2001, and in 2002 the figure dropped to 165. According to the CAO, the DIT had 3,297 net acceptances in 2002 (CAO, 2002). This 165 represents just 5%, lower than the national average of 6% already quoted from the same report –already far lower than the OECD average of 20% and even the agreed target of 15%. In fact, the DIT percentage of mature entrants had in 2000 and 2001 been ahead of the national average and dipped below it in 2002. This position is shown in Figure 1.

Considering that the DIT is a major provider of third-level education in the state, with 9% of all CAO acceptances (CAO, 2002) this drop has also adversely affected the national figure. If the DIT had simply held its 2000 figure through to 2002, the overall national percentage would be 6.2% instead of 6.0%. If the DIT had grown at the same rate as other third-level institutions, the national percentage would be 6.6%.

The Lifelong Learning Unit

Dr Diana Kelly was the first head of DIT's Lifelong Learning Unit within the Directorate of Academic Affairs, with responsibility for policy regarding mature students. Before coming to the DIT she spent 20 years working

in the California Community College system, where latterly she was director of continuing education. In Dr Kelly's opinion, the primary equity problem facing mature students in the DIT is that most of them must pay tuition fees. At the moment there are no tuition fees payable by EU citizens pursuing a first full-time undergraduate course in the south of Ireland, but fees are still payable for part-time courses. Mature students in the DIT are most often part-time due to family, work or other commitments. It would be better to have 'free fees' for all students, but worldwide governments are pulling back from this. In the California Community College system, generally all students (full or part-time, mature or school leaver) pay $11 per unit studied – and even this modest fee can be waived. Most modules comprise three units, and a full-time student would generally take five modules per semester (part-time students take less). With two semesters per year the fee would amount to only $330. This fee is even less than the fees for registration, capitation and exams paid by students in Ireland's 'free-fees' system. Dr Kelly feels that the California system is more equitable. She points out that modularisation of undergraduate courses would blur the distinction between part-time and full-time students, as individuals could register for more or less courses depending on their circumstances .

It might also be argued that the opportunity costs of returning to college having worked for a number of years are greater than those of going directly to college after school. However, it is not clear whether this could be considered an equity issue. A further problem is that the low number of mature students overall often means that most mature students are the only mature student in their class. Dr Kelly believes that this contributes to a feeling of alienation, and ultimately to lower retention. She feels that this alienation exacerbates the common reactions that she calls dispositional barriers: 'It's too late for me', 'I won't be hired', or 'I feel uncomfortable with all the young ones'. Students also have problems settling into study habits, and in particular with mathematical subjects. According to Dr Kelly, in the California Community College system the median age of students is 29, and in her experience in the US, 50% of all higher education students are aged 25 or over. These figures are broadly confirmed by the College Board (2002), which gives a figure of 44% for students over age 25 for 1996, although it predicts a drop back to 39% by 2008 due to demographics. The OECD figures for Ireland given above compare very poorly with these.

Dr Kelly feels that there exists a further inequity problem in that there may be a serious ageism problem in relation to hiring in Ireland, which means that, for example, a 45-year-old person who hopes for a career change might be wasting their time in returning to college. This opinion is supported by research quoted in the Age & Opportunity Newsletter where it is claimed 'a Europe-wide study of age discrimination carried out in 1993 found that recruitment practices discriminated against people from age 40 on in most countries' (Age & Opportunity, 2000). This prejudice might be based not only on age, but also on an assumption that older applicants have more commitments, would be inclined to work less, andexpect more money than younger applicants. Such issues would generally not be considered fair criteria in recruitment. There is new legislation in the area in Ireland, the Employment Equality Act (1998), which outlaws discrimination in relation to employment on nine grounds: gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religious belief, age, disability, race and membership of the Traveller community. But its effect has not yet been seen (Department of Justice, 2002).

