

## MATURE STUDENTS AND CONTINUING EDUCATION IN IRELAND

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Interest in mature students and continuing education has increased considerably in recent years in Ireland. At the same time educational organizations and institutions have gradually responded more to the needs of mature students. This paper is concerned with the position of part-time mature undergraduate students in the university sector. The main reports and documents concerning continuing education are reviewed. The admission procedures for part-time undergraduates, the courses that are available to such students, and enrolment trends between the years 1983/84 and 1989/90 are outlined. Two of the main barriers to the participation of adult students in continuing education, finance and the availability of access courses, are discussed.

The 1960s witnessed growth in interest and change in Irish education. The first major report of the period, *Investment in Education* (1965), was based on the principle that the educational system had a crucial contribution to make to economic development. The report also saw the need for greater equality of opportunity so that all members of society would be given the chance to participate in the educational system. Twenty-five years later, it is now generally accepted that some form of continuing education throughout life is essential. It is also becoming less and less realistic to assume that higher education can be provided once and for all at the end of schooling.

In this paper, I will concentrate on the position of part-time mature undergraduate students in the university sector. I will review in chronological order the main reports and documents in Ireland that have made some reference to continuing education. Then I will deal with the admission procedures, part-time undergraduate degree courses, and enrolment trends that apply in the different universities. Finally, I will discuss two of the main barriers that affect the participation of adult students, finance and the availability of access courses.

DOCUMENTATION RELATED TO PART-TIME MATURE STUDENTS  
IN CONTINUING EDUCATION

In 1960, the Minister for Education, Dr P.J. Hillery, set up a Commission on Higher Education. Its terms of reference were

Having regard to the educational needs and to the financial and other resources of the country, to inquire into and to make recommendations in relation to university, professional, technological and higher education generally (Commission on Higher Education, 1967, p.1).

Seven years later, this long and much-awaited report was presented to the then Minister for Education, Mr Donogh O'Malley; parts of it referred to adult education. The Commission remarked

that the needs of those who are prevented by circumstances from attending courses of higher education at the usual age should receive special consideration in their later years when these circumstances might no longer be an obstacle (p. 95).

Despite this recommendation, adult education or the education of mature students was seen as marginal to the Commission's terms of reference.

In relation to part-time degree courses, different views were expressed regarding the desirability and organization of the evening courses that existed. The Commission found that there was a consensus of opinion that, while part-time education was seen to be giving some adults the opportunity of continuing higher education, evening degree courses were not consistent with the real nature and purpose of a university. Organizational and administrative problems, additional teaching duties at the expense of research, and inadequate study of subjects in depth were some of the reasons cited against evening courses, as is evident in several remarks made to the Commission. The Board of Trinity College Dublin said:

It is doubtful whether evening degrees or diplomas are desirable at all; young people can get the full benefits of a university education only through full-time attendance, either prior to employment or during employment release from normal duties (Commission on Higher Education, 1967, p. 661).

The Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland said:

To profit fully from university education, a student must be a full-time student; ... diplomas and certificates should be substituted for the so-called evening degree (p. 661).

Senator Brosnahan of the Irish National Teachers Organisation said:

The week-end courses for national teachers in U.C.G. were believed to be adequate, but were no more than a substitute for what the Organisation was seeking and could not be regarded as more than second-best (p. 663).

According to the Institute of Public Administration,

Part-time night study for a university degree, 'whether viewed from the standpoint of the university or of the public service, is very much a second best but it is a long way better than nothing ' and, subject to suggested improvements in the organisation of, and provision for, such courses, 'the Institute would urge that the universities maintain their existing service to young officials ' (p 661)

The Civil Service Executive and Higher Officers Association remarked that

While recognizing that evening degree courses may not be as good as full-time day courses, the Association would not agree that they are undesirable, it maintained that such courses represented a decided and worthwhile advantage for persons who could not attend a day course but who wished to improve their education to university level. The proper step would be to improve the quality of the evening courses (and to extend their duration, if necessary) rather than to discontinue them. The Association urged the Commission to recommend 'that university colleges should provide facilities for obtaining BA and BComm degrees by attendance at evening lectures and by qualifying at prescribed examinations' (p 661)

In the view of the Convocation of the National University of Ireland,

The provision of night lectures is very commendable but 'while being wholly desirable, it is imperative that a degree taken through night courses should maintain exactly the same standard as those taken by day students, and that the facilities provided for night students should be at least as good as those offered to day students ' (p 661)

