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Access Programmes



NUI Galway
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Considering the 'Impact' of Access and Widening Participation:

The Undergraduate,
Postgraduate and
Employment Experiences
of NUI Galway Access
Students

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SEPTEMBER 2015

 **Access Centre**

Executive Summary

The aim of this study was to explore the undergraduate, postgraduate, and early employment experiences of students who had completed an NUI Galway Access programme, with a view to informing policy and practice in the area of widening participation (WP) and student support in higher education (HE) in an evidence-based fashion. While a body of research in the Irish context exists on under-represented groups' undergraduate experiences (Fleming and Finnegan, 2011b; Keane, 2009a,b; 2011,a,b; 2012, 2013a,b; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Share and Carroll, 2013; UCCPLUS+, 2011), we know relatively little about these groups' progression to postgraduate level and into employment, apart from the findings of a number of important institutional studies in Trinity College Dublin (Share and Carroll, 2013; Trinity Access Programme (TAP), 2010; Carroll, 2011), University College Cork (UCCPLUS+, 2011), Dublin City University (DCU Access Service, 2011), and NUI Maynooth, Dublin Institute of Technology and TCD (Kenny, Fleming, Loxley, and Finnegan, 2010). Thus, WP into postgraduate level and employment constitutes an important emerging focus of research in Ireland, to which this NUI Galway study contributes. Such a focus demonstrates an important developing policy concern with *equality of outcomes* (Stuart, 2012; TAP, 2010), rather than solely with *equality of access* to HE. In an era of serious economic recession and austere HE funding in Ireland, and in the context of a discourse which connotes WP to 'falling standards' (Keane, 2011b), it is important to explore the 'impact' of what is being done to

achieve equality outcomes in and through HE. This study presents evidence of WP 'impact' through an exploration of various indicators of access students' 'performance' and 'progression' in and beyond HE.

A mixed-methods research design (employing a self-completion questionnaire and in-depth semi-structured interviews) was selected in order to gather data on a wide range of variables from a substantial population while also exploring the research participants' lived experiences in an in-depth fashion. The questionnaire was employed between 2012-2014, focusing ultimately only on those who had formerly completed the pre-entry School Leavers' Access (SLA) and Mature Access (MA) programmes at NUI Galway between 1997-2012. 195 responses were obtained, resulting in a response rate of 23.1%. The relatively low response rate was due to difficulties in respondent recruitment related to not having up-to-date contact details for many former students, a common problem in research of this kind. 26 semi-structured interviews (with 14 SLAs and 12 MAs) were conducted between 2013 and 2014 to facilitate an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and an element of (between methods) triangulation (Denzin, 1970). The questionnaire and interviews focused, in the main, on the study participants' background, schooling and Access experiences, their experiences of undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and their early employment experiences.

The main findings of the study highlight the very positive 'impact' of Access and WP initiatives at NUI Galway on the life chances of the study participants. The findings – reported in four chapters – relating to the participants' 1) background, schooling and access experiences, 2) undergraduate experiences, 3) postgraduate experiences, and 4) employment experiences – point to their very positive 'performance' and 'progression' in relation to a number of indicators in HE and beyond.

The considerable fortitude and resilience of the study's participants was very evident in their pursuit of and engagement with HE, in spite of challenging life circumstances and schooling experiences. They reported overwhelmingly positive experiences of the Access programme, emphasising its many benefits and its significant role in their subsequent success. In spite of their 'non-traditional' entry-route and/or prior academic qualifications, 89% of the relevant questionnaire respondents graduated, and almost 97%, and 25 of the 26 interviewees, achieved a 1.1, 2.1, or 2.2 degree. Over 78% reported that they found their undergraduate academic work the same, less, or a lot less difficult relative to other students. However, the persistence of the MAs' low level of academic self-confidence was notable, as was the lack of extra-curricular and/or socio-relational engagement of a significant portion of the study's participants, which they linked to differential HE goals, external commitments, and feelings of academic and socio-economic inferiority. Extreme socio-relational distancing was reported in undergraduate Law. High levels of satisfaction were reported in relation to financial, personal, and academic post-entry Access supports, although a significant minority reported the need for a more individualised approach in relation to careers, as well as more targeted and relevant support for mature-aged students in this area.

Almost 80% of the questionnaire respondents, and 23 of the 26 interviewees, progressed to postgraduate level, with the majority citing career and employment motivations. However, many of the MA interviewees had not planned beyond undergraduate level, resulting in 'haphazard

choosing', with some later regretting their choices, whereas the SLAs' narratives revealed assumptions about postgraduate progression. Further, the SLAs' choices were strongly tied to specific careers, and many were altruistically motivated in their desire to enter professions through which they could contribute to society. While generally positive experiences were reported by the interviewees at postgraduate level – including the sense of confidence gained by the MA interviewees having achieved at this level – socio-relational distancing (Keane, 2011a) continued, and became more extreme in some disciplines (Law, Finance, and Business).

The majority of graduates reported that their first year in employment met their expectations, with the remainder citing a lack of employment opportunities (generally as a result of the recession), or suitable graduate-level opportunities. In terms of current (at the time of the survey) employment, over 65% of graduates were employed (mostly full-time), with almost 63% employed in graduate occupations, demonstrating significant impact in terms of social mobility. Over 71% of the questionnaire respondents, and 15 of the 26 interviewees, were in positions related to their qualification/s. Poorer employment outcomes were reported by the MAs relative to the SLAs. High levels of satisfaction with current employment roles were reported although respondents were less confident about their future prospects, particularly in the context of the recession. Just over 35% of questionnaire respondents reported that their employment experiences had been affected by socio-demographic factors, citing especially age, family responsibilities, and social class, and these were also cited by the interviewees. In spite of the additional difficulties experienced by (especially the older) MA study participants in relation to employment, they were clear that they did not regret HE, and emphasised its transformative impact at a personal level.

While the study provides very significant evidence of the positive impact of the WP activities at NUI Galway on access students' life chances, focusing only on such interpretations of 'impact' precludes

the necessary critical examination of (HE) system 'performance'. Policy-level conceptualisations of 'impact' tend to be deficit in nature and metrics-based, thus rendering invisible questions about the 'performance' of institutions in relation to how the curriculum, teaching, and student support serve all students (of all backgrounds, in terms of enabling or constraining their 'performance'),

as well as broader social justice objectives. The lived experiences of the SLAs and MAs at the post-entry level and beyond suggest the need for ongoing commitment to system redevelopment and transformation.



List of Abbreviations

AHEAD	Association for Higher Education Access and Disability	IoTs	Institutes of Technology
CSO	Central Statistics Office	KPIs	Key Performance Indicators
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education	MA	Mature Access
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools	NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
DES	Department of Education and Skills	NUIG	National University of Ireland, Galway
DfES	Department for Education and Skills (UK)	NUIM	National University of Ireland, Maynooth
DCU	Dublin City University	OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
DIT	Dublin Institute of Technology	QR	Questionnaire Respondent
FE	Further Education	REC	Research Ethics Committee
HE	Higher Education	SLA	School Leaver Access
HEA	Higher Education Authority	TCD	Trinity College Dublin
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route	UCC	University College Cork
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency	UCD	University College Dublin
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions	WP	Widening Participation

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Chapter One: Context and Policy

1.1 Widening Participation in Higher Education: A National Policy Priority

The ‘massification’ (Schuetze and Slowey, 2002) of higher education (HE) systems in many countries, including Ireland, has involved very significant increases in participation rates in recent decades. For example, in Ireland, in 1980, 20% of 17-19 year olds progressed to HE compared to approximately 52% of 18-20 year olds currently¹ (Higher Education Authority (HEA), 2014a). In Ireland, there is a commitment to achieving a target 72% HE participation rate by 2020 for the relevant age cohort (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2011; Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2007; HEA, 2008), although there has been a lack of critical discussion about this target (Keane, 2013a). In spite of increased HE participation, however, there remain significant socio-demographic disparities in the representation of certain groups. The ‘saturation’ of higher socio-economic groups’ representation (Clancy and Wall, 2000; HEA, 2015; O’Connell, Clancy and McCoy, 2006), and the under-representation of lower socio-economic and minority ethnic groups, as well as mature students and students with disabilities, is noted and it is acknowledged that further increasing participation rates will be reliant upon “tap[ping] into the deep reservoirs of disadvantage” (HEA, 2014a, p. 3).

In this content, widening participation (hereafter, WP) in HE is a policy priority in Ireland (DES, 2013; HEA, 2014a), and is firmly embedded in the Europe 2020 strategy objectives relating to poverty reduction and social inclusion (European Commission, 2010; HEA, 2014a). While the rationale for WP in Ireland has long been premised on both social justice and economic grounds, the latter frequently have taken precedence. This is evident in the neo-liberal policy discourses underpinning relevant debates, which emphasise ‘choice’, merit, competition, markets, and individual responsibility, and the potential of WP as a means of supplying the economy with necessary human capital, filling skills requirements (HEA, 2014b) and avoiding ‘wastage’ (Burke, 2002; Keane, 2009b; Thomas and Quinn, 2007). While WP is also recognised as a means of redressing social exclusion (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2003) and strengthening civic engagement (HEA, 2008), Archer (2003) contends that this aspect of the discourse contains notes of social control, in that HE is viewed as something of a ‘civilising’ societal force.

Irish WP policy is set in the context of two previous national access plans developed by the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education (established within the HEA in 2003), with the first plan setting targets for 2005 to 2007 (HEA,

¹ 69% of students if all age groups are included

2004) and the second plan covering 2008-2013 (HEA, 2008). Also of note is the HEA consultative document (HEA, 2014b) towards the development of the 2014-2017 national plan². The main target groups over time have included certain lower socio-economic groups, mature entrants, and students with disabilities.

The 2008-2013 national plan emphasised target setting, funding, mainstreaming and embedding access policy within institutions, as well as the importance of the post-entry stage, and identified five high level goals aligned to National Development Plan (2007-2013) objectives. These were: 1) institutional-wide approaches to access, 2) enhancing access through lifelong learning, 3) investment in WP in HE, 4) modernisation of student supports, and 5) WP in HE for those with disabilities. The mid-term review of the national plan (HEA, 2010a), during the depths of the economic recession, observed that not all of the specific actions and targets were being achieved, and specific items were selected for progression in 2011.

