

## THE COLLEGE IN THE COMMUNITY: LOCATION AS A MEANS OF COMBATING EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY

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Research conducted in 1996 and 2000, the results of which are presented in this paper, shows that educational disadvantage is an ongoing problem in Cork city, and stems from a combination of economic, social, and cultural factors. Cork Institute of Technology and University College Cork propose to establish a joint campus on Cork's northside, where much of the city's socioeconomic and educational disadvantage is located. The colleges expect that the proximity of the new campus to the target community and the provision of specific programmes and facilities will help to facilitate greater participation in higher education by underrepresented groups. While the findings of the research reported in this paper support the initiative for the proposed campus, it is argued that its physical location in an area of socioeconomic disadvantage will be insufficient to increase participation in higher education in target communities. The campus must also have a status comparable to that of its parent institutions, its provision should reflect the needs and expectations of the community at which it is targeted, and it should constitute just one facet of an integrated set of policies and strategies aimed at combating educational inequality and increasing participation.

There has been a persistent imbalance between socioeconomic development on the northside of Cork city and the rest of the city.<sup>1</sup> The northside experiences higher levels of unemployment, early school leaving and dependency, and lower levels of household income, than other parts of the city. The manufacturing base on the northside is relatively weak, while much of the recent industrial investment has been elsewhere in the city. Prestigious public institutions such as University College Cork (UCC), Cork Institute of Technology (CIT), Colleges of Further Education, FÁS, the Southern Health Board, and all of the main hospitals are located on the south of the city. In terms of social-class composition, Census

<sup>1</sup> The northside is the area of Cork city north of the River Lee, which splits the city in two, north and south. The northside covers 41% of the total area of the city, and holds over two-fifths of its population.

figures from 1996 indicate that over two-fifths of people on the northside belong to the semi-skilled and unskilled manual groups, compared with just over one-fifth in the rest of the city (Steering Committee of the Cork Northside Centre for Higher Education, 2001).

The Cork Northside Education Initiative was established in 1991 to promote access to higher levels of education and training through community-based models of learning. Members of the Initiative included people from northside communities and representatives of UCC, CIT, Cork Corporation, City of Cork VEC, and the Southern Health Board. The report of the Initiative (1996) documents the problem of educational disadvantage on the northside and reports on the results of a consultation process with local communities and education providers which took place between late 1994 and early 1996. The report recommends the establishment in the area of a physical centre which would provide a range of educational opportunities for people from the northside and other areas.

Little progress was made until autumn 1999, when UCC and CIT sent a proposal to the Department of Education and Science, seeking funds for the establishment of a joint campus in a northside location. The Department responded by requesting a piece of primary research which would update the findings of the 1996 research. This research was undertaken over a nine-month period in 2000, and was overseen by the Committee of the Cork Northside Education Centre, made up of representatives of UCC, CIT, City of Cork Vocational Education Committee, and Cork Corporation. Findings were submitted to the Minister for Education and Science in early 2001, and the campus has now been sanctioned.

It is proposed that the new campus will provide educational opportunities for school leavers who have attained the necessary qualifications to enter third-level, but who are failing to do so; for adults who wish to return to education; and for people who are already in the workforce, but who wish to update or upgrade their skills. Participation by these groups would be facilitated in a number of ways: lowering of the points requirements of some courses, recruitment of significant numbers of mature students, and organization of several courses in a flexible manner so as to accommodate the participation of people who wish to update their skills while remaining in the workforce. It is hoped to offer a range of courses, some of which would provide skills necessary for the economic regeneration of the area. Proposed courses include certificates/diplomas in business studies, computing, and management. A single degree (BSocSc) in Youth and Community Work would be offered. Articulation with programmes

provided in the parent institutions would enable students to progress to higher level courses in UCC and CIT.

In this paper, following a review of literature relating to educational inequality and Irish third-level education, the findings of research on educational need carried out in 1996 and 2000 are reported. The findings are quantitative (relating to the age at which education ceased and participation in third-level education) and qualitative (based on the views of northside communities, groups, and education providers on the causes of educational disadvantage and on the proposed new campus).

#### EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY AND IRISH THIRD-LEVEL EDUCATION

Research by Clancy and Wall (2000) demonstrates the persistence of educational inequality in Ireland. Across three major education transitions, children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are disadvantaged relative to their counterparts from higher socioeconomic groups. First, the percentage of those from the unskilled manual group who leave school without any qualifications is much greater than for any other socioeconomic group. Second, those from the unskilled and semi-skilled groups are less likely to achieve high grades in the Leaving Certificate Examination than those from other groups. Finally, school leavers who achieve modest grades in the Leaving Certificate Examination and who come from the lower socioeconomic groups are less likely to proceed to higher education than their counterparts from other socioeconomic groups.

Lynch and O'Riordan (1998) provide evidence that educational inequality is the result of three factors: economic, educational and cultural. These factors are presented as barriers to educational equality for 'low-income working-class students' (p. 452). Economic barriers constrain achievement in several ways. Low-income families are not in a position to spend large amounts of money on their children's education. They cannot afford extra tuition, 'grinds', or resources such as computers or supplemental reading material. Less tangible effects of low income may include a sense of isolation or alienation from society's institutions, including higher education. Educational barriers include the middle-class culture of schools and colleges, inferior facilities in schools in disadvantaged areas, and (perceived) lower teacher expectations for working-class students. Cultural barriers include a lack of information about college life, isolation and fear of isolation in a college environment, and negative neighbourhood/peer influences on college students from working-class areas.

A range of actions which should be taken to overcome these barriers to educational opportunity have been suggested. The state should take responsibility for removing the financial barriers to participation in higher education, through the reduction of economic inequality and the improvement of financial supports for working-class students. Schools, universities, and colleges must play a part in removing educational and social/cultural barriers. Here, possible actions include the generation of 'positive learning climates' in working-class schools (Lynch & O'Riordan, p. 474), dissemination of information on higher education in working-class communities, and the development of links and partnerships between higher education and schools in disadvantaged areas. Skilbeck (2000) also advocates the establishment of closer relationships between schools and colleges to increase entry to and progression in higher education by groups which have been traditionally underrepresented.

Irish universities and institutes of technology are already engaging in some of these actions. Since 1996, the Higher Education Authority has operated a Targeted Initiative on Widening Access for Young People from Socio-economically Disadvantaged Backgrounds. Under the initiative, all universities have developed access programmes aimed at increasing participation by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, under its Access to Third-Level Programme, UCC provides a range of incentives and supports for second-level students and for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Key to the programme has been the development of positive relationships with schools which are designated disadvantaged. Since 1996, the Dublin City University (DCU) North Dublin Access Programme has engaged in a range of activities aimed at encouraging participation in higher education by students from schools in the catchment areas of three area partnerships (Osborne & Leith, 2000). DCU is a partner in the Ballymun Initiative for Third-Level Education (BITE), which aims to assist young local people who have both the ability and motivation to complete higher education, but who are prevented from doing so for financial or other reasons. Interventions include scholarship awards for students at Ballymun Comprehensive School and for third-level students who study in the school; incentive awards to sixth class pupils of primary schools in the Ballymun area; a free tuition scheme which provides third-level tutors for students at Ballymun Comprehensive; visits to DCU and other colleges; and supervised study rooms for Junior and Leaving Certificate students (BITE, 2000).

Most institutes of technology employ access officers, and several have developed access programmes and initiatives. CIT has an Educational

Opportunities Department (EOD), which works to increase the participation in the college of groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education. The EOD's Exploring Education Programme offers a range of activities aimed at encouraging interest in education among young people from schools with disadvantaged status. These include visits to CIT and taster courses for second-level students, comprehensive induction programmes for prospective and actual entrants, and a variety of academic supports for new entrants.

A recent evaluation of the HEA's Targeted Initiative (Osborne & Leith, 2000) acknowledges the commitment of the universities to widening access, but points out that the task of increasing the numbers of entrants from disadvantaged backgrounds is a long-term one. To date, the number of students entering university through access routes is low. The ongoing involvement of universities in initiatives to overcome negative attitudes towards education in working-class communities is crucial.