On the basis of the evidence which it received, the Commission was of the opinion that there was a need for agencies outside the universities to cater for adult education. They recommended that the proposed New Colleges should consider providing part-time higher education which would be 'somewhat different from the traditional form of university education and no less excellent of its kind' (p 663)

In 1969, Aontas, the national association for adult education, was founded as an advisory and consultative body for the promotion and development of adult education. In the Aontas (1984) submission to the Commission on Adult Education, reference was made to second-chance education

There is a growing demand for educational opportunities leading to qualifications. Aontas holds the view that a very practical step and incentive in this direction is to assess credit for relevant work, community, home-based experience in the context of adults re-entering the educational system/process (Sect. 3.2)

In the same year as the establishment of Aontas, the government took the initiative of setting up an advisory committee on adult education under the Chairmanship of Mr Con Murphy. The wide-ranging report of the Committee, which is often referred to as the Murphy Report, was presented to the Government in 1973 and urged that adult education provision should not be a peripheral area of concern. Regarding evening degree courses, the Report stated that

An urgent consideration for all institutes of higher education is how to respond adequately to the demands by adults for evening courses leading to professional qualifications (Committee on Adult Education, 1973, p. 40).

Accordingly, the Committee recommended that 'institutes of higher education extend their services to cater for the increasing demand for evening courses' (Committee on Adult Education, 1973, p. 40).

The Committee also referred to the third-level higher education opportunities available in Britain through the Open University. The Open University was still evolving and the Committee felt that it should postpone any further consideration of the distance learning system until it had been longer in operation. However, the Committee did recommend the establishment of a special committee, whose brief would be to consider the implications of the Open University in Ireland and to define stages of development for the possible emergence of such a university in Ireland.

In 1979, a report for the Higher Education Authority, which dealt with full-time third-level education, contained a section which made brief reference to part-time higher education:

The justice of allowing those who have failed to qualify for third-level education to try again later in life along a route more appropriate to their adult experience, as well as the related concept of education as a recurring process throughout one's life-time, has gained increasing acceptance in principle, if not in practice. The obstacles to this type of education in Ireland include the absence of attractive and appropriate educational provisions ... and a set of negative attitudes to formal education among a large section of the adult community. Yet the findings of the present educational survey testify to the pressing need for second chance education if our society is serious about providing equal educational opportunity (Clancy & Benson, 1979, p. 34).

In the following year, the *White paper on educational development* (Ireland, 1980) devoted a chapter to adult education which emphasized the importance of continuing education.

Adult education activities will be promoted and developed as resources allow in accordance with the general guidelines set out in the educational

recommendations of the Report of the Committee on Adult Education. In establishing priorities under this programme, special consideration will be given to the needs of      and those wishing to avail themselves of second chance education (p 57)

The next development in adult education was the announcement in 1981 by the Minister for Education, Mr John Boland, that he was establishing 'an advisory body to prepare a national development plan for adult and continuing education' (Commission on Adult Education, 1984, p 5). The report of the body, entitled *Lifelong learning*, was prepared under the Chairmanship of Dr Ivor Kenny. It listed 17 different types of agencies or institutions involved in adult education and outlined developments that had occurred. It was recognized that the universities played an active role in adult education by providing evening courses leading to primary degrees in Arts and Commerce subjects. The report recommended that

Third-level institutions should adopt new approaches to facilitate greater participation in part-time day and evening courses such as modular credit systems, accreditation for experience and credit transfer between institutions (p 146)

The Government's *Programme for action in education, 1984-1987* also raised the question of a modular credit system.

The question of evening degree courses being more widely available and greater use being made of modular degree programmes with a system of course credits will be examined (Ireland, 1984, p 30).

This report also emphasized the social dimension, by which the education system should seek to make permanent and continuing education available to all citizens and equalize opportunities for educational advancement between the various socio-economic groups in society.

The most recent publication by the Higher Education Authority on new entrants to full-time higher education was issued in 1988. Despite the recommendation for further discussion on part-time education in a 1982 report (Clancy, 1982), the 1988 report stated that

the part-time higher education sector is underdeveloped and, indeed undervalued in Ireland. This reflects a serious structural imbalance in the higher education system (Clancy, 1988, p 74).

It went on to say

Perhaps what is required is the dropping of the rigid distinction between part-time and full-time higher education and a disaggregation of academic programmes of study giving students greater flexibility in their study plans,

allowing them to accumulate credits at a rate suited to their own circumstances and consonant with their evolving career plans (p. 74).