A core system objective noted in the DES (2013) Higher Education System Performance Framework (2014-2016) relates to WP. The first report on HE system performance (HEA, 2014b) reports progress in relation to targets for students with disabilities and flexible pathways, but a failure to reach targets for those from under-represented socio-economic groups and (full-time) mature students. Four goals are proposed in the HEA (2014a) consultative document towards the development of the 2014-2017 national plan, including 1) promoting HE access for disadvantaged groups (including a target for the HE participation of Travellers, for the first time), 2) coherent pathways from second level, further education, and other routes into HE, 3) increasing progression and completion for target groups (including a focus on the student learning experience, and academic and pastoral supports, at post-entry level), and 4) supporting evidence-based policy formation by strengthening data systems. Specific targets have been proposed for particular groups, including the non-manual, and semi- and unskilled socio-economic

groups (with a suggestion to also include socio-economic indicators relating to postcode), both full- and part-time mature entrants, students with disabilities, part-time and flexible participation options, and Travellers, although there is still no mention of 'other' minority ethnic groups. The consultative document also notes that targets and performance outcomes in relation to WP form a core part of the 'compacts' agreed between HEIs and the HEA, which "form the basis for performance funding allocations to HEIs" (ibid., p. 6).

Ireland's HEIs offer and/or facilitate a wide range of WP initiatives and programmes, including school level activities, pre-entry Access courses, direct entry routes (the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and the Disability Access Route (DARE)), and myriad supports at post-entry level (cf. HEA, 2006; Keane, 2013a, 2009b; Murphy, 2009).

1.2 Access and Widening Participation at NUI Galway

Since 1997, NUI Galway has worked to ensure a significant increase in participation in HE for those who for social, economic and educational reasons have not yet realised their full educational potential with a particular focus on meeting the HE education needs of citizens and supporting regional development in a catchment area which has low density and a dispersed rural population. Over seventeen years the NUI Galway Access Programme has played a key role in WP across the HE sector, developing policy, programmes, raising awareness, and engaging in advocacy and research on relevant issues.

The University's Access strategy is concerned with the development, promotion and delivery of programmes of learning for targeted individuals in partnership with a wide range of academic units of the University and a number of external partners. It involves a wide range of educational approaches and specialist services targeted at large numbers of students who are classified by the HEA as 'non-traditional', and are perceived as disadvantaged or under-represented in HE.

The activities delivered by the Access Office since 1997 include:

- Access Programme for School-Leavers (Galway);
- Access Programme for Mature Students (Galway);
- Outreach Access Programmes in the Border, Midlands, and Western (BMW) region (in collaboration with other HEIs in the region and NUI Maynooth) and currently delivered in Ballinasloe, Connemara and at St. Angela's College, Sligo;
- Foundation Programmes in Business, and in Science, Technology and Engineering, in collaboration with GMIT;
- Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) for school-leavers; and
- Primary and post-primary school programmes, including *University Trail* and *Uni4U*, aimed at schools in the University's target region, including DEIS³ schools.

In 2015, the Access Office, the Mature Students' Office, and the Disability Support Service merged to establish a new Access Centre focusing on the access and participation of under-represented groups at NUI Galway. The *additional* activities managed by the new Access Centre include:

- Disability Access Route (DARE) for school-leavers;
- Supports for students with disabilities; and
- Mature student admissions and support.

The NUI Galway Draft Mission-based Performance Compact with the HEA (February, 2014) outlines a range of institutional objectives and targets relating to access, WP and lifelong learning,

including part-time and flexible provision, technology-enhanced education, outreach programmes, developmental programmes aligned to DEIS schools, the alignment of the Access, Mature Student and Disability Offices under Student Services, and the development of reporting and tracking mechanisms for relevant students in relation to retention and completion. NUI Galway's 2015-2020 Strategic Plan identifies four major goals, including Teaching and Learning, Research and Innovation, NUI Galway and the World, and Our Communities, and for each of these, key measures of success and targets for 2020 are identified. Under the goal of Teaching and Learning, one of the key measures of success refers to students from traditionally under-represented groups, with a target of 24% of undergraduate students by 2020.

1.3 Overview of the Research

The aim of this research was to explore the undergraduate, postgraduate, and early employment experiences of students who had completed an NUI Galway Access programme, with a view to informing policy and practice in the area of WP and student support in an evidence-based fashion⁴. While a body of research in the Irish context exists on under-represented groups' undergraduate experiences (Fleming and Finnegan, 2011b; Keane, 2009a,b; 2011,a,b; 2012, 2013a,b; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Share and Carroll, 2013; UCCPLUS+, 2011), we know relatively little about these groups' progression to postgraduate level and into employment, apart from the findings of a number of important institutional studies (in Trinity College Dublin (Share and Carroll, 2013; TAP, 2010; Carroll, 2011), University College Cork (UCCPLUS+, 2011), Dublin City University (DCU Access Service,

³ Schools included in the DES (2005) *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS) action plan for educational inclusion, through which a range of integrated supports are provided at school level to participating schools.

⁴ As part of NUI Galway's School of Education's *Research Seminar Series* (RSS), an Access and Widening Participation research seminar was conducted in November 2011, at which Dr. Elaine Keane presented on findings from her previous research and publications on school-leaver-aged access and traditional-entry students' academic and socio-relational experiences at undergraduate university level. At the seminar, Imelda Byrne, Access Officer, presented on the NUI Galway Access Programme work and achievements since the inception of the programme in 1997. The seminar was very well attended, with representatives from the HEA's National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, Access, Mature and Disability Officers from various HEIs, and researchers and academics in the field. Discussions at the seminar led to recommendations that Dr. Keane's findings be explored with a wider section of the student access community (for example, with Mature Access students), and be extended to include a focus on 'what happened next?' (cf. Trinity Access Programme (TAP), 2010), in terms of access students' postgraduate and employment experiences.

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2011), and NUI Maynooth, Dublin Institute of Technology and TCD (Kenny, Fleming, Loxley, and Finnegan, 2010)), which will be examined in Chapter Two. Thus, WP into postgraduate level and employment constitutes an important emerging focus of research in Ireland, to which the current NUI Galway study contributes. Such a focus demonstrates an important developing policy concern with *equality of outcomes* (Stuart, 2012; TAP, 2010), rather than solely with *equality of access* to HE. In an era of serious economic recession and austere HE funding in Ireland, and in the context of a discourse which connotes WP to 'falling standards' (Keane, 2011b) (see Chapter Two), it is important to explore the 'impact' of what is being done to achieve equality outcomes in and through HE. In this study, based on data gathered through a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews between 2012 and 2014 with former NUI Galway Access students, what might constitute evidence of 'impact' is considered through an exploration of various indicators of Access students' 'performance' and 'progression'.

There are eight chapters in this report. Following this introduction, in Chapter Two, the Literature Review briefly explores key findings from relevant research nationally and internationally, drawing in particular on the findings of a number of relevant institutional research studies in the Irish context. The study's methodology is the focus of Chapter Three. Chapters Four to Seven present the study's findings, examining the research participants' 1) background, schooling and Access experiences, 2) undergraduate experiences, 3) postgraduate experiences, and 4) employment experiences. In Chapter Eight, the concluding chapter, the findings are summarised and critically discussed, and the implications for WP policy and practice are considered.



Chapter Two: Literature Review – Considering Indicators of Widening Participation ‘Impact’

2.1 Introduction

The ‘impact’ of widening participation (WP) activities is generally examined through various indicators of (student) ‘performance’ and ‘progression’. However, such terms are not unproblematic. Performance is generally taken to mean a student’s *academic* performance. Research with academic staff internationally suggests that they believe the ‘calibre’ of undergraduates in general has declined, that undergraduates are less equipped for HE (McInnis, 1999), are insufficiently prepared (Casey, 1999), and have become more dependent and instrumental over time (Keane, 2006). As such views have been expressed in the same timeframe as the implementation of Access and WP initiatives in HE, Shaw, Brain, Bridger, Foreman and Reid (2007) note the ongoing tendency to connote ‘falling standards’ to WP (cf. Furedi, 2004), in spite of significant evidence internationally that WP does not depress

academic standards and outcomes (Whiteford, Shah, and Nair, 2013). As Keane (2011b, 2009b, see also, Gillborn, 2008) has argued, such views are premised on unproblematised meritocratic assumptions about the relationship between socio-demographic factors, and academic ‘ability’ and achievement, which do not recognise the significant factors which constrain the achievement of some (whilst enhancing that of others) irrespective of their academic ‘ability’, at both pre- and post-entry stages (cf. Anyon, 1981; Ball, 1981; Bowl, 2003; Burke, 2002; Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander and Grinstead, 2008; Gillborn, 2008; Haggis and Pouget, 2002; Keane, 2011b, 2009b; Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Lynch and O’Riordan, 1998; Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1968).

A key barrier to HE progression for those from lower socio-economic groups is their lower levels of school completion and attainment in the Leaving Certificate examination (DES, 2011). Of those who complete the Leaving Certificate,

those from lower socio-economic groups achieve significantly lower grades relative to their initial 'ability' levels than those from higher socio-economic groups (Hannan, Smyth, McCullagh, O'Leary and McMahon, 1996; Smyth, 1999; Smyth and McCoy, 2009; Technical Working Group, 1995). Research has found that dominant educational practices disadvantage those from lower socio-economic and minority groups (Devine, 2011; Lynch, 1999; 1989; Lynch and Lodge, 2002), including low teacher expectations and 'ability grouping' practices (Smyth and McCoy, 2011). It is during the Junior Cycle that young people, and most especially those from lower socio-economic groups, become particularly disaffected and disengaged, experiencing negative relationships with teachers, attending poorly, and falling behind with academic work, particularly in a 'teaching to the test' school environment (Keane, 2009b, 2011b; Smyth, 2009; Smyth, McCoy and Darmody, 2004). In this context, underachievement at school, combined with less family experience of educational progression and success, impacts negatively on the academic self-confidence, and expectations about HE progression, of those from lower socio-economic groups (*ibid.*). Recognition of the need to support inclusion, student retention and achievement at school level is seen through, for example, the DEIS (DES, 2005) programme, as well as through supplementary entry routes to HE, and the myriad Access and WP initiatives in FE and HE sectors.

2.2 Student 'Performance': Retention, Degree Outcome, and Academic Experiences

Mooney, Patterson, O'Connor, and Chantler (2010) provided the first national retention and progression in Irish HE report including all publicly-funded HEIs, and found that, on average, 15% of new entrants in 2007/2008 (across all sectors and National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) levels) were 'not present' one year later, representing a retention rate of 85%⁵. Non-progression was found to be strongly linked to attainment in the Leaving Certificate. The most up-to-date figure nationally (HEA, 2014c) for non-

presence/non-progression, based on the new entrant cohort of 2010/2011, is 16% overall (across all sectors and NFQ levels), with far greater non-progression rates in Institutes of Technology (IoTs) (25%) relative to universities (9%) and other Colleges (4%).