Increasing the number and diversity of institutions and the flexibility of provision can be useful ways of encouraging and improving access by groups which are underrepresented in higher education. When the number of institutions increases, there is an automatic increase in the number of places. Greater flexibility of provision can be achieved through the establishment of a more diverse range of institutions, through the development of tailored access policies and strategies, and through the provision of a variety of programmes and courses.

While Skilbeck (2000) professes support for diversity and flexibility, he counsels against the creation of a situation in which any new provision may be labelled 'inferior'. 'Diversification remains a very potent tool for addressing the distinctive needs of different equity groups, provided tendencies to equate "different" with "superior-inferior" can be constrained' (p. 51).

Similar reservations are expressed in the report of the Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education (1995), which points out that the location of higher education institutions in a locality can have real and beneficial economic effects for the area, but only if these institutions are of 'appropriate stature and prestige' (p. 86). An institution's stature will depend to a large extent on the range and quality of the programmes it delivers. The OECD (1995) stresses that the public expects higher education to engage in the development of engineering and the natural sciences, such as chemistry, biology, and physics, but does not accord the same level of recognition to the social sciences. Thus, it would appear that if an institution is to gain recognition, respect, and the attendant status, it must offer, in whole or in part, high-level courses in the

natural sciences and engineering, as well as in social science and other disciplines.

#### THE 1996 AND 2000 RESEARCH STUDIES

The research was carried out by the author between September 1994 and May 1996 on behalf of the Committee of the Northside Education Initiative, and between April and December 2000, on behalf of the Committee of Cork Northside Centre for Education.

The 1996 research involved the gathering of quantitative and qualitative information on educational need in Cork city. The quantitative information was obtained from the Central Statistics Office (1991 Small Area Statistics), the Department of Education, UCC, and CIT. The 1996 research sought quantitative information relating to early school leaving and participation in third-level education in 31 District-Electoral Divisions (DEDs) on the northside of Cork city and the remaining 43 DEDs in Cork city (rest of city).

Qualitative information was gathered through consultation with northside groups and institutions with an interest in education, training, and community development, and through a series of seminars and a conference on the themes of access to education and equality of educational opportunity. Between 1995 and 1996, the Northside Education Initiative held a series of seminars to explore the attitudes of communities towards educational inequality, its causes and possible solutions. The seminars were primarily attended by members of the community, and by others with an interest in education, including students, teachers and principals, community educators, and community activists. One of the seminars addressed the main issues which arise for young people as they consider their education and training options, and the factors which encourage or prevent them from thinking in terms of higher education.

The 2000 research involved the collation of primary information from a variety of sources. These include the Central Statistics Office (1996 Small Area Statistics), the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, UCC, CIT, Cork Corporation, and the FÁS Local Employment Service. The information is quantitative in nature, apart from information obtained in interviews which were conducted with principals of four of the five second-level schools with disadvantaged status in the target area. The interviews sought to establish the views of the principals on the proposed new UCC/CIT campus. Information was sought on educational need in the following geographical areas: 17 selected District Electoral Divisions (DEDs) on the northside of Cork city (i.e., target area) with the lowest levels of educational attainment in the city, in terms of numbers of people who have

achieved third-level education; the remaining 57 DEDs in Cork city (Rest of City); the Cork subregion (CSR), which includes Cork city and all outlying areas within 45 minutes commuting distance of the city.<sup>2</sup>

## RESULTS

### *Quantitative Research*

Table 1 presents census information from 1991 and 1996 on the percentage of the population for whom education had ceased at the age of 15 in the target area, rest of Cork city, and Ireland. The data confirm that in 1991 early school leaving was a considerable problem in the target area, and that there was little change in its extent between 1991 and 1996. In both years, over half of the 15+ population in the target area had left school at or before age 15. The rate of early school leaving in these areas was significantly higher than in the rest of Cork city and the country as a whole.