The present Minister for Education, Mrs Mary O'Rourke, made a statement about mature students in higher education towards the beginning of the 1990 academic year:

I am very concerned also to facilitate more mature students in advancing to higher education. But our demography is such at the moment that there is a huge pressure to meet the needs of the school leaver and they have to be the priority. But I would eventually like to be able to introduce an access course for adults, like those available in Magee College in the North, which would be for adults who had not done a Leaving Certificate but wanted to avail of higher education (*Irish Times*, August 24, 1990).

Based on the recommendations proposed by the various committees and individuals, the question can be asked if there have been any improvements in the provision of first degree courses for part-time mature students in the university sector? This question will be considered in the next section which will examine the provisions that have been made by looking at the admission procedures that apply to mature students, the type of courses available and enrolment trends in the university sector.

#### ADMISSION PROCEDURES FOR PART-TIME UNDERGRADUATES, COURSES AVAILABLE, AND ENROLMENT TRENDS IN THE UNIVERSITY SECTOR

##### *Admission Procedures*

In relation to the entrance requirements of the National University of Ireland (NUI) colleges (Cork, Dublin, Galway), all applicants must satisfy the matriculation requirements of the faculty to which they are applying. A student can matriculate under normal faculty rules or on the basis of mature years. Under normal faculty rules, an applicant must be matriculable in the university in six subjects. These requirements can be met through the results of the Leaving Certificate Examination, the results of the Matriculation Examination of the NUI, or a combination of both. Matriculation can also be obtained on the results of other examinations, for example, the British General Certificate of Education. To matriculate on the basis of mature years, applicants must at present be aged 24 years or over in the year of entry, and apply to the Academic Council for recommendation to the Senate of the NUI for matriculation on the grounds of mature years. Interviews may be held to assess suitability of applicants to courses.

In the newly-established universities, Dublin City University (DCU) and the University of Limerick (UL), the normal admission requirements which apply

to school-leaving entrants do not apply to a mature applicant. Entry to courses is possible for candidates who, in the absence of the minimum entry requirements, can show satisfactory evidence (usually from work experience) of the ability to pursue and benefit from a course. For some courses, an applicant is required to take an aptitude test.

### *Courses Available*

The type and length of undergraduate degree courses available in universities during the academic year 1990-91 are set out in Table 1. This table shows that in the NUI Colleges, emphasis is generally placed on humanities and business

TABLE 1  
PART TIME UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE COURSES AVAILABLE IN THE  
UNIVERSITY SECTOR DURING THE ACADEMIC YEAR 1990-91

College	Degree Course	Duration of Course
Trinity College Dublin	Bachelor of Science (Computer Science)	4 years
University College Dublin	Bachelor of Arts	3 years
	Bachelor of Commerce	5 years
	Bachelor of Banking and Financial Studies <sup>1</sup>	5 years
University College Galway	Bachelor of Arts	4 years
	Bachelor of Commerce	5 years
University College Cork <sup>2</sup>	Bachelor of Business Studies	4 years
	Bachelor of Civil Law	4 years
Dublin City University	Bachelor of Business Studies	4 years
	Bachelor of Science (Computer Applications)	5 years (Hons degree)
	Bachelor of Science (Information Technology) <sup>1</sup>	4 years <sup>3</sup>
University of Limerick	Bachelor of Business Studies	4 years
	Bachelor of Mechanical Engineering	4 years

<sup>1</sup> Distance learning courses

<sup>2</sup> Since the 1930s UCC has offered a Bachelor of Arts degree course. During the academic year 1990-91 this course was not offered and the next restructured BA course commences in October 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Recommended length for degree but as distance education courses are on a modular basis course completion for some students may take longer.



courses. These colleges have not increased their range of undergraduate part-time degree courses to any great extent over time. It should also be noted that NUI regulations do not allow students pursuing a part-time BA degree course to obtain an honours degree, though students pursuing other NUI evening first-degree courses can, based on performance, obtain an honours degree. The findings of studies conducted on part-time mature students show that such students generally have high success rates in terms of examination performance (Bourner, Hamed, Barnett, & Reynolds, 1988; Morrissey, 1989; Power, Robertson, & Merdith, 1987). Such findings indicate that part-time mature students should be given the opportunity to avail of an honours degree programme. Both Dublin City University and the University of Limerick allow students who reach the required standards in examinations to be awarded an honours degree.

Regarding the provision of distance education, as already stated, the report of the Committee on Adult Education (1973) referred to the possibility of an Open University in Ireland. Later, the report of the Commission on Adult Education (1984) recommended that the Department of Education should make available resources to facilitate the provision of distance adult education courses. One year later, the National Council for Educational Awards (1985) discussed the possibility of the accumulation of credits for modular courses.