In spite of the constraining factors outlined in section 2.1, research is generally positive about the HE retention of those from under-represented groups. In an evaluation of 37 Access and Foundation courses in Ireland (across five universities, two Colleges of Education, and ten IoTs), Murphy (2009) pointed to the positive impact of Access programmes, including high levels of transfer from pre-entry Access courses to HE, and subsequent high levels of retention and completion at undergraduate level. Based on data from 12 pre-entry courses nationally, of 2,142 students registered, 80% completed the Access or foundation course, 62% progressed to undergraduate level in HE, 21% had graduated, and at the time 31% remained in the system.

The various institutional studies consistently report very good retention rates for those entering HE from the various Access programmes and routes. For example, in TCD in 2008/2009, the retention rate for TAP (access) undergraduates was 89%, higher than the average current retention rate of 84% (HEA, 2014c). In UCC, the retention rate of access graduates (also 89%) matched that of the mainstream cohort (UCCPLUS+, 2011). At DCU, only 7% of access students did not complete their undergraduate programmes (DCU Access Service, 2011). In Keane's (2009b, 2011b) qualitative study of 45 school leaver-aged access (SLA) and traditional entry (TE) students at NUI Galway, all SLA students completed their degree (one switched to part-time), while one of the traditional-entry students withdrew prior to completion. Participants in the various institutional studies were clear that while insufficient, financial supports, such as the grant, were crucial in considering HE progression as a possibility initially and in supporting their retention once at undergraduate level (Kenny et al., 2010; TAP, 2010; UCCPLUS+, 2011).

Mooney et al.’s (2010) national study on retention found that lower socio-economic groups had higher ‘non-presence’ rates (17-19%) than the average (15%), but noted that the impact of gender and socio-economic status on retention is mediated by Leaving Certificate achievement, and once the latter is taken into account, no significant social class differences in retention were found. However, the skilled manual socio-economic group was an exception, and McCoy and Byrne (chapter six, in Mooney et al., 2010) note this group’s declining level of grant eligibility as a key factor. More recently, the Higher Education System Performance report (HEA, 2014b) reported an increase in the non-progression rates of students from targeted socio-economic groups, and particularly those engaged in awards at NFQ levels 6 and 7, but it is unclear if this includes those entering via pre-entry Access programmes or only direct-entry students. The latest national study of non-progression based on the new entrant cohort of 2010/2011 (HEA, 2014c) found that mature students have lower non-progression rates than average at levels 6, 7 and 8 in IoTs, but have a higher non-progression rate at level 8 in universities (13%, relative to 8% for those under the age of 23). This study also reports that the non-progression rate of semi- and unskilled socio-economic groups improved from 2007/2008, from 17-15%, and 19-17% respectively. The authors note, however, the increase in the non-progression rate for the ‘Unknown’ socio-economic group (from 16-20%), which, they argue, is largely comprised of those from under-represented groups.

In terms of academic performance, research has found that students from under-represented groups generally perform ‘at least as well’ (Molloy and Carroll, 1992, in Osborne, Leopold and Ferrie, 1997, p. 162) as their ‘traditional’ peers in terms of degree results internationally⁶ (cf. Bowen and Bok, 1998; Gallacher and Wallis, 1993) and in the Irish context (Delaney, Harmon, and Redmond 2010; Denny, Doyle, Hyland, O’Reilly and O’Sullivan, 2010; Keane, 2009b, 2011b; Kenny et al., 2010; Share and Carroll, 2013; Staunton, 2009; TAP, 2010; UCCPLUS+, 2011) typically achieving a 2.1 degree. For example, UCCPLUS+ (2011) reports

that 95% of their access graduates achieved an honours degree, with 15.1% obtaining first class honours and the majority achieving 2.1s. Relatively similar findings were reported by TAP (2010) at TCD, with 5% of access students obtaining first class honours, and 58% achieving a 2.1, with access students’ achievement mirroring that of the ‘traditional’ student population (although fewer students obtained first class honours). DCU Access Service (2011) found that just over 14% of their access students obtained first class honours, with 47% achieving a 2.1. In a study of mature students, Staunton (2009) reported that 58% achieved either a first or second class honours degree. In a qualitative study of 45 school leaver-aged access and traditional-entry students at NUI Galway, Keane (2009b, 2011b) noted that both groups performed similarly in terms of end degree results, with the majority of both groups obtaining 2.1s, and a small minority of both obtaining first class honours and 2.2s. Indeed, in a couple of the studies, access students were found to be outperforming their ‘traditional’ peers (cf. DCU Access Service, 2011; UCC PLUS+, 2011). Further, in a national study (based on a random sample of 22% of students at all seven universities), Delaney et al. (2010) found that despite significantly different Leaving Certificate points across socio-economic groups, HE performance was similar across all groups.

The positive impact of Access programmes can also be seen at an intergenerational level, in terms of relevant students’ HE participation subsequently influencing siblings, children, and/or members of their wider family (and community) to enter HE (Share and Carroll, 2013; UCCPLUS+, 2011). Over half of the UCC access study participants were first in their family to progress to HE, and almost 45% of their siblings have since entered HE (UCCPLUS+, 2011). In TCD, Share and Carroll (2013) noted the impact of access students’ HE progression on their wider families, including the ‘ripple effect’ within families seen through the understanding about the education system first generation HE participants passed on to their children, the increased aspirations and expectations that access graduates expressed for their own children’s educational progression,

⁶ However, white students have been found to achieve higher degree classifications than those from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds (cf. Connor, Tyers, Modood, and Hillage, 2004; Richardson, 2008).

and their enhanced involvement in their children's education. Further, Share and Carroll (2013) found that their access students tended to remain in their original communities following graduation, suggesting impact at community level.

Several factors play a role in under-represented groups' 'at least as well' HE retention and academic performance. In the various relevant institutional studies in Ireland, the pre-entry Access/Foundation course was regarded by students as a key factor in their subsequent success, and this has also been found to be the case in the UK (cf. Sanders and Daly, 2013). Denny et al.'s (2010) study of the New ERA (Equal Right to Access) programme at UCD between 1999-2004⁷, found that the programme had positive effects on first year examination performance, reduced first year withdrawal rates, and improved progression to second year and final year graduation rates. Students in the various institutional studies highlight, in particular, the vital role played by the additional financial supports available to them through their Access programme in supporting their retention and success, as well as that of academic (particularly additional tuition and academic writing modules) and pastoral supports (Kenny et al., 2010; Share and Carroll, 2013; UCCPLUS+, 2011). While specific aspects of the UCD Access programme were not separated out (for example, pre-entry vs. post-entry supports and activities), Denny et al. (2010) suggest that financial aid combined with academic support provided the greatest positive impact on the retention and grades, especially in the first year, of access students. Financial aid in general (that is, the means-tested state-funded grant) has been found to have a positive effect on student retention, particularly in the IoT sector (Mooney et al., 2010). As Keane (2013a) points out, as a retention support mechanism, financial support is effective not only directly in terms of practicalities but also indirectly in reducing the need for engagement in part-time work and the level of debt incurred over the term of study.

In spite of the positive academic 'performance' of under-represented groups, their academic experiences suggest that more work is required to create genuinely inclusive and supportive HE systems (Fleming and Finnegan, 2011b; Keane, 2013a). Difficulties may be experienced in the transition to undergraduate level; for example, the transition from small-group and developmental learning and teaching methodologies in their pre-entry programme to large lecture-based approaches at undergraduate approach was problematic for some of the TCD access students at first (Share and Carroll, 2013). They reported being more comfortable with the pedagogical approach in later years of their degree, when project and small-group work were more prevalent. Unrealistic expectations about workload and standards, and adapting to a more independent learning approach and academic discourse (relative to school level), can result in academic disjunction for many students (Bennett and Kottasz, 2006; Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCune, 2008; Lillis and Turner, 2001; Lowe and Cook, 2003; Thomas and Quinn, 2007). However, relative to the traditional-entry students in her study, Keane (2009b, 2011b) found that the access students transitioned to HE much more smoothly, experiencing far less 'academic culture shock', as they required less 'deconstruction from dependence' (having not engaged in, or having been less successful in, dependent learning approaches at school and having had explicit instruction about the nature of HE academic practice in their Access course). The access students, therefore, 'hit the ground running' (ibid.) and attributed their success at the post-entry level to their pre-entry Access course.

Research suggests that the core HE academic system remains oriented towards 'traditional' undergraduates, however. Share and Carroll (2013, p. 8) argue that their access graduates' experience was of "a system established for traditional students that enter on high Leaving Certificate points" in which "educational provision tends to

be geared to the majority group”. The students in Fleming and Finnegan’s (2011a) study (a small majority of whom were mature-aged) questioned their suitability for HE, citing a lack of recognition by lecturers of the relevance of their wider life experiences. In this context, access students’ lack of academic self-confidence, manifest through their expressed concerns about not being ‘able’ for the academic challenge of HE relative to ‘traditional’ students, or worrying about being seen by others as not being ‘able’ (Keane, 2011b; Share and Carroll, 2013), in spite of their ‘at least as well’ academic performance and feeling more prepared for HE following their Access course (Keane, 2009, 2011a), is unsurprising. Commitment by senior management in HE to WP and inclusive policy and practice, including in relation to teaching, learning and student support, is vital (May and Bridger, 2010; Thomas and May, 2010) but individual academics also have a key role to play (cf. Ashwin, Boud, Coate, Hallett, Keane, Krause, Leibowitz, McLaren, McArthur, McCune and Tooher, 2015). Fleming and Finnegan (2011a) emphasise the need for academic staff to assist students from under-represented groups to build successful learner identities, but note that the increasingly demanding schedules of academic staff, and the large lecture approach generally employed at undergraduate level, may not allow for this sort of support.

2.3 Student ‘Performance’: Considering Socio-Relational Dis/engagement

It could be argued that ‘performance’ also ought to include some measure relating to the *socio-relational* realm (students’ extra-curricular, social (including peer) and cultural experiences), given its emerging importance in Ireland (Keane, 2009a,b, 2011a, 2012, 2013a,b; Share and Carroll, 2013) and internationally (Christie, Munro and Wager, 2005; Crozier et al., 2008; Thomas, 2013), due to its impact on retention, academic outcomes, progression, and employment (Little, 2006; Thomas and Quinn, 2007; Tinto, 1993; Van Dyke, Little and Callender, 2005). Keane (2009a,b, 2012) found evidence of access and traditional-entry students differentially prioritising academic

and social realms at undergraduate level, with the access students ‘frontlining’ the academic, to the neglect of the (campus-based) social realm, relative to their traditional-entry peers. Highly conscious of the high stakes involved in their HE participation, and perceiving this as their second (and last) chance, their approach was to over-focus on the academic. They also performed a significant ‘compartmentalisation’ approach, aiming to keep their HE and outside lives separate, with many noting they treated HE ‘like a job’. A lack of engagement in social activities on campus, and compartmentalising HE and outside lives, by access students has since also been reported in a TCD study (cf. Share and Carroll, 2013).