DIT initiatives

Due to concern about attrition rates among students, the DIT set up an internal retention project in 2000. The project team initially examined the status of the entry cohort of 1994. While the greater number would be expected to complete their chosen course within the normal length of time (3 or 4 years in most cases), this 6 year period allowed for longer courses and repeated years or years out. Completion rate for full-time mature students was only 33%. The figure was just over 60% for students overall (DIT, 2000). The report went on to identify possible reasons for this, and some of these are being addressed. Unfortunately this research only deals with full-time students. This situation contrasts starkly with other reports which show much higher success rates for mature students in Ireland over much the same period, notably Healy's 1997 study (quoted in Action Group, 2001, p. 82) which showed 87% successfully graduating. From an intake of 119 mature students in University College Cork in 1994, 80 graduated with honours degrees and 8 with pass degrees (Henchion, 2001).

The DIT has run an 'Untapping your Potential' programme for the last four years, dealing with study, time and life management issues. Participation is free to all mature students, and offered at a number of DIT sites. Feedback received by Dr Kelly suggests that the best aspect of the programme is the sense of community it creates.

Current issues

Recent developments
That lifelong learning has become a Government priority can be seen from the level of activity in the last few years. In 2000, a White Paper was published setting out priorities in the area (Department of Education, 2000). While dealing with more than higher-level education, it confirmed the finding of earlier reports that there

very serious barriers to participation being faced by mature students. It promised equality of access and a systematic approach to educational provision, and action on the part-time/full-time fee anomalies. A targeted, higher-education, mature-student fund, to reach at least €12.7m 'to enable third-level institutions to make innovative strategic shifts towards adult-friendly policies' was proposed. In September 2000, Minister for Education and Science Dr Michael Woods set up an action group on access to third level education under the chairmanship of Dr Cormac McNamara. Its role was to advise the department on the development of a co-ordinated framework to promote access by mature and disadvantaged students to third-level education. This group reported in May 2001, and called for the establishment of a national office for equity of access to higher education within the HEA (Action Group, 2001). It found particular fault with the piecemeal approach currently being taken:

The work is uncoordinated. It lacks cataloguing, and there is no structure to take responsibility for identification and dissemination of best practice. On an individual level, many disadvantages students are still unable to access third-level places or sustain participation in college, even though they receive significant supports; the supports available may be the wrong mix in their individual circumstances, or it may simply be substantial but inadequate.

A number of very specific recommendations in relation to mature students were made, including: the broadening, simplification and coordination of the procedures for entry; evaluation and improvement of guidance services; improvements in financial support; and provision of childcare facilities. In particular, the report endorsed the setting up of a targeted higher-education mature-student fund, and the setting aside of at least 15% of places for mature students.

The HEA itself has become a vocal supporter of increased access to third-level education for mature students. Among their recent initiatives are:

- In their submission to the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education, they have proposed a national programme aimed at addressing inequality of access to higher education, and a dedicated equality office to be set up to draw up the policy outline and oversee the implementation of that programme.
- In December 2000 they began research into the demand for places among potential mature students (Action Group, 2001). This involves surveying all 1999/2000 applicants for full-time undergraduate places (both successful and unsuccessful), for part-time places and participants in access courses in order to get a profile of these groups and make recommendations to improve the provision being made for them (Hayden, 2001).

The taskforce

A taskforce on lifelong learning was established in 2000 by the Departments of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and of Education and Science. Its report was published in 2002, and its remit included access throughout life to formal third-level education, but went beyond this to include all aspects of the 'interrelationship between employability and social inclusion' and a wish 'to promote and develop active citizenship' (Taskforce on Lifelong Learning, 2002). The Taskforce noted a number of key issues which are of relevance to mature students at third level, and set up a subgroup to look at the whole area of 'Access/Barriers to Lifelong Learning'. They found in common with other sources already referred to that 'the current fragmentation of information is a serious block to Lifelong Learning' and they recommended both information provision and guidance.