Table 1 also shows that Dublin City University and, more recently, University College Dublin, have implemented what the Commission on Higher Education (1967) saw as a type of part-time higher education which would be different from traditional university education. In collaboration with regional centres, Dublin City University has made provision for distance education by offering undergraduate degrees. While it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss postgraduate degree courses, it should be noted that both Dublin City University and the University of Limerick, provide postgraduate degree and diploma courses by distance learning. Distance education courses are run on a modular basis and students can work towards certificate, diploma, and degree qualifications.

At present, Dublin City University is in the process of initiating an open university foundation course in technology and mathematics which is expected to commence in 1991. Up until October 1990, none of the NUI colleges had provided distance learning undergraduate part-time degree courses. The most recent development in this area has been the introduction by University College Dublin, in co-operation with the Institute of Bankers, of a Bachelor of Banking and Financial Services distance learning degree course.



*Enrolment Trends on Part-time Undergraduate Degree Courses*

Data on enrolment trends between 1983/84 and 1989/90 in the different colleges are presented in Table 2. Since the early 1980s, the NUI colleges have been experiencing a decline in part-time enrolment in some undergraduate degree courses. This is quite evident on the BA course, concern about declining enrolments in each cycle was referred to by the Higher Education Authority (1990a) in its *Annual report* for the period of 1987-88. Present enrolment trends show that each NUI college must carefully examine its range and structure of undergraduate part-time degree courses.

TABLE 2

PART TIME EVENING DEGREE REGISTRATIONS 1983/84 1989/90								
College	Course	1983/ 84	1984/ 85	1985/ 86	1986/ 87	1987/ 88	1988/ 89	1989/ 90
University College Dublin	BA							
	First Year	428			377			361
	Second Year		347			294		
	Third Year			328			288	
	BComm							
	First Year		160		193		233	
	Second Year	77		105		167		
	Third Year		55		48		159	
	Fourth Year	45		40		38		241 <sup>1</sup>
	Fifth Year		43		36		34	
University College Cork	BA							
	First Year	215			158			
	Second Year		148			125		
	Third Year			127			114	
	Fourth Year							113
	BCL							
	Year One							52

TABLE 2 - Continued

## PART-TIME EVENING DEGREE REGISTRATIONS, 1983/84 - 1989/90

College	Course	1983/ 84	1984/ 85	1985/ 86	1986/ 87	1987/ 88	1988/ 89	1989/ 90
University College Galway	BA:							
	First Year		184				110	
	Second Year			145				96
	Third Year				123			
	Fourth Year	147				123		
	BComm:							
	First Year		58				42	
	Second Year			45				37
	Third Year				46 <sup>2</sup>			
	Fourth Year					42		
	Fifth Year						40	
Dublin City University <sup>3</sup>	Business Studies:	75	44	104	109	158	195	138
	Computer Applications:	-	-	67	171	112	98	147
University of Limerick <sup>3</sup>	Business Studies:	322	271	258	335	362	472	460
	Engineering:	87	94	86	139	110	102	75

<sup>1</sup> Years 2 and 4 combined.<sup>2</sup> This figure includes 10 students who joined the course in 1986/87.<sup>3</sup> The Dublin City University and University of Limerick figures include students registered for part-time undergraduate and part-time professional courses.

Source: Higher Education Authority (1990b).

The demand for distance learning is increasing. For example, the number enrolled in the Information Technology course (BSc) of Dublin City University has risen consistently since 1985-86. In that year, 124 students enrolled. Two years later (1987-88), the figure was 465. By 1989-90, there were 672 students enrolled (Higher Education Authority, 1990b).

#### BARRIERS THAT AFFECT PARTICIPATION OF MATURE STUDENTS

Much of the research on the participation of adults on courses points to obstacles placed in the way of adults. In this section, I will briefly discuss two main barriers that affect participation: finance and the absence of access courses.

##### *Finance*

An International Project on Adult Participation in Higher Education, conducted by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation/Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (1987), referred to the obstacles placed in the way of part-time students, identifying finance as the most obvious. Both Hanratty (1973) and Morrissey (1989) also found that lack of finance was a common reason for mature students' withdrawal from Irish universities. There have been recommendations for financial aid for mature students. For example, the Commission on Higher Education (1967) made reference to aid for mature students (p. 786), it suggested that aid for full-time study should be provided, but failed to suggest any provision for part-time courses. An Aontas submission to the Commission on Adult Education (1984) recommended that scholarships and grants be available for mature students (Sect. 8.1). Despite these recommendations, the only scheme that presently exists for mature students was one introduced by the Department of Education in 1984. This scheme awarded ten full-time mature women students £1,000 annually as a once-off payment to help finance their third-level studies. For the 1990-91 academic year, the number of grants was increased to twenty. Presently, the European Community Social Fund Scheme (Advanced Technical Skills Programmes) does not apply to adults pursuing part-time undergraduate degree courses at universities.