Keane (2009b, 2011a) also reported significant ‘distancing’ behaviours amongst students within the socio-relational realm. In her study, many of the access students tended to ‘stick with their own’ on campus, rather than integrating in meaningful ways with traditional-entry students, and reported that some student groups were exclusive and impenetrable. Both access and traditional-entry students talked at length about the ‘wealthy, snobby students’ who, they believed, deliberately exhibited their perceived higher social status through their physical appearance, clothes and material possessions. In an era of increasing credentialism, it may be that more privileged students, seeing working class students ‘catching up’ via their HE participation and achievement, have moved the ‘game’ of status-reckoning to the socio-relational realm, in which working class students may be more reluctant to engage (ibid.). Keane found that the access students’ distancing behaviour was due to their need to self-protect, a function of feeling inferior, both academically and socio-economically. A key reason for their general avoidance of disclosing their Access course route to other students was the fear of being thought of as unable for the academic challenge of HE, and/or undeserving of their HE place, having not obtained the relevant Leaving Certificate points. The access graduates, especially those who were of mature-age, in Share and Carroll’s (2013, p. 54) TCD study, expressed similar concerns when faced with their traditional-entry peers, who were seen as being “proper intellectuals ... proper

people". Keane's (2011a) access students were also disinclined to reveal their Access entry route because of its association with socio-economic disadvantage. The access students in Share and Carroll's (2013) study were also very conscious of being in HE with students who came from very different socio-economic backgrounds to themselves, feeling that they did not belong, and being very aware of their different accents.

As socio-relational disengagement negatively affects academic outcomes, retention, and employment outcomes, Keane (2011a) has argued that socio-relational and extra-curricular distancing and disengagement may ultimately constitute a form of self-sabotage, and the issue requires more attention in research, particularly as the WP focus extends to the postgraduate and employment levels. Meanwhile, further work also remains to be done to create a more inclusive HE environment, in order that all students can feel accepted and comfortable to engage in meaningful ways (Keane, 2009b, 2011a, 2013a).

2.4 Student 'Progression': Postgraduate Level

Indicators of *progression* may include transfer to postgraduate level. Of the 'class of 2013', 40% of graduates progressed to postgraduate level, an increase from 37% in 2012 (HEA, 2014d) and 34% in 2008 (HEA, 2010b), but these data are not disaggregated to show progression rates for different student groups (Keane, 2013a).

Internationally, there has been limited attention to and research about WP at the postgraduate level (Bowes, Thomas, Peck and Nathwani, 2013; McCullough and Thomas, 2013; Wakeling and Kyriacou, 2010). With a postgraduate qualification increasingly needed for graduate level employment and for access to the professions (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009), inequalities at this level require examination. Drawing on Heagney (2010), Bowes et al. (2013) point to the under-representation of those from lower socio-economic groups at all levels of postgraduate study in Australia. In the UK,

applications for postgraduate programmes from UK and EU students have fallen significantly in the last couple of years (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013), generally due to financial constraints (Milburn, 2012). Of those who do pursue postgraduate qualifications, vocational motivations are most frequently cited, in terms of improving their employment prospects, becoming more competitive in the labour market, and progressing in their current career path (National Union of Students, 2010; Soilemetzidis, Bennett and Leman, 2014).

While research in Ireland in this area is in its embryonic stage (Keane, 2013a), findings from the various institutional studies indicate a high progression rate to postgraduate level amongst access students (DCU Access Service, 2011; Kenny et al., 2010; Share and Carroll, 2013; TAP, 2010; UCCPLUS+, 2011) of at least over 50%, and in some cases much higher. In the TCD study (TAP, 2010), 57% of graduates had progressed to postgraduate level or some form of further education and training; 41.1% progressed to programmes at levels 8, 9, and 10, 31.9% to 'Other training qualifications', and 19.5% to 'Professional training qualifications'. In DCU, over 53% of access graduates progressed to further study (DCU Access Service, 2011). In the UCC (UCC PLUS+, 2011) study, only 28% sought employment following graduation, and 72% of survey participants were pursuing some form of postgraduate study. In 2008, the number of UCCPLUS+ (ibid.) (access) students pursuing postgraduate studies was twice that of 'mainstream' students. Reasons for postgraduate progression mirror those cited in studies from the UK, with students perceiving a need for a qualification at this level for entry into graduate professions, to advance in their current roles, to get full-time employment, and in the expectation of a higher income (TAP, 2010; UCCPLUS+, 2011).

In Ireland, while we are lacking socio-demographic data on those accessing programmes regarded as 'high prestige' and for which high (Leaving Certificate) points are required (for example, Physiotherapy, Psychology, Law, Medicine and Veterinary Studies) (National Access Office, 2013),

national policy recognises that professional occupations are disproportionately composed of those from higher socio-economic groups, and acknowledges the need to encourage those from under-represented groups to consider relevant professional programmes (Government of Ireland, 2007). One profession which is gaining attention in Ireland in this regard is that of teaching. In a background document (National Access Office, 2013) in preparation for the next national access plan, the importance of a diverse teaching population is highlighted. The central objective of the *Diversity in Initial Teacher Education* (DITE) national research project, based in the School of Education at NUI Galway, is to explore and compare the socio-demographic backgrounds (including a range of diversity variables, as well as career motivations, educational experiences, and experiences with diversity) of all applicants and entrants to primary and post-primary initial teacher education (ITE) in Ireland, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels (cf. Heinz, Keane and Foley, 2016; Keane and Heinz, 2015). Key aims are to review entry procedures and selection criteria for ITE programmes, and to explore ways of facilitating entry to the profession by under-represented groups. Initial findings provide baseline data on a national level in relation to postgraduate post-primary ITE entrants’ nationality/ies, ethnicity/ies and disability, and point to the negative impact of the change to a two-year postgraduate programme, particularly in the context of the economic recession, on the representation of lower socio-economic groups (Keane and Heinz, 2015). The Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) has also highlighted the need for diversity in the teaching population, noting the inflexibility of entrance policy to ITE for students with disabilities.

2.5 Student ‘Progression’: Employment

Stuart (2012) argues that the debate about HE and social mobility has moved from a focus on widening access to HE to equality of *outcomes* for graduates. Thus, ‘progression’ also involves a consideration of employment experiences,

in terms of employment status, the type of employment (i.e. ‘graduate’ or ‘non-graduate’ employment, cf. Elias and Purcell, 2004), satisfaction levels, and expectations about opportunities. Contextual factors, including the state of the economy, must be taken into account in discussions of graduate employment patterns, most especially the very severe economic downturn in Ireland from 2007 which heralded the end of the so-called ‘Celtic Tiger’ ‘boom’ years. Prior to the economic recession, rates of graduate progression to employment, and graduates’ expectations and starting salaries, were high (HEA, 2006; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2006) relative to a short few years later (HEA, 2009), when much more limited employment opportunities were available to graduates. In Ireland, of the ‘class of 2013’, 51% of graduates with a Bachelor’s degree progressed to employment either in Ireland or overseas, compared to 52% in 2012, 45% in 2009 (HEA, 2014d), and 50% in 2008 (HEA, 2010b), with 12% in 2013 working overseas, compared to 10% in 2012, and 5% in 2008 (HEA, 2014d). Approximately two-thirds reported that their qualification was relevant or very relevant to their employment area. 6% were ‘seeking employment (down from 7% in 2012) and 3% were unavailable for work or study (ibid.).

Increasing numbers of graduates entering the employment market has made for a more competitive environment. In this context, an ‘employability’ focus during the undergraduate years is seen to be necessary, as is the recognition that an undergraduate degree may not be sufficient for graduate-level employment (Brown and Scase, 1994; Sexton, Canney, and Hughes, 1996). The concept of ‘graduateness’ (Yorke, 2004) is closely linked with ‘employability’, particularly in terms of the sorts of skills and attributes that graduates are seen to need for the employment market. Bozalek (2013, p. 72) argues, however, that there is little recognition that students from under-represented groups are “differentially positioned” in their motivations, prior experiences, and needs in the context of wider ‘employability’ discourses, which can result in very different early labour market experiences relative to their more

advantaged peers (Furlong and Cartmel, 2005; Purcell and Hogarth, 1999). Indeed, research from England suggests students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds are more likely to report employment discrimination (Blasko, Brennan, Little and Shah, 2002; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005) and less favourable experiences and outcomes, including in relation to salary and time needed to find permanent employment (Brennan and Shah, 2003; Thomas, 2005), than are 'traditional' students. Research points to a range of factors in this regard, including employers' selection and hiring practices (Thomas, 2005), which in a hyper-competitive market may involve the preference for graduates from more 'prestigious' universities (Rivera, 2011; Wakeling and Savage, 2015) who employers feel can demonstrate particular extra-curricular accomplishments (Rivera, 2011; Tomlinson, 2008), and the extension of the academic assessment element to school-level achievement (Naylor, Smith and McKnight, 2002). Practices such as these place 'non-traditional' graduates at a disadvantage, given that they are generally over-represented in what are perceived to be 'lower status' institutions and programmes (Boliver, 2013), and are more likely to have under-achieved at school (Purcell, Rowley, and Morley, 2002). Working class students also experience more challenges securing 'good' work placements - often a precursor to obtaining (paid) employment in one's field - as a result of financial constraints and a lack of access to informal networks (Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth, and Rose, 2013). Research also points to the disadvantaged position of (particularly older) mature-aged graduates in the labour market in terms of experiences and outcomes (cf. Blasko et al., 2002; Purcell and Elias, 2004; Purcell and Hogarth, 1999; Purcell, Wilton, and Elias, 2007), although Woodfield (2011) recorded positive employment experiences and outcomes in relation to a range of indicators for 2006 mature graduates (using a Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) database). A further issue is access to the professions for those from minority and under-represented groups: Stuart (2012), drawing on a wide range of research evidence, observes that access to the professions in the UK has become less socially representative over time. Based on their large-scale national

study in the UK, Macmillan, Tyler and Vignoles (2015) found stark and statistically significant differences across socio-economic groups in relation to graduates accessing high status professions, and note the important (but complex) roles played by family social background, including access to private schooling, and key social networks, which act as advantages for those from privileged backgrounds, as well as employers' hiring practices. In their qualitative study of 'non-educational' barriers to elite law and accountancy firms in London, and to elite financial firms in Scotland, Ashley, Duberley, Sommerlad, and Scholarios (2015) observe the continued - indeed, increased - dominance of those from higher socio-economic groups, and point to elite employers' tendency to recruit from a small group of prestigious universities and to define 'talent' based on factors strongly associated with middle class values, status and socialisation.