The NQAI

In 2001 the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) was set up with two principal tasks: to establish and maintain a national framework of qualifications and to promote and facilitate access, transfer and progression (NQAI, 2003a, NQAI, 2003b). Among the groups identified by the Authority who 'in the past had limited access to education and training awards' are 'those with limited levels of basic education, mature learners, older learners, learners who are unemployed or not in the labour force, workers in unskilled or low-skilled occupations, people with disabilities, those living in remote or isolated locations, members of the Traveller community or minority ethnic groups, and refugees' (ibid, p. 6). The Authority acknowledges that the current structure does not accommodate these groups well and that achieving its objectives will require 'many significant changes in the systems and structures of Irish education and training' (NQAI, 2003a, p. 2).

Equality legislation

The setting of a target 'quota' of 15% mature entrants by 2005 is an example of affirmative action, and as such is open to scrutiny. This paper does not detail the difficulties associated with affirmative action, other than to note that there are many arguments for and against. In fact many affirmative-action initiatives have been rolled

back, notably in the US where the Bakke decision of 1978 allowing quotas under certain conditions has been overturned by Hopwood vs. State of Texas (1996), and the decision of the University of California to end special access (Gallagher, 2002). Recently these issues have again been raised in the US Supreme Court where two separate affirmative action policies of the University of Michigan were ruled on. The court held that a process that allocated 20 extra points on a 150-point scale to undergraduate applicants from minority races was unconstitutional (Reid, 2003); but that a system for assessing graduate applicants to the law school which used race as a factor was constitutional because 'student body diversity was a compelling state interest' (Reuters, 2003).

It would not be unimaginable that in a scenario where 15% of places were reserved for mature applicants, unsuccessful 'standard' applicants would take recourse to the courts. In this regard it is important that the proponents of affirmative-action schemes can explain how affirmative action differs from 'arbitrary', and therefore unfair, discrimination. However, it is possible that even a robust defence of the principles of affirmative action might not be sufficient in the context of the Equal Status Act of 2000. The Act deals with discrimination outside the employment context, including education, provision of goods, services and accommodation, and disposal of property, and outlaws discrimination on the same nine grounds as those covered by the Employment Equality Act (1998) detailed above (Department of Justice, 2002). While many of the cases taken so far have been of the expected type – members of the travelling community who were refused access to public houses for example – a number of unexpected cases have also been taken. Among these is the case where a parent, objecting to a public house insisting that children be off the premises after a certain time, took a case under the age-discrimination section of the Act. It is not inconceivable that this legislation might be used to challenge quotas for mature students.

Freedom of information

Although passed in 1997, the Freedom of Information Act only began to apply to educational institutions in October 2001. All documents prepared after that date, and some before, come under its scope, in particular interview records, internal correspondence relating to applications, and even notes written on application forms for applicants since 2002 have all come under the scope of the Act, and applicants as a matter of course have a right to copies of these documents. Previously access could only be ensured by court order. The initial impact of the Act on the processing of applications is likely to be a tightening of procedures, and the development of consistent practice. This is in line with recommendations made by various interested parties.

Part-time and full-time courses

Most part-time or evening courses at DIT are diploma/certificate or short courses, and most degree programmes are not available in a part-time or evening format.. Mature students often prefer to follow part-time courses due to other commitments, a view backed up by the Points Commission (Points Commission, 1999). Some of the inequities inherent in this have already been pointed out: in particular fees, are payable for part-time courses. This issue is also addressed by the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning and found that 'it is critical to remove the fee barriers which deter a return to learning, if the key objective is to be achieved of raising the qualifications of the adult population, thus improving competitiveness and social cohesion (Taskforce on Lifelong Learning, 2002, p. 39). The Points Commission notes a further inequity in that, typically, support services in third-level institutions are focused on full-time students (ibid., p. 106). Indeed, even standard office opening hours are often inconvenient for part-time students who are usually in the college mainly in the evening.

Which mature students?