TABLE 1  
EDUCATION CEASED BY AGE 15, 1991 AND 1996

Area	1991	1996
Target Area	53.8	52.5
Rest of Cork City	27.8	27.8
Ireland	36.1	34.5

Source: Central Statistics Office

To update the CSO figures, the 2000 research obtained more recent figures on early school leaving in Cork city from the Department of Education and Science. These figures are presented in Tables 2 and 3, which track the progress of the two most recent cohorts of Cork students from commencement of second-level education in 1992 and 1993 until completion of the senior cycle in June 1997 (5-year programme) or June 1998 (6-year programme), in the case of the first cohort; and June 1998 or June 1999 in the case of the second cohort. They show retention rates to the Junior Certificate year, to completion of the Junior

<sup>2</sup> Education statistics for the Cork subregion are not relevant to this paper and are excluded. Instead, statistics for Ireland are provided, so as to allow for comparisons between Cork and the rest of the country.

Certificate Examination, and to completion of the Leaving Certificate Examination. The cohorts are divided into students attending (i) schools in the target area classified by the Department of Education and Science as disadvantaged; (ii) schools in the rest of the city classified as disadvantaged; and (iii) Cork city schools which are not classified as disadvantaged.

TABLE 2  
PROGRESS OF THE 1992-1997/8 SECOND-LEVEL COHORT,  
ALL SCHOOLS IN CORK CITY

School Status	Number in Cohort 30th Sept. 1992	Junior Certificate Year 3 (3%)	Junior Certificate Exam 'Sits' (%)	Senior Cycle 'Sits' (%)
Target Area Disadvantaged	768	90.0	87.0	68.2
Rest of Cork City Disadvantaged	354	94.6	92.9	71.8
All City Non-Disadvantaged	1,888	97.7	96.8	85.2

Source: Department of Education and Science, 2000

TABLE 3  
PROGRESS OF THE 1993-1998/9 SECOND-LEVEL COHORT,  
ALL SCHOOLS IN CORK CITY

School Status	Number in Cohort 30th Sept. 1993	Junior Certificate Year 3 (3%)	Junior Certificate Exam 'Sits' (%)	Senior Cycle 'Sits' (%)
Target Area Disadvantaged	775	91.0	86.7	65.7
Rest of Cork City Disadvantaged	358	97.5	96.1	78.8
All City Non-Disadvantaged	1,861	97.3	96.2	85.7

Source: Department of Education and Science, 2000

In general terms, the figures in Tables 2 and 3 indicate that early school leaving at junior-cycle level continues to pose a problem for schools in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage. Furthermore, the retention rate of target area



disadvantaged schools to Junior Certificate is significantly lower than that of equivalent schools in the rest of Cork city. In the case of both cohorts, 13% of target area students failed to sit the Junior Certificate Examination.

For disadvantaged schools, retention rates to the Leaving Certificate are considerably lower than the projected national average of 78% for 1998 and 80% for 1999 (Review Committee on Post Secondary Education and Training Places, 1999). Again, disadvantaged schools in the target area display lower rates of Leaving Certificate Examination 'sits' than equivalent schools in the rest of Cork city. In fact, the number of students from target area disadvantaged schools sitting the Leaving Certificate Examination declined in both periods under investigation.

Government policy aims to ensure a retention rate to the Leaving Certificate of 90% in the future. In the case of disadvantaged schools, this research indicates that much remains to be done if this aim is to be achieved. Until it is achieved, however, significant numbers of young people from these areas will miss the opportunity to proceed to higher education.

Given that the Leaving Certificate Examination is still the key gateway to higher education, one would expect participation in higher education to be relatively low in areas where early school leaving is a problem. Table 4 shows that in 1991 the percentage of people with third-level qualifications in the target area was very low, relative to the rest of Cork city and the country as a whole. In 1996, this situation had not changed. In several of the DEDs within the target area, the number with third-level qualifications was actually lower than the average of 5.9% presented in Table 4.

TABLE 4

% POPULATION 15+ WITH THIRD-LEVEL QUALIFICATIONS 1991 AND 1996

Area	1991	1996
Target Area	5.7	5.9
Rest of Cork City	26.4	25.3
Ireland	20	19.7

Source: Central Statistics Office

Table 5 provides combined entrance figures for UCC (1999-2000) and CIT (1998-1999), relative to the population of 15- to 19-year olds in the target area and in the rest of Cork city. The figures relate to full-time students from Cork city, and also include students from areas outside the city boundaries but

immediately adjacent to the city. Table 5 shows that, proportionate to the population aged 15 to 19 years in both areas, the percentage of full-time entrants to both institutions from the target area is considerably lower than for the rest of the city. Relative to UCC, CIT recruits a greater number of students from areas of socioeconomic disadvantage, but such students are underrepresented in both institutions.