Research in Ireland suggests quite positive employment experiences and outcomes for access graduates, and this is particularly of note given the impact of the economic recession on employment opportunities more generally. As previously noted, the majority of UCC access graduates continued in HE. Of the 65% in employment (at the time of the survey), the vast majority were working full-time (UCCPLUS+, 2011). 75% of TCD access graduates were employed (TAP, 2010), and the majority of those not employed were engaged in further study. 96% of DCU's access graduates were reported to be in employment⁸, with 4% unemployed (DCU Access Service, 2011). In their study of mature students in NUI Maynooth, Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and TCD, Kenny et al. (2010, p. 11) reported an 8% level of unemployment. In Share and Carroll's (2013) study of access graduates in TCD, the minority who were unemployed found it difficult to reconcile being unemployed with having a degree from a prestigious university, and had not anticipated that they may also need to obtain a postgraduate qualification. The various institutional studies also report that the majority of access graduates are in 'graduate' forms of employment, and in areas related to their degrees (DCU Access Service, 2011; UCCPLUS+, 2011).

TCD access graduates were mostly employed in the education or healthcare sectors, with some in the financial, legal, and social and community sectors, and their mature students were more frequently employed in the education sector (TAP, 2010). Indeed, Kenny et al. (2010) have observed the marked number of access graduates choosing to work in the field of education, and this was also of note in the TCD study (TAP, 2010), especially amongst their mature-aged graduates. The vast majority (generally 60-70%) of access graduates from the various studies were earning €35,000 or less, broadly in line with national starting salaries for HE graduates (52% of graduates reported earning initial salaries of €25,000 or under, with 45% earning €25-45,000, HEA, 2014d). TAP (2010) reported that mature students earned less than younger students and also reported a 9% increase in the rate of unemployment for mature students compared to young adults. Among both TCD and UCC access graduates, significant satisfaction rates were reported with a range of factors related to their employment (ibid.; UCCPLUS+, 2011).

Compared to research in England, a minority of Irish access graduates report that their employment experiences have been negatively affected by their socio-demographic positioning. For example, the majority of participants in the TCD study (TAP, 2010. See also, Carroll, 2011) reported that they did not feel that their gender, location or age negatively impacted in terms of accessing graduate employment. Their mature-aged participants did, however, observe that family and/or personal responsibilities could hinder progression. Participants acknowledged

a lack of professional experience, and having fewer networks upon which to draw, and while these issues were seen as hampering progress initially, they were not viewed as barriers to career progression. UCCPLUS+ (2011) report that their findings are in line with the TCD findings, although the issue of perception of labour market disadvantage is not directly addressed. Share and Carroll (2013) reported that some access graduates were reluctant to disclose their access to HE route to their employer, while others were comfortable in doing so and even “used this as ‘other capital’ in their jobs. They brought their life experiences to their employment and had an edge that other traditional graduates appeared to lack” (ibid., p. 11).

2.6 Concluding Comments

This chapter has explored previous research findings in relation to the undergraduate, postgraduate and employment experiences of those from under-represented groups, with a particular focus on access students and relevant studies in the Irish context. Indicators of ‘impact’, in terms of relevant students’ academic performance, progression rates to postgraduate level, and employment experiences were examined, as well as these individuals’ wider (including socio-relational) experiences in HE. The research evidence suggests that access students are performing ‘at least as well’ as ‘traditional’ students in relation to many ‘objective’ indicators, pointing to significant positive impact of Access and WP programmes and activities.



Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

As previously noted, the aim of this research was to explore the undergraduate, postgraduate and early employment experiences of NUI Galway access students. A mixed-methods research design (employing a self-completion questionnaire, and in-depth semi-structured interviews) was selected in order to gather data on a wide range of variables from a substantial population while also exploring the research participants' lived experiences of HE and beyond in an in-depth fashion. Research design was completed in consultation with the NUI Galway Access Office between January and March 2012, and full ethical approval for the project and its procedures was provided by the NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee (REC) in April 2012. Approval for the project was also granted by the NUI Galway Access Steering group.

3.2 Data Collection: The Questionnaire

Following a small pilot study, questionnaire design and all accompanying documentation (letter of invitation and consent form) for both online and hard-copy versions were finalised in summer 2012. The questionnaire consisted of 81 items, including both closed- and open-ended

items, exploring participants' socio-demographic and educational profiles, their undergraduate experiences and 'performances', and their postgraduate and employment experiences. Many questions relating to socio-demographic background were developed based on Irish Census (2011) items (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2012). Some questions were based on findings from Keane's previous research (2009b, 2011a,b, 2012) for the purpose of examining their applicability amongst a larger group of school-leaver-aged access students, and amongst mature-aged access students. Other questions were developed based on research with access students and graduates in other Irish HEIs (cf. UCCPLUS+ 2011; TAP, 2010) for the purposes of comparison, and/or were informed by research in the field from the UK (cf. Elias and Purcell, 2004; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005). Questionnaire completion time was approximately 30 minutes.

Significant efforts were made to establish the full relevant student population and compile potential participants' contact details. Rather than selecting a random sample, it was decided to implement the questionnaire with the full population, because a low response rate was anticipated and because the main purpose of the research was to provide descriptive profiles of the study's participants and their experiences, rather

than to generalise from the findings or examine causality.

The questionnaire was implemented in August 2012, and both hard-copy and online (via Survey Monkey⁹) versions of the questionnaire were employed in an effort to maximise the response rate. Reminders were sent in September, and further recruitment efforts were made throughout 2013, including through social media. Difficulties in participant recruitment stemmed from not having up-to-date contact details for many former access students; in a large number of cases, individuals were no longer at the postal address on university records, and the email address they had previously provided was no longer in use. The response rate was particularly low from those who had completed the various Outreach Access courses, especially where course co-ordinators were no longer in post due to funding cuts. Similar participant recruitment difficulties were encountered in the other relevant institutional studies (cf. TAP, 2010; UCCPLUS+, 2011) and are common in research of this kind (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). As a result, it was decided to re-implement the survey a final time in January 2014 with the two NUI Galway Access course (School Leaver Access and Mature Access) groups, and to only continue with these groups in terms of data collection. 195 responses were obtained, resulting in a 23.1%¹⁰ response rate. While this is lower than that achieved in the other institutional studies, and it is a limitation of this study, insofar as can be determined, the overall number of respondents is the highest of the institutional studies. A related issue is that non-respondents may well differ from respondents (Dale, 2006), which can affect validity and reliability, although this is seen to be less of a problem where the overall population is relatively homogenous, which, at least in socio-demographic terms, the access student population at NUI Galway could be deemed to be (ibid.). A further issue, as noted

elsewhere (Keane, 2013a), is that in research of this kind it is also possible that graduates who have experienced the most success may make up a large proportion of those who choose to respond, which necessitates caution in the interpretation of the results.

Respondents were categorised into one of 10 socio-economic groups, based on father's occupation (using precise job title) at the time the respondent left school, and according to the categories of the 2011 Census classification (Appendix 7) (CSO, 2012). Questionnaire respondents' current occupations were coded using Elias and Purcell's (2004) schema¹¹, categorising occupations into 'traditional graduate occupations', 'modern graduate occupations', 'new graduate occupations', 'niche graduate occupations, and 'non-graduate occupations'. The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) for Windows (version 21). A variety of statistical tests were performed, including frequency tests of all variables, and multiple response tables. Where relevant and possible (taking due regard of the underlying assumptions of the test), chi-square tests of independence were employed to explore significant differences between respondent groups, and where significant differences were found, these are reported. In this report, percentages reported refer to 'valid' percentages (i.e. based on the number of respondents who answered each particular question). Overall, the response rate for individual questions was high. As the research included respondents who completed their Access course between 1997/1998-2011/2012, some sections of the questionnaire (for example, the questions relating to postgraduate level and employment) were not relevant for those who had completed their Access course in more recent years.

⁹ <https://www.surveymonkey.com>

¹⁰ The total population for SLAs and MAs 1997-2012 inclusive was 845.

¹¹ Elias and Purcell's (2004) five graduate categories included the following: 1) Traditional Graduate Occupation (for example, Teacher, Social Worker, Nurse, Doctor, Special Needs Assistant), 2) Modern Graduate Occupation (for example, IT Workers, Laboratory Technicians, Analysts, Quality Assurance Workers), 3) New Graduate Occupations (for example, graduates entering companies), 4) Niche Graduate Occupations (for example, Research Assistants, Tutors, Translators), and 5) Non-Graduate Occupations (for example, Sales Assistants, Bar Workers, and the Self-employed).

Profile of Questionnaire Respondents

Of the 195 respondents, 49.2% had completed the School Leavers Access (SLA) programme and 50.8% had completed the Mature Access (MA) programme. 2.1% had withdrawn during their Access programme, citing family responsibilities, or not feeling 'able' for HE. A further 6.7% completed the Access programme but did not progress to undergraduate level, citing financial, employment, and personal reasons. Just over 27% of the respondents had completed their Access programme in the 2010/2011 or 2011/2012 academic years, and the remainder were relatively evenly distributed between 1997/1998-2009/2010 academic years in terms of when they completed their Access programme. 79% of the respondents were female, and 21% were male. Almost half were single (never married) and the majority had no children (59.5%). At the time of the survey, over 98% of SLA respondents were aged 18-35 years. Approximately one third of MA respondents were aged 35 or younger, one third were aged 36-45, and one third were over 46 years.

The vast majority of respondents (91.3%) were of Irish nationality, 4.1% were British, and the remaining 4.6% were of nationalities including Albanian, American, Czech, Estonian, German, Polish, Sudanese and Zimbabwean. In terms of ethnicity, 84.6% were from a White (settled) Irish background, 2.1% were from the Travelling community, 9.7% were from 'Any other White Background', 2.1% were Black African, 1% 'Any other Black Background' and 0.5% were Asian. English was cited as the first language of 84.7% of respondents, and Irish for 9.7%. 5.6% spoke other languages including Albanian, Arabic, Czech, Estonian, German, Polish, Shona and Zulu. 24.1% of respondents cited a disability, with 8.2% reporting more than one disability or condition.

Almost 80% were from target lower socio-economic groups, including non-manual, manual skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled, and Farmer and Agricultural groups. In terms of parental education, over 41% of respondents' fathers, and almost 34% of respondents' mothers, had either no formal educational qualification or primary school level

only. Approximately 19% of respondents' parents had achieved to either Group or Intermediate/Junior Certificate level only, and 26-28% to Leaving Certificate or equivalent level only. 7.6% of respondents' fathers had obtained some form of third level qualification, compared to 13% of respondents' mothers. 47.4% reported that they were the first in their family (including parents/guardians and siblings) to progress to HE.