Once a decision has been made to facilitate mature or other 'non-standard' entry, it becomes important to decide on the criteria to select suitable applicants. The Points Commission, while accepting that an 'appropriately developed' Leaving Certificate is the most appropriate mechanism for selecting school leavers, recommends that 'third-level institutions should move towards a coordinated system of assessment of mature student applications, under the CAO, and that such a system be in place for mature students seeking a place commencing in autumn 2002'. It acknowledges that 'there should be a single evaluation of a mature person's application for a third-level place in any broad course area and that where diverse courses are applied for there should be a common base evaluation for each application' (Points Commission, 1999, pp. 114–15). However such a system is not yet in place.

The DIT in 2003 prepared 'Guidelines for Evaluating Mature Student Applications' and 'Guidelines for Interviewing Mature Student Applicants'. These documents were circulated to the schools where the applications are currently assessed and represent a useful move towards a unified system, at least within the DIT. Dr Kelly believes that there is a need for multifaceted criteria in the selection process, including APL

(accreditation of prior learning) and APEL (accreditation of prior experiential learning). Rather than concentrating on an age threshold or cut-off point, she prefers to speak of 'multiple life roles'.

Issues arising from recent journal articles

A special issue of Comparative Education in 1999 focused on lifelong learning, and raised a number of points relevant to this paper. In his article 'Global trends in lifelong learning and the response of the universities', for example, Peter Jarvis argues that moves towards lifelong learning in universities are being driven more by a response to globalisation, and a pragmatic desire to adapt to changing market forces, than a commitment to an opening of education to all (Jarvis, 1999). He feels that where 'universities are not responding to the needs of the international division of labour, transnational companies are taking the initiative in creating their own universities'. Simply put, it is a survival instinct on the part of the traditional universities. The globalisation theme is taken up by Edmund King in his article 'Education revised for a world in transformation'. While not agreeing as to the motivation for initiatives in lifelong learning, he does argue that the current system is hopelessly out of date and in need of a radical overhaul to adapt to new understandings of education and to deal with "An Upheaval of Priorities in 'Lifelong Learning'" (King, 1999). The lesson from the US, which is ahead of both the UK and Ireland in terms of lifelong learning, would seem to be that the result of the development of lifelong learning will be a 'serious underemployment of people's learning capacities' which will only be addressed by substantial economic reforms and a change in the nature of work (Livingstone, 1999). Livingstone deals in detail with 'credential inflation' for employment, charts the phenomenon in both the US and Canada, and shows that in spite of this the trend during the 1970s to 1990s was away from underqualification and towards underemployment. He does allow that education is not only about developing employment skills, but also about self-fulfilment.

Andrew Marks is an interesting commentator on mature student issues, and he questions whether the focus of much education, which is to prepare young people for employment, is suitable for those mature students who are more focused on 'intellectual expansion' than career development (Marks, 1999). In amore recent, brief paper, he argues that 'many potentially excellent adult students are put off the idea of university by its image as a place solely for well-qualified teenagers', and suggests a model of two years further education followed by two years in university (Marks, 2002).

Michael Osborne has been researching issues around lifelong learning and access to further and higher education for many years. In a recent paper he compared policy and practice in six countries, including Ireland (Osborne, 2003). He found that 'the second major imperative at institutional level for structural changes is that retention be improved' where 'access as flexibility' is the first major imperative. He also quotes Davies' greater emphasis in England on 'getting through' in parallel with 'getting in' (ibid., p. 52). This paper was also interesting in that the research described was funded by the Scottish Executive, showing how seriously these issues are considered by our nearest neighbours.

A recent Irish paper pointed out that while access programmes can go some of the way to 'encourage greater participation of the socially marginalised groups in third-level education' (, and that support and flexibility are inherent in suchprogrammes, there is no evidence that 'degree/diploma courses have evolved to meet student needs' (McGuire et al., 2003, pp. 42, 47).