TABLE 5

COMBINED FULL-TIME UCC ENTRANTS 1999-2000 AND FULL-TIME CIT ENTRANTS 1998-1999, CORK CITY

Area	Number of Entrants	% Entrants	Population 15-19 years in each area	% Pop
Target Area	179	18	3,455	25
Rest of Cork*	801	82	10,443	75
Total City	980	100	13,898	100

Source: UCC and CIT 2000

\* Includes the DEDs of Douglas and Lehenagh, which are adjacent to the city but just outside the city boundary.

To provide the most recent information on the socioeconomic backgrounds of entrants to both UCC and CIT, Tables 6 and 7 compare the acceptance rate of those who sat the Leaving Certificate Examination (all types) in target area disadvantaged schools with that of those from all schools in the rest of Cork city. Just 8.4% of Leaving Certificate Examination students from target area disadvantaged schools accepted places in UCC in the academic year 2000-2001. In contrast, nearly one third (30%) of students from all schools in the rest of Cork city accepted places. This finding is not surprising, given that fewer students from disadvantaged schools in the target area complete their second-level education, and supports the view that students from disadvantaged schools in the area need particular assistance and encouragement to complete their second-level education and thus aspire realistically to places in university. CIT caters for greater numbers of students from disadvantaged schools than UCC, although these students are still underrepresented in CIT relative to their counterparts from non-disadvantaged schools.

TABLE 6  
NUMBERS ACCEPTED BY UCC, BY SCHOOL OF ORIGIN, 2000-2001

Area	Number of Students who sat Leaving Certificate, 2000	Number of Students Accepted by UCC	%
Target Area Disadvantaged Schools	486	41	8.4
Rest of Cork City Schools	2,219	665	30.0

Source: UCC, 2000

TABLE 7  
NUMBERS ACCEPTED BY CIT, BY SCHOOL OR ORIGIN, 2000-2001

Area	Number of Students who sat Leaving Certificate, 2000	Number of Students Accepted by UCC	%
Target Area Disadvantaged Schools	486	74	15.2
Rest of Cork City Schools	2,219	1,166	52.5

Source: UCC, 2000

Finally, Table 8 presents data on the socioeconomic backgrounds<sup>3</sup> of Cork city entrants to UCC for the academic year 1999-2000 (corresponding figures for CIT were unavailable). When the numbers in socioeconomic group 12 are set aside, students from non-manual backgrounds constitute the largest number of entrants, in both the target area and the rest of the city. Thus, even within the target area, people from the non-manual groups are more likely to enter university than their counterparts from manual backgrounds.

3 The socioeconomic groups into which UCC places principal earners correspond to the classification in the 1991 Census: 1. Farmer/Farm Manager; 2. Other Agricultural Occupations; 3. Higher professional; 4. Lower Professional; 5. Employers and Managers; 6. Salaried Employees; 7. Intermediate Non-manual; 8. Other Non-manual; 9. Skilled Manual; 10. Semi-skilled Manual; 11. Unskilled Manual; 12. Others/Unknown/Unemployed.

TABLE 8

NUMBERS OF CORK CITY UCC ENTRANTS 1999-2000, BY SOCIOECONOMIC GROUP

Area	Social Groups 3-5	Social Groups 6-8	Social Groups 9-11	Social Group 12	Total
Target Area	8	12	12	31	63
Rest of Cork City	170	81	30	111	392
Total	178	93	42	142	455

*Source: UCC, 2000**Qualitative Studies*

Participants in seminars identified four educational achievement factors, or factors which explain why young people leave school early. First, some students may experience alienation within the school system, or may be labelled in a negative manner due to streaming in schools. Secondly, attitudes, resources, and circumstances within the family can have an adverse effect on educational attainment. Thirdly, facilities, attitudes, and peer influence in a student's community can help to determine whether or not a student stays in education. And fourthly, the provision, or not, by the education system of support, guidance, advice, and information for students is an important element in influencing their decision whether to leave or remain in education (Northside Education Initiative, 1996). An interplay between a variety of factors - economic, educational and cultural - rather than one overriding cause is obvious.