3.3 Data Collection: Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were selected as a further data collection method to facilitate an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and an element of (between methods) triangulation (Denzin, 1970). A questionnaire item invited respondents to provide contact details if they wished to participate in an individual interview on the topic of the research, and 68 respondents volunteered. As the aim of the research was to explore participants' undergraduate, postgraduate and employment experiences, it was decided to prioritise those who had had the opportunity for such experience (in terms of the year in which they initially graduated), leaving approximately 53 volunteers, all of whom were re-invited to participate in the interviews and were sent the relevant documentation (letter of invitation containing full information on the study and its procedures, and a consent form). 26 responded, and the interviews were conducted between November 2013 and June 2014, 21 in person, and five via Skype (as these individuals were no longer living in Ireland). Of the 26 interview participants, 14 had completed the School Leavers' Access course, and 12 had completed the Mature Access course¹², before progressing to university. 18 were female, and 8 were male. Further information about the participants and their subject areas, their qualifications at undergraduate and postgraduate level, and their educational trajectories is threaded through the research report in context. However, a detailed overview of participants' characteristics is not provided in order to protect the confidentiality of the specific individuals.

¹² Of the Mature Access interviewees, six were over the age of 50 at the time of interview.

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The interviews were semi-structured in nature (Cohen et al., 2011) which allowed for flexibility in interview style and approach, whilst generally standardising the key questions across participants. Interview questions generally focused on their views and experiences in relation to their background and schooling, the Access course, undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and into employment. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and basic grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006, 2014) coding procedures were employed at the analysis stage, including open (line by line) and focused coding, and categorising.

In Chapters Four to Seven, the findings from both the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews are presented in an integrated fashion, in relation to participants' background, schooling and Access experiences, and experiences of undergraduate and postgraduate levels and employment. The abbreviations 'SLA' and 'MA' are used throughout to indicate former students of the School Leaver Access, and Mature Access, programmes at NUI Galway respectively. Where a quote is included from a questionnaire respondent, it is indicated by 'QR'. Pseudonyms are employed for the SLA and MA interview participants. All Figures included in the report are based on the questionnaire respondents only.



Chapter Four: Background, Schooling and Access Experiences

4.1 Family Background

While many of the SLA and MA interviewees noted wanting to progress to higher education (HE) at earlier stages in their lives, many reported not expecting to be able to do so. Growing up in challenging and “chaotic” (Jamie, SLA) family circumstances of various kinds was commonly reported, which impacted in both practical and psychological ways on participants’ capacity to consider HE as a viable future option, as well as on their ability to engage with the demands of schooling. Many recalled childhood experiences marked by family crises, traumas, disruption, and serious financial struggles.

... we were from [area in city] which is rough as shit to be honest with you ... we were kind of outsiders even in primary school ... we had absolutely nothing growing up. My father was on the dole most of his life ... so like we’d real socioeconomic difficulties. (Justine, SLA)

... the things I was exposed to there, my house ... was really in bad condition, the place we were living in [area], I was

so embarrassed with it ... just that total stigma ... and I suffered abuses ... then I went wild as well ... (Harriet, SLA)

I was studying all honours subjects and because my dad being ill ... I had to cut a lot of them down to the pass level because I just didn’t have the time or the energy to put in the study and there was just so much pressure at home and craziness at home ... (Oscar, SLA)

Participants talked about a lack of family history of education, especially HE, in their immediate and extended families, with several explaining that parents’ literacy difficulties also impacted on their ability to academically support their children, as “there was no culture of learning in my house” (Jamie, SLA). In this context, for many, HE was not seen to be a viable option, and for some, it was an impossibility, with Jude (MA) noting that in his area at the time “ ... there wouldn’t have been that many people of a certain class going to higher education, it would have been all doctors’ sons and so forth”. For many of the MAs, financial constraints constituted a key barrier to HE progression, particularly as grants and financial

supports were even less available in the relevant timeframe.

... I was the eldest of five children ... there was no grant, we had a small farm, there was no money, there was no encouragement ... So that was that, that dream was not happening and I got married and I had children ... (Heather, MA)

Melissa (MA) explained that her family "nearly had a heart attack" when she mentioned her desire to progress to HE as they could not afford it, so she "put it to the back of my mind and ... went out and worked" but "always felt that I could do more". Additionally, leaving school early, or missing a lot of school, to help out at home and/or contribute to the family in financial and/or other practical ways was necessary for some:

... my mother was sick when I was growing up ... I did do the Leaving Cert ... But my marks were just pass marks ... emotionally I was all over the place ... often I wasn't at school a lot of the time, I was kept at home to mind her ... I missed an awful lot of days at school. (Alice, MA)

... the interest wasn't really there for school at the time, just wanted to get out and work was more important because like at that time there wasn't much money around so I preferred to be earning. (Mark, MA)

... I suppose the socio-economics at the time, you know, I was the eldest in a family of five so I felt ... maybe to go out and work would be more productive, certainly in the short term ... (Jude, MA)

Several of both groups talked about being in a school context which was "not geared towards academia" (Melissa, MA), in which few, if any, progressed beyond the Leaving Certificate stage, and many left school early without any formal academic qualifications. Several interviewees from both groups talked about teachers not believing in them or encouraging them to engage academically or to consider further study options.

I always wanted to go to college but the [name of school] wasn't a school that encouraged people to go to college ... it's a disadvantaged school ... I remember a teacher telling me 'Oh you'll never go to college anyways' ... I don't think that they were people that would push you to go towards college or believed in the students that were in that school (Tracy, SLA)

I come from a lower socio-economic background and the school I went to wasn't geared towards academia in any way, shape or form ... it was geared towards people doing Group Cert and usually for boys particularly getting a trade after that ... the majority of students just stayed there till Group Cert, which was second year, and left and usually got a trade ... (Melissa, MA)

... in my class, I'd say if there was five people that went on to third level ... it was all about trades, you go there, you do your trade ... (Oscar, SLA)

Several from both groups of interviewees reported that there was little or no information provided about HE or further study options in their school, while others emphasised the lack of necessary subject, or subject level, choice available.

4.2 Experiences of School

The interview participants' reported experiences of school were, in the main, quite negative. For both the SLAs and MAs, the over-arching sense was one of not feeling encouraged in or by school.

... we didn't have great teachers to be honest with you, but not only that, there was no information about college, you weren't geared towards it in any way ... you just did your ordinary subjects and whatever you got you got ... (Melissa, MA)

... we had no subject choice at all. I was at a loss ... we had no career guidance, we had nothing in our school, it wasn't great ... I suppose not many would have gone on to third level education from our school. (Rosa, SLA)

... I actually wanted to do some business subjects in there but I was limited because ... I had to do the mechanical subjects ... (Oscar, SLA)

Chester (SLA) found it difficult to concentrate and progress academically, due to the disruption in his class on a daily basis:

... [our class] really became like almost a collection of misfits towards the Third, Fourth Fifth Year, really the worst achievers were kind of all get bundled together ... people that were interested in disrupting the class and missing as much of the school day as they could ... teachers would tend to maybe concentrate on telling people to be quiet rather than actually teaching anything ... (Chester, SLA)

Many reported being very unhappy in school, and subsequently rebelling through 'mitching' class and/or acting out in various ways, falling behind academically, and/or leaving school early:

I went to secondary school in Galway ... I really felt out of place. I didn't like the teachers ... I really hated it ... I never went ... I spent the whole of second year ... with other outcasts or misfits ... we all started getting in trouble ... mitching school, smoking, fighting. [after an incident] ... I was allowed back after the suspension but then at the end of the year I was told ... it would be better if I didn't come back the following year, so I didn't go back the following year. (Helena, SLA)

For a small number of MA interviewees, their memories of school were extremely negative; they recalled instances of corporal punishment, including being quite severely beaten.

Well primary was horrible. I developed an anxiety in my stomach because I was afraid, I hated it simply because you'd be beaten for writing with your left hand ... So I hated school and my whole childhood was ruined from my anxiety about school ... (Amelia, MA)

I went to [name of primary school] ... we had a very bad experience down there because they used to beat us ... actually physically beat us ... I got kicked in the head down there, that's always in your head as well you know. (Mark, MA)

In terms of the highest level of education achieved by the questionnaire respondents prior to entering their Access course, 3.1% had completed primary school without progressing further, 19.2% had completed either only a Group, Intermediate or Junior Certificate, and 77.7% had completed a Leaving Certificate (the majority of whom had completed the Established Leaving Certificate). Figure 4.1 provides a comparison of the SLA and MA groups, and as we can see, more of the SLA group (83.3%) than the MAs (55.7%) completed the established Leaving Certificate programme.

Almost all of the questionnaire respondents had attended a state post-primary school. 40.5% of respondents had obtained a FETAC qualification. 64% of respondents had completed a points-based Leaving Certificate, with the majority achieving between 200-400 points. The majority of the MA group did not complete a points-based Leaving Certificate¹³ (see Figure 4.2).

Notwithstanding the negative schooling experiences reported by many of the interviewees, what came through from the narratives of both groups was an over-riding desire to return to and progress further in and through education. Several of the MA participants had been occupied with work and/or raising a family for some time before returning to education became a possibility. For these participants, HE had always remained at the back of their minds; they were motivated by the desire to "do something for me" (Heather, MA) and/or wanting or needing better employment.

¹³ The Leaving Certificate completed by many of the older MA respondents and interviewees pre-dated the Points System.