Most research into mature students focuses on students who have succeeded in entering the system, and often deals with their subsequent success or lack of success. On the other hand, it has become quite common in business research to look closely not only at customers, but at enquiries from people who did not become customers. In a similar vein Mark Murphy and Tom Inglis (2000) have looked at unsuccessful applicants to Ireland's largest university – University College Dublin. They found that the application process itself was a barrier, as was the lack of a standardised procedure for assessing applications and the absence of recognised access routes. These latter two are issues which have now been widely recognised, but the first is also a cause for concern.

When an institute sets out to facilitate mature students from under-represented socio-economic groups it has to deal with two sets of problems simultaneously. In examples where this has been undertaken and studied the combination of factors identified – situational, institutional and dispositional – can be wide reaching (Bamber and Tett, 1999). Again the clearest conclusion is that more and different support is necessary to enable these non-traditional students to participate and to achieve academic success. As the DIT is traditionally a provider of vocational education, with a mix of certificate, diploma and degree courses, all of these articles would have relevance for the DIT's emerging lifelong learning strategy.

Questions which should be asked

How should we define a 'mature' student? Is being over a certain age an adequate definition? Is 23 old enough?
If there are arbitrary criteria being applied to the treatment of mature/adult learners then the cut-off age is certainly one. The age defined by the HEA for application to colleges in the Republic of Ireland is 23 (HEA, 2003), whereas in the UK it is 21 (UCAS, 2003). In the US, for research purposes an 'adult learner' is usually someone aged 25 or older (College Board, 2002), but in fact the age of the applicant is not used in the application process and there is no special application process for mature applicants. When one considers that students typically leave school and enter college at an earlier age in Ireland than in the UK, the average age at entry in Ireland is 18½ – only in the Philippines is it lower (OECD, 2000), this means that there is a significantly longer period between leaving school and being eligible for consideration as a mature student – even between the two parts of Ireland. As pointed out by the Points Commission, this makes the option of working for a few years and returning to education far less attractive.

Could the current system be used as a fallback by already well represented groups?
This has to be a concern. The Points Commission sees the potential of mature entry being seen as a 'soft option' as an argument against lowering the age threshold to 21 (Points Commission, 1999, p. 107). It would be invidious if a move to promote equity had the opposite effect, and increased representation from over-represented sectors of society.

Does the DIT currently receive enough viable mature applications? If not what can be done to improve the applications?
Although the number of mature entrants during the period 2000–2002 has been falling, the number of applicants has actually been rising. In 2000 there were 650 applicants who indicated that they were mature on their application forms. In 2001 this figure was 751, and in 2002 it was 970 <--Personal communications from the DIT Admissions Office, May - July 2003; Dublin.-->. In fact this does not represent the total of applicants who actually were eligible to be classified as mature, as some over-23 year-olds apply in the ordinary way. Even allowing for students who do not avail of the 'mature route', but who are allocated places anyway, this represents conversion rates of applicants to entrants of 39%, 27% and 17% respectively at the very best. Even though the overall increase in applications means that a lower proportion needs to be viable and that a conversion rate of about 50% would meet the 2005 target, the DIT is actually disimproving, and is barely meeting a third of the target, as can be seen from Figure 2.

Questions must be asked as to why this dramatic falloff is happening. Are the applicants in 2002 really less suitable, or are offers not been taken up? This situation contrasts with the overall CAO picture. In 2000 there were a total of 33,077 CAO applicants who indicated some preference for a DIT course – somewhere between preference 1 and 10 on either the degree or certificate/diploma list. These are referred to by the CAO as 'Total Mentions'. In 2001 this figure was 30,816, and in 2002 it had fallen 28,156. The conversion rates for these have been 10%, 11% and 12% respectively, as there are currently around 3,300 entrants a year.