Second-level principals who were interviewed for the 2000 research agreed with the conclusions of the 1996 seminar as to causes of educational disadvantage. They suggested that the Access Programmes of UCC and CIT are having a positive effect in combating obstacles to participation in higher education, but stress that much has yet to be achieved by these and other community-based initiatives. Some of their comments are as follows:

The Access Programme has been and is wonderful, and it's developing all the time. As a result of it our students have far more contact with UCC than they had previously ... The whole idea is that they become familiar with it as an institution. It's not just a name and an unknown place that they've never been to. And I think it does stimulate their interest. The parents get terribly interested.

The Access Programme is excellent. It does help to change people's minds and open up possibilities that they may not have taken on board. We'd have first year students and their parents getting the opportunity to

look at UCC but it's almost like bringing people to look at a novelty. It's too little and too small.

The results of the 1996 and 2000 research indicate widespread support from Northside communities and education providers for the establishment of an education centre or campus on Cork's northside. The feedback from the 1996 conference encapsulates the general view: 'One major, readily accessible building is needed on the northside as a centre and symbol of learning' (Northside Education Initiative, 1996, p. 92).

Despite the positive response to the idea of a campus, the research findings point to considerable anxiety about the kind of institution that might be provided. The first concern relates to its status. From its establishment, the institution would have to enjoy a status equal to that of its parent institutions to facilitate recruitment of students from a variety of backgrounds and geographical areas. If this does not happen, there is a danger that the institution may be seen as the ultimate destination of working-class people from the northside, and as a 'sop' to their educational needs. Once established, it would be difficult to overcome this perception. Such a development would merely serve to 'ghettoize' the institution, while failing to make any impact on the social class composition of students in the parent institutions.

The location of the institution on the northside would be meaningless if it failed to offer a range of courses and programmes of a type and standard which people expect from higher education institutions. If it is to attract students from both the local and wider communities, it must offer a range of degree programmes as well as certificates and diplomas. The current plan to provide a single social science degree would not be sufficient to place the campus on a par with its parent colleges in terms of status. The following statements from the research are representative (the first one is taken from the 1996 conference, and the others from the northside principals):

People from the northside want access to the full range of third-level courses, and place more importance on the value of degrees than diplomas.

What I would not like to see is a sort of second-rate college that doesn't offer accredited certificates, diplomas or degrees.

It should therefore be a characteristic (of the Centre) that it would be of the highest possible standard, equal if not better than the facilities anywhere else, and that it should offer the same courses and the same type of access as elsewhere.

It is also clear from the findings of the 1996 and 2000 research that the institution should operate as part of an integrated set of policies aimed at tackling

the economic, educational, and cultural barriers which affect the educational achievement of working-class students. There are two aspects to this requirement. In the first instance, the campus and its provision must meet the needs of the area in which it is based. The following conclusion from the 1996 conference reflects the general view:

No single model, available in other places, can automatically be slotted into the northside. The model which is eventually put in place there must suit local needs and conditions (Northside Education Initiative, 1996, p. 92).

Further consultation and liaison with northside communities, groups, and education providers will therefore be necessary. Furthermore, the campus should seek to complement and extend the work of the existing access programmes of UCC and CIT, and other community-based education initiatives, which are just beginning to make an impact on the problem of educational disadvantage.

#### CONCLUSION

Research conducted in 1996 and in 2000 revealed the extent of problems of socioeconomic and educational disadvantage in Cork city. Potentially, the proposed new institution could make a contribution to addressing this problem. The collaborative nature of the endeavour represents a unique opportunity for the pooling of resources and efforts to improve participation in higher education by people from disadvantaged communities. It is an innovative undertaking, with the potential to become a model of good practice which could be replicated in other places. The location of the new institution on the northside may also contribute to the economic regeneration of the area, through the provision of courses and programmes offering training in skills needed in the local economy and through raising the profile of the area and enhancing its image. This potential is unlikely to be realized, however, if community needs and expectations, in terms of the status, focus, and provision of the institution, and its relationship to existing provision, are not met.

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