

Chapter 10

Contributing to an Evidence Base for the Enhancement of the Experiences and Outcomes of Mature Students at an Irish University

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores current patterns of participation and progression by mature students in undergraduate (Bachelors) programmes in an Irish university. The study was conducted by HERC (Higher Education Research Centre) in collaboration with an Institutional Analysis and Research Office with input from an expert Advisory Group. Based on the suggestions and experiences of students and staff, and informed by good practice examples from literature, a series of recommendations are proposed, aimed at enhancing experiences and successful outcomes of mature students in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Ireland has a binary higher education system comprising seven universities and thirteen institutes of technology (IoTs)-all publicly funded.

The full-time undergraduate student population is 70,090 in the Universities and 62,376 in the IoTs. Universities have a majority of female students (53%) while the IoTs enrol a majority of male students (56%) (HEA, 2013). In addition, there are

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colleges of education and a number of specialist colleges and a small number of private higher education institutions. Universities in Ireland are relatively small by international standards, ranging from approximately 24,000 students in the largest to approximately 9,500 students in the smallest. In 2014, the Irish university involved in the study described in this chapter had around 12,000 registered students. There has been a substantial growth in the higher education sector in Ireland which is exemplified by the fact that in 1965 there were approximately 19,000 full-time students in the sector and by 2013 this has risen to approximately 165,000 (HEA website/ Statistics 2013).

Despite a strategic priority to increase the number of mature students^{1**} in higher education in Ireland (HEA, 2008), the number of students over the age of 23 participating in higher education remains relatively low (HEA, 2012, 2013). With a view to improving participation rates and enhancing outcomes for mature students, an exploratory study was conducted with students at one Irish university (referred to from here as IUX – abbreviation of Irish University X). In IUX, mature students enter programmes across the university through a variety of routes. While they are widely recognized as constituting a valuable part of the student community, little was known about their profile, their patterns of participation across the university, and, importantly, what factors appear to shape successful outcomes. This study is an exploration of current patterns of mature students' participation and experiences in programmes across IUX. Based on the suggestions and experiences of student participants, and informed by relevant literature, a series of recommendations aimed at enhancing the experiences and successful outcomes of mature students have been developed. Before presenting the results of the consultation with mature students at IUX we provide a brief overview of literature related to the experiences of mature students and their profiles, and where available, with particular reference to an Irish context.

Diversity of Motivations and Experiences of Mature Students

There is a danger that mature students are presented as a homogenous group (McGivney, 2004). While all students are distinct individuals, because they do not 'progress' directly from school as a cohort, the even wider range of motivations and life circumstances of mature students must be taken into account in seeking to meet their educational, personal, social and occupational needs. A twelve country comparative analysis identified seven groups of adult learners in higher education (Slowey & Schuetze, 2012).

1. Second chance learners;
2. Equity groups;
3. Deferrers;
4. Recurrent learners;
5. Returners;
6. Refreshers;
7. Learners in later life.

These sub-groups may be diverse, but at the same time they are interconnected and it is therefore unsurprising that mature students' motivation to study in higher education is equally diverse. Their decision to enter higher education may relate to personal, financial or family responsibilities (Davies, 2001) that usually require bigger life changes than for younger, 'traditional' age students (Waller, 2006).

Some studies suggest general life circumstances activate the decision-making process (Britton & Baxter, 1999; McGuire et al, 2003) while other studies suggest that entering higher education is a long-standing goal or ambition of mature students (Fleming & Murphy, 1997; Bowl, 2001; Osbourne et al., 2004). A significant life-changing event such as redundancy or divorce can also prove a motivator (Gallacher et al., 2002; Lawton, 2005; MacFadgen, 2007; McCune et al., 2010) or that obtaining a qualification may be part of a long educational journey (Foster, 2009); whereas many

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