So, ironically, the DIT is increasing its standard CAO acceptances while at the same time reducing its mature acceptances. In fact the conversion rates are tending towards each other. However, as the DIT has agreed to the target of 15% of all entrants being classified as mature by 2005, this means that about 500 mature entrants have to be found somewhere. It is unlikely that they can come from this relatively small number of applications unless the conversion rate is much improved – to about 50%. The overall number of applicants must also be increased.

Further research is needed to study why the DIT is performing as it is, and to find examples of best practice to improve this.

As it is not enough to facilitate entry – how do you ensure continuation/completion? Is the non-completion rate higher for mature students?
We have seen that there are higher non-completion rates for mature students in the DIT, and that support is required if this gap is to be closed. Of course this support must be appropriate, and as identified by the Action Group on Access it must be in the 'correct mix'. The Points Commission identifies financial support, and the removal of various financial anomalies, as being crucial for mature students; but also identifies the need for support in terms of induction into the third-level environment – both academic and social. Progress must also include transfer between courses and progression from certificate to diploma to degree.

Does the format of third-level education itself discriminate against mature students – full-time vs. part-time, attitudes of staff towards students, independence of students, compatibility with family life/caring and social life?

The DIT is the largest single provider of part-time courses in the Republic, with over 250 course offerings – some of which lead to ordinary degrees. However, most DIT courses leading to honours degrees are only available on a full-time basis. Many of the courses offered full-time are not currently available on a part-time

basis, and those courses that are available on a part-time basis are mainly at sub-degree level. As already mentioned this should improve with the development of modular programmes of study. In this context it is worth considering what Dr Don Thornhill, chairperson of the HEA, had to say at 'Challenges for the Millennium - The Future Shape of Third Level' (Thornhill, 2000):Mature and part-time students are not a homogeneous category. They include students and learners involved in second-chance or 'catch-up' education as well as individuals who have already secured third-level qualifications and who are taking further courses either for professional reasons or for personal development. These groups start off from different positions. They have different requirements and face different constraints but they share one common feature. Their needs will not be addressed efficiently by an inflexible model of day-time teaching based on the traditional academic year."

Commentators have identified the need to look beyond access as in-reach (to attract full-time students) and out-reach (involving educational partnerships with the wider community) and towards access as flexibility – incorporating APL, open and distance learning (Osborne, 2003).

Is a separate entry system for mature students, and other non-standard applicants, unfair in itself? Is there even a danger of this? Is this unavoidable in any form of affirmative action?
Dr Kelly is clear that she does not like quotas, and the impression sometimes caused that this involves bending over backwards to facilitate the entry of one student who may not have the ability to complete at the expense on one who has. She prefers the introduction of access courses to level the playing pitch, and is currently working on the design of such a course in a modular structure for the DIT. As we have seen, it is possible that a quota system would be open to challenge in the courts.

Do non-standard means of entry (i.e. other than the points system) foster any form of bad feeling? If so, do we just have to live with that?
Dr Kelly does not believe that this is the case in the DIT, again because there are so few mature students at the moment, but that there are problems in the US. The way to overcome this, she feels, is for the criteria for admission to be fair, clear and open. Indeed she feels that the SATs (Scholastic Assessment Tests) currently used widely in the US are not fair in that there is evidence of particular groups consistently performing better or worse on them.

Conclusions

As we have seen, the target of 15% of places at third-level to be reserved for mature students has been widely accepted: the Points Commission, the HEA, USI, the Access Group on Access to Third Level Education and the White Paper on Adult Education all accept it as a given. In addition, it has been written into the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness, Framework IV, 'Post-Second Level Participation, including by Mature Students' (Action Group, 2001). However the fact remains that Ireland has one of the lowest participation rates for mature students at third-level.