A statement in connection with mature students' grants was made in August 1990 by the then Fine Gael Spokesperson on Education, Mr John Bruton, on launching his party's proposals to remedy higher education injustices (Fine Gael press release, August 1990). According to the statement, people from low-income families were more likely to see the value of college education after they had had some work experience and would probably gain more from higher education than school leavers. However, it was recognized that the present grant

system does not cater for such people at all. Mr Bruton proposed that higher education grants should be available to full-time college mature students and that a tax relief on the repayment of privately negotiated student loans should be granted to students working in Ireland. However, while his statement highlighted the grant situation for mature students, there was no mention of a scheme for part-time mature students.

### *Access Courses*

The report of the commission on Adult Education (1984) recognized the need for access courses for mature students, as is evident from the following quotation:

Preparation or foundation courses for higher education intended for mature students should be provided by the appropriate adult education agencies and educational institutions and, in suitable cases, these should be recognized by third-level institutions as satisfying entry requirements (p. 146).

Despite this recommendation, the provision of such courses for entry into third-level institutions is still limited, although some progress is being made. For example, the Department of Adult and Continuing Education at University College Dublin initiated a part-time course in 1989, extending over two terms entitled 'Returning to Learning'. The course was designed for adults requiring preliminary experience of what is involved in a degree course at a third-level institution.

In England and Scotland, there has been an increase in the number of access courses. This was confirmed in a survey by Lucas and Ward (1985) who discovered nearly 100 institutions offering at least one course on a part-time basis. In 1984, the Department of Education and Science commissioned Millins (1984) to report on access courses which had been established since 1978. The Millins report covered the attitudes of institutions, staff, and students to the courses, and in his concluding comments, Millins stated that there was a firm 'yes' for the encouragement of further access courses. Scottish surveys also revealed that over 90% of access students had benefitted from access courses and that the majority of the participants proceeded to undergraduate study on completion (Kavanagh, 1986; McDonald, 1982).

Regardless of an adult's background or qualifications, there is a need for adequate foundation courses. The need for access courses was emphasized in the observation of Hedderwick and Mitchell (1984) who, on the basis of their teaching and research findings on mature students, stated

the nationwide development of sustained appropriate access courses for mature students would not only ensure some greater social justice but in more mundane terms prove outstanding cost-effective academically (p 26)

#### CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to show that supported by recommendations from reports and organizations such as Aontas and the Commission on Adult Education, there have been improvements in the provision of part-time undergraduate degree courses. Flexible admission procedures adopted by colleges, which differ from traditional student entry regulations, have enabled mature students to participate in higher education. However, unlike other countries, such as Sweden and the United States, Ireland still has a low participation of part-time mature students in undergraduate degree courses.

As in Britain, differences exist in enrolment rates in the different colleges and in the range of courses offered. The main growth in part-time undergraduate degree provision has occurred in what was formerly the non-university sector (Dublin City University and the University of Limerick). Both institutions have increased their range of courses and implemented some courses based on recommendations from the reports of the Committee on Adult Education (1973) and the National Council for Educational Awards (1985). Evidence of this is to be found in their distance learning, modular courses and in the development of open university courses.

The three constituent colleges of the NUI have experienced declining enrolment trends in some part-time undergraduate degree courses and have been slow to respond to the need to extend the range of part-time undergraduate courses and to introduce technological and scientific courses, credit transfers, modularization, and distance learning courses.

It can be stated that the main barriers to course participation are lack of finance and lack of access courses. The introduction of a comprehensive grant scheme, increased European Social Funding, adequate access courses, and the implementation of the International Labour Convention on paid educational leave (approved by the Government in 1979) would help to facilitate adults wishing to pursue part-time education. In addition, courses need to be more accessible to previously excluded groups such as the unemployed and educationally disadvantaged. Low and declining enrolments on some courses suggest that more concerted advertising is required, particularly to a wider cross-section of the adult population through work places, trade unions, and

unemployment centres, together with information about the possibility of gaining entry to third-level institutions as mature students.

Finally, the role of adult and continuing education will become even more important in the future under the influence of demographic pressures and other changes in the social and industrial structure. Since higher education has an important role in the provision of adult and continuing education opportunities, a commitment from institutions to meet a range of adult and continuing needs is essential.

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