Considering the 'Impact' of Access and Widening Participation:

The Undergraduate, Postgraduate, and Employment Experiences of NUI Galway Access Students

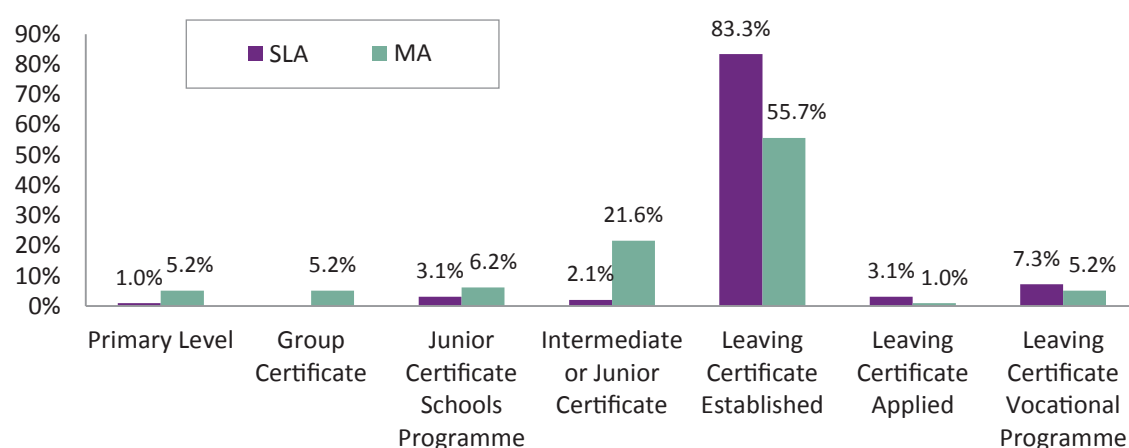


Figure 4.1: Highest Level of Education Prior to Access

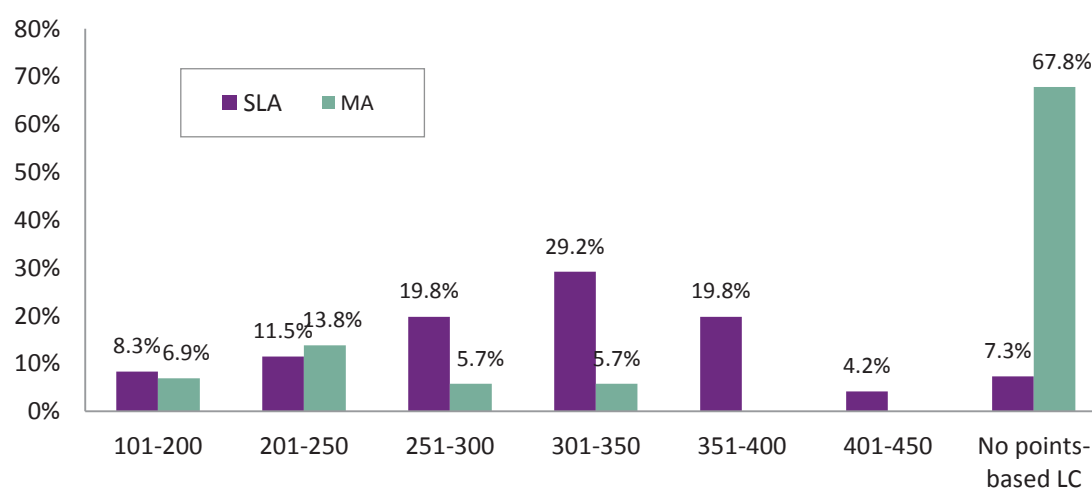


Figure 4.2 Leaving Certificate Points

... I was my husband's wife and I was my children's mother ... and I had a role in the community ... I was really, I suppose, at a point in my life when I needed to do something for me ... (Heather, MA)

I had been working for about six years ... I knew I could do a little bit more ... am I still going to be doing this when I'm in my 60s, I don't think so ... [the employer] can take on young girls, pay them for very cheap and they have no rights ... so when I saw the ad I thought, right this is it ... aim to get something better employment wise in my 30s ... (Melissa, MA)

I had my daughter ... I wasn't working, so I was at home ... I was thinking down the road, I said I didn't want to be in kind of a job that wasn't very well paid and trying to support her and, you know, when she's in school and just to be struggling ... (Sarah, MA)

Similarly, in their responses to the questionnaire items asking about their reasons for wishing to progress to HE and to explain what HE meant to them, respondents emphasised career and employment motivations in the main, but also noted the importance of a desire to return to learning, wanting the opportunity for HE when it had not been previously available to them,

and wishing to 'better the self' through personal development and opportunities for the future. The need to prove oneself academically was also highlighted, and this was especially important for MA respondents, many of whom noted that achieving in HE proved to them that they were "officially not stupid" (QR: MA).

4.3 Experiences of Access

51.3% of the questionnaire respondents felt that Access programmes were best placed in HE, 30.4% felt they were best placed in a HE/Further Education (FE) partnership, and 17.8% selected FE. 0.5% selected 'Other' but did not elaborate.

Both groups of interview participants reported their experiences of Access as being overwhelmingly positive, indeed, transformational. Interviewees typically reported they 'loved Access', very highly praised both the course, and the various Access staff and tutors, and emphasised how grateful they were to the Access programme more generally.

... I would have climbed mountains and crossed rivers in order to avail of the opportunity and as a whole learning experience I found that it was absolutely wonderful ... I would have been one of those people [who] would stand outside the gates of the university and look in and wonder would there ever be a place for me in there ... I really loved it ... (Penelope, MA)

I loved it actually, it was brilliant, Access ... it just felt like home ... everyone went above and beyond the call of duty for us ... I loved everything about Access ... (Helena, SLA)

Many benefits of the Access course were discussed by the interviewees, including the structure of the course, the close interaction with academic staff, the opportunity to attend lectures on campus and 'sample' various subjects, the continuous assessment and feedback approach, the friendships made and associated camaraderie, and getting the skills and knowledge required for successful HE

participation. A key benefit related to building their self-confidence, particularly academically, ensuring that the participants realised they had potential for HE progression:

... and Access really just builds up your confidence, helps you to write, how to think properly, how to think at university level ... just a big confidence builder. (Tracy, SLA)

I found it brilliant ... it just gave me a great boost, a great confidence level ... all the achievements through the Access course ... They were so encouraging all the time. (Clare, MA)

An important source of their growing confidence was their academic writing module, which was highly praised by both groups, but especially the MAs, most of whom had been out of education for a significant amount of time (several for between 15-20 years) in advance of returning to do the Access course.

... [tutor] was absolutely amazing ... she did writing skills ... I always remembered what she told me ... things that were very practical, very simple, but I felt that I needed at the time to help me get through college ... that particular module definitely helped me with college ... (Sarah, MA)

... being away from education for what, almost 10, 15 years, you know you tend to get a bit sloppy with your written expressions ... just how to phrase things properly, how to quote things properly ... just how to align paragraphs ... I suppose you could theoretically learn them from a book, there's nothing like the hands on. (Jude, MA)

Both groups emphasised how well the Access course prepared them for HE, with the MA interviewees in particular directly linking their undergraduate completion and success to the Access course, and arguing that the course should be available to *all* students. For example, Sarah (MA) explained that students are "a lot

more supported" in school, whereas in HE, "you can choose to not go to your lectures" and you have "no one kind of helping you, no real hands on support in college itself". Believing there was "too much of a gap between the Leaving Cert and college life itself", she argued that "every student across the board should do some kind of an Access course before they enter into college". The SLAs talked about Access being a great "stepping stone" and a "fantastic preparation" for first year (Paul, SLA), and a "fantastic course for breaking you into college life" (Justine, SLA).

... it definitely did equip us going into first year ... we'd loads of study skills ... it definitely complemented me ... it gets you into the formalities of college ... the routine ... referencing, you know the bibliographies ... gets you IT smart as well ... it provided a fantastic buffer going in to first year as a preparation. (Paul, SLA)

Jamie (SLA) believed he may have dropped out without the preparation Access had provided:

... opened up the doors in university ... it really kind of supported me ... The Access course was really, really, really good ... exposing me to what was required of me in order to succeed in university ... if I had just been let into first year university, without that support, and without real formal educational supports growing up ... I guess I would have got lost very, very quickly ... I may or may not have dropped out because I would have been just completely out of sync with what was going on. (Jamie, SLA)

The strong bonds formed between access students were emphasised, with many interviewees noting that they were "all in it together" (Heather, MA) due to "all coming nearly from the same background" (Clare, MA), "all coming in on the same basis" (Harriet, SLA), and having similar challenges and constraints with which to deal. This sense of being "in the same boat" (Sarah, MA) led to significant camaraderie amongst access students, and they also emphasised the support they gave each other, noting "you kind of kept each other going" (Alice,

MA). Many of them were still very friendly with each other, often many years later:

... there was a camaraderie there you know em because everybody I suppose was in the same boat ... Everybody had time constraints, be it work, family, whatever the case may be ... you'd still meet for a coffee or whatever ... (Jude, MA)

And there was a good camaraderie with everyone there ... everyone got on really well and we used to always hang out together and go to lunch together and help each other out when we were studying ... And some of the friends that I met on the Access course I still talk to today... (Oscar, SLA)

Having already formed some friendships and some bonds with peers of similar kind of status and those friendships ... and the quality of those bonds ... having those supports going into undergrad, being able to work with each other on the same level, they're all massively important supports that got us up and over the line. (Jamie, SLA)

A couple of the SLAs, however, reported that having such close friendships already formed at the Access course level subsequently played a role in them not making more or new friends, a point to which we will return in Chapter Five.

Over 93% of the questionnaire respondents who completed their Access Course progressed to undergraduate level¹⁴. Just under 7% did not progress, and reasons cited included ill-health, examination failure, and time pressures as a result of employment.

Chapter Five: Undergraduate Experiences

5.1 Undergraduate Programme and Transitioning to Higher Education (HE)

As can be seen in Figure 5.1, a very large majority of questionnaire respondents (80.6%) progressed to a Bachelor of Arts degree at undergraduate level, with small numbers progressing to Bachelors of Commerce, Science, Law, Engineering, and Nursing. There were very few differences between the SLA and MA groups in terms of their choice of undergraduate discipline. 76% of respondents said that they would choose the same undergraduate

programme again, showing a high level of satisfaction with their discipline choice.

Similarly, a large majority (17/26) of the interview participants completed Bachelor of Arts degrees at undergraduate level, with three completing Bachelor of Science, three Bachelor of Civil Law, and three Bachelor of Commerce degrees.

There were differences between the SLA and MA interviewees in how they described their experiences of transitioning from Access to HE. The SLAs described the transition as being relatively

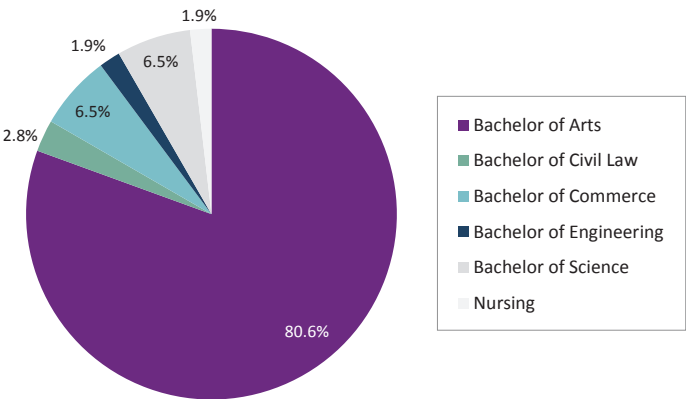


Figure 5.1: Undergraduate Discipline

smooth and reiterated how well prepared they had been by their Access course.