'Equality of Opportunity' for mature students is not just about access to courses but also about retention, and completion with attainment of life goals, which often include employment. These might be called access, progress and success. How is the DIT performing?
In terms of access, the DIT is not performing well. Even at 200 students entering a year – a figure that was not reached in 2002 – it falls below the average for the Institute of Technology sector in Ireland, and way short of the OECD norms and agreed official targets. In common with other colleges the approach in uncoordinated, and uncatalogued (Action Group, 2001). It is clear that more needs to be done to attract applications, to progress as many as possible of the existing applications, and to develop a set of entry criteria to include APL/APEL. For those students who narrowly miss these criteria, Dr Kelly's new access course (see above)<-- link--> might provide a bridge. It must also be accepted that mature students do not have access to adequate third-level guidance, and that this places them at a further disadvantage vis-à-vis school leavers. The DIT cannot solve this problem alone, but it can be part of the solution.

Regarding progress, the DIT's own retention project shows that the situation is far worse for mature students than for school leavers – although at 60%, the overall completion rate is also a cause for concern. There are many reasons for this, some of which stem from the course structure in the DIT, but it is to be hoped that the introduction of a flexible modular structure will improve matters here. It should also have a positive effect of the number of applications. If it also involves a change in the distinction between full-time and part-time courses, it would bring additional benefits. So it may well be that the DIT's faults are both of omission and commission, and that the format of education offered is not appropriate. How much of this could be addressed when, or if, the DIT moves to a modular system? However to achieve a satisfactory level of mature-student participation requires more than a change in course structure, laudable policy objectives, and a small group of committed people working diligently either centrally or locally. It will need significant resources, and the reality is that this will only be fully realised as the number of school leavers entering continues to decline.

Recommendations

The DIT policy towards mature applicants is broadly in line with international standards. However, the practice seems to fall far from the laudable standards contained in the policy. Worryingly there has even been slippage – the numbers of mature entrants is falling when it should be rising. This will have to be addressed as a matter of urgency. In the short term the DIT will need to further develop the criteria for the selection of mature applicants, and this will require research to establish international best practice. With a conversion rate of applications to entrants of only 17% in 2002, is it the case that the DIT is not getting enough viable applications, or is the DIT not recognising the viable applications that it does get? Effort will also have to be put into attracting mature students and into facilitating their joining the system through pre-registration workshops, application workshops, access courses and support; and facilitating their successfully passing through the system. Effort will also be needed in developing a culture among staff, particularly among those involved in dealing with mature applications, which is disposed towards facilitation of applicants. In particular the administration of mature applications will have to be speeded up and streamlined. Not only is this delay frustrating and de-motivating for the applicants, it may mean that some accept offers for other institutions because they are unsure if they will ever hear from the DIT. It is hard to understand how it takes ten weeks for applications to the CAO to be forwarded to the individual schools within the DIT: an improvement of even a few weeks in this would be of significant use.

Table 1. Higher Level Entry 1998–2002

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Applications	66,012	65,253	63,451	63,810	63,886
Degree Acceptances (nett)	18,872	20,179	20,786	20,934	21,101
Dip/Cert Acceptances (nett)	16,189	16,663	16,739	15,691	15,526
Degree Courses	325	365	387	416	458
Diploma/Cert Courses	338	352	374	343	328

Source: CAO (2002) *Board of Directors Report for 2002*, Galway: Central Applications Office.