... really good, as I said the Access course was such a good basis for that first semester, knowing your way around again and knowing a few people as well really, really helped ... I loved it like, just completely settled in, was such a smooth transition for me. (Casey, SLA)

In spite of also feeling very well prepared, the MAs reported that they still found the transition challenging. A number talked about feeling overwhelmed and lost in a large campus, amongst a "tsunami of young people" (Peter, MA), being "terrified starting ... thinking 'look at all these young people'" (Brenda, MA), and they questioned if they would be able to stick it out:

... the first day I was actually sitting down in the IT building ... when the doors opened and ... a couple of hundred young people came flying out. I literally lost my life, I sat behind this big pillar and I said I can't do this, like I froze. And I said 'oh my God, what have I let myself into?' ... [access friend] she said to me 'what are you doing?' and I said 'I don't think I'm going to be able to stick this' ... because they're all young and, and then she says 'come on, get out of there, you're going to be fine and we're going to do this'. (Clare, MA)

While Heather (MA) struggled with feelings of personal adequacy throughout, she found the experience "liberating" and loved the sense of being challenged.

I think it was liberating, I was looking at all of the youngsters thinking 'ah you don't know how good you have it, what a fantastic opportunity you have' ... I just really, really loved it. Em, it was very sociable, and by that I don't mean that we were out in the college bar or anything like that, but I mean you sat and had a cup of coffee and discussed your Maths

problems or your English problems or whatever it was, it was very, very nice ... I loved the fact that my brain was being challenged ... (Heather, MA)

5.2 'Disclosing' Access

Many of the MA participants reported being happy to tell other students that they had entered university through an Access course, while others explained that they were happy to do so 'after a time'. Alice (MA) recalled, however, a fellow access student "had a big thing about it", worrying that other students would look down on them and think they lacked (academic) ability.

... one of our friends one day said 'Look, is it plastered all over my face that I got access, you know, does it make us different that way?', she would have had a big thing about it ... because they got in by the ordinary method they were cleverer or listened to more or something ... she would have always felt that herself. (Alice, MA)

The SLAs took a stronger position; the majority reported deliberately *not* telling other students at undergraduate level about their entry route, with a small minority explaining that they told those whom they had come to trust after a time. While the SLAs' general wish to not disclose their entry route was partly a function of them not mixing much or at all with non-access students (see section 5.6), they also explained their non-disclosure in relation to their concern that other students would think they did not deserve to be in university, did not work hard enough in school to get the required grades, or were not able for the academic challenge of HE. They "did not want to be seen as different from them [other students]" (Tracy, SLA). This resulted in a significant feeling of inferiority relative to their 'traditional-entry' peers, further impacting on their already low level of self-confidence:

... I never actually brought up the Access course myself ... I didn't want people to think I had an easy way in ... they might

think 'maybe she didn't get the grades to be here, maybe she didn't work hard enough'. I didn't want any judgment so I decided to not bring it up. (Deirdre, SLA)

... I never wanted anyone to know that ... maybe that was another reason I didn't want to talk to people, say 'oh yeah I came out of an Access course' ... because I wanted them to think that I was just there on the same merits they were. (Harriet, SLA)

... I always tried to keep it secret ... I would have preferred that if nobody knew. Because I felt there was a certain amount of stigma attached to coming in through that route. Almost as if like you know 'ah he's got in here, he shouldn't be in here' sort of thing. (Malachy, SLA)

Another reason for the non-disclosure of access by SLAs was feeling inferior socio-economically. A number explained that they did not want to have to explain to other students about being in a position of socio-economic disadvantage, and feel 'exposed'.

... you wouldn't volunteer the information ... To say to someone "oh, it's because of socio-economic disadvantages" ... I didn't have the inclination to tell everyone what that meant. And why personally, why I was

admitted ... you don't want to talk about it because you're a little bit embarrassed I guess ... (Chester, SLA)

... because it's for disadvantaged students like, so automatically ... you're exposing yourself to them ... (Helena, SLA)

This sense of inferiority also impacted on their socio-relational engagement (see section 5.6).

5.3 Academic Experiences

As can be seen in Figure 5.2, 39.5% of questionnaire respondents reported that they found their undergraduate academic work 'about the same' in terms of difficulty level, relative to other students, and almost 39% reported finding it less or a lot less difficult.

There were some differences between the groups on the issue, with 30.1% of the MAs reporting that they found their academic work more or a lot more difficult than their undergraduate peers, relative to 13.1% of the SLAs. On recoding the five-point Likert scale to a three-point scale (a lot less, or less, difficult; about the same; and more or a lot more difficult), a chi-square test found a significant relationship¹⁵ between perception of difficulty at undergraduate level and respondent group; significantly more of the MAs perceived their academic work at undergraduate level to be more, or a lot more, difficult than did the SLAs.

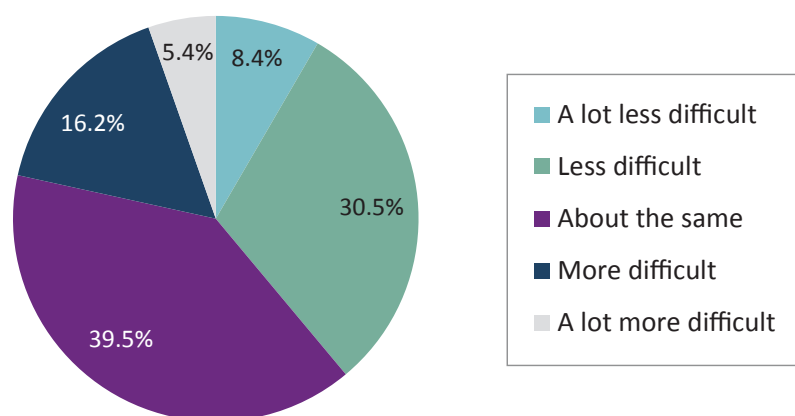


Figure 5.2: Perceptions of Academic Difficulty at Undergraduate Level

¹⁵ $\chi^2(2, n = 167) = 7.34, p = 0.03$, Cramer's $V = 0.21$. Using Cohen's (1988) criteria for effect size of 0.10 for small effect, 0.30 for medium effect and 0.50 for large effect, this is considered a small effect size.

Two factors were at play here in particular; academic self-confidence, and 'knowledge of the system'. Questionnaire respondents' reported confidence levels over time show a significant decrease for both groups at post-primary level (66% at primary level reported being confident or very confident, relative to 43% at post-primary level) and a significant increase to over 80% at the Access course level, demonstrating the likely positive effect of the confidence-raising work completed during the Access programme. After a slight fall at first year undergraduate level (to 63%), an increasing percentage of respondents reported feeling confident or very confident over the remaining undergraduate, and into postgraduate, years, peaking at over 89%. At all stages until third year undergraduate level, however, the MA respondents reported lower levels of self-confidence relative to the SLAs. The issue of lacking academic self-confidence was particularly acute amongst some of the MA interviewees. This was evident in their reported feelings of being "a fraud" (Brenda, MA), "not worthy" and "an interloper" (Heather, MA), similar to the SLAs who also felt inferior to students who had entered HE directly from school.

... they came straight from school and they were obviously good enough to go on and I kind of, not got in the back door, but I wasn't good enough at school to get in to college ... that's an insecurity thing that sticks with you (laugh). (Melissa, MA)

... I always felt ... they'll find out that I'm a fraud, that I have in some way or other winged my way in here ... they'll realise I'm not half as smart as they think I am ... 'I shouldn't be here, I can't hold my own with these people, I'm not as good as they are' ... (Brenda, MA)

... for quite a long time when I went to college I expected somebody to come along and tap me on the shoulder and say, 'would you like to leave now, we've just discovered that you're not worthy' ... I felt like I was some kind of an interloper for a while ... that we were in there some sort of false pretences ... (Heather, MA)

While their confidence levels increased over time, for many it was not until they graduated and/or progressed to postgraduate level that they finally felt they were 'good enough'. Obtaining their degree boosted their self-confidence and gave them a great sense of achievement.

The MAs also felt that the younger traditional-entry students were "more advanced" and because they had completed the Leaving Certificate "were more trained into the academic" approach (Mark MA). Melissa (MA) felt they knew "how to work the system ... they're well able to go party, do the lectures and you know do their exams and do really well in it". Melissa explained how she had learned to employ a different approach after being advised about 'the system' by a member of academic staff.

I didn't do the party thing, I went to every lecture, every tutorial and did terrible in my exams ... it absolutely broke my heart to fail because I put everything into it ... [name of academic] 'you're a typical mature student ... you want to know everything'. She said the scope of the course is too broad to learn absolutely everything. She said 'you're going about this all the wrong way' and explained to me that there's a system and kids coming out of school know how to work that system, whereas ... you're trying to learn everything and it's impossible ... they're used to working, gearing towards exam questions and utilising, breaking down their time ... learning certain things off by heart ... rather than, you know learning everything and knowing it inside out and upside down. (Melissa, MA)

5.4 Retention, Completion, and Level of Undergraduate Award

Of the questionnaire respondents who had progressed from Access to undergraduate level and had had the opportunity to complete their undergraduate degree¹⁶, 89% had graduated, and 11% had withdrawn. Of those who withdrew and provided information on their decision, two cited ill-health, two gave family/personal reasons, while

another two stated that academic difficulties and the workload had led to their withdrawal. One student who withdrew transferred to another programme.

Of those who had graduated at the time of the survey, the vast majority achieved either a 2.1 degree (51.1%) or a 2.2 degree (42.3%) (see Figure 5.3). A higher proportion of the MA group achieved either a 2.1 or 1.1 degree (68.1%) compared to the SLAs (41.7%).

The questionnaire respondents reported high levels of satisfaction with their level of award, with 68.9% reporting being either satisfied or very satisfied, with a higher proportion of the MA respondents (77.8%) reporting such levels of satisfaction relative to the SLAs (60.4%). 21 of the 26 interviewees obtained a 2.1 degree, with four achieving a 2.2, and one a pass degree. The vast majority reported being happy or very happy with the outcome, although a small number of those achieving a 2.1 reported being a little disappointed at not achieving a 1st class honours result.

5.5 Satisfaction with and Experiences of Supports and Services

Respondents reported high levels of satisfaction with the various post-entry Access supports (financial, personal, and academic) provided, with 65.9% reporting being very satisfied or satisfied with financial supports, 76.2% with personal supports, and 79.1% with academic supports (see Figure 5.4). There were few to no differences

between the groups on this issue.

During their undergraduate years, respondents derived information about careers from a number of sources. The most popular sources were the internet/TV/radio/newspapers and the Career Development Centre (CDC), followed by lecturers and/or professionals in the relevant field (cited particularly often by the SLAs) and fellow students. More of the MAs than the SLAs did not seek careers information from any source during their undergraduate years.

64.5% of respondents reported that they had used the CDC during their undergraduate years, with very little difference between the groups. The majority described these experiences as positive and helpful:

Good experience overall, very helpful staff and useful practical information about careers job prospects. (QR: SLA)

Good service, gave useful information regarding postgraduate opportunities and types of employment areas relevant to degree. (QR: SLA)

Very helpful for CV preparation and information on chosen career. (QR: SLA)

They were very helpful, gave me some one to one advice. There was a lot of information available at the career office. (QR: MA)