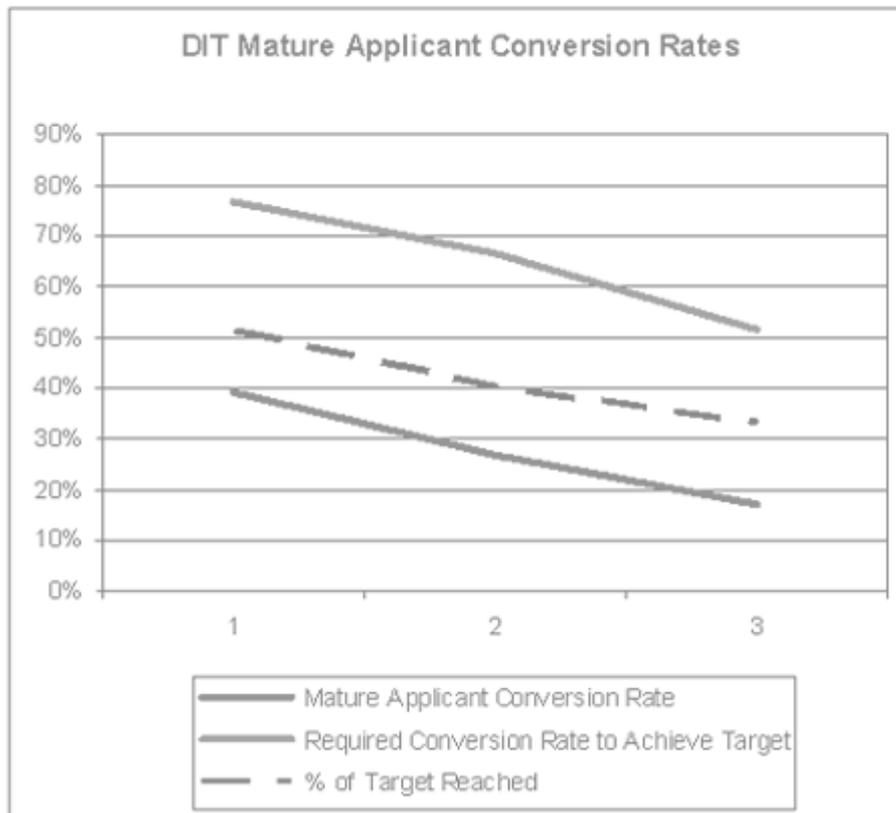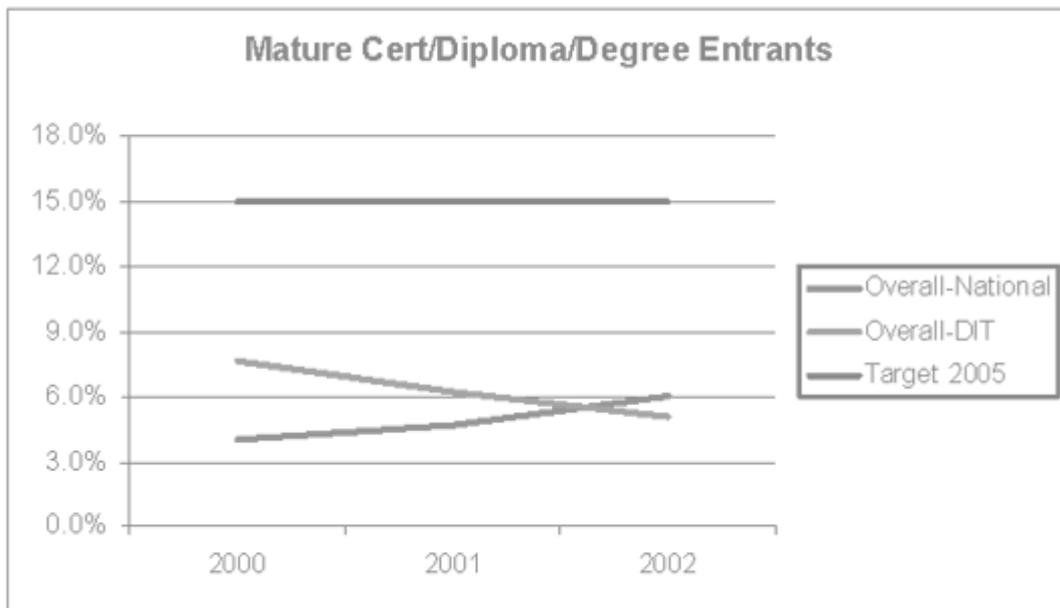Figure 2. Actual and target mature applicant conversion rates

Figure 1. Percentage of entrants classed as 'Mature', 2000–02

Acknowledgement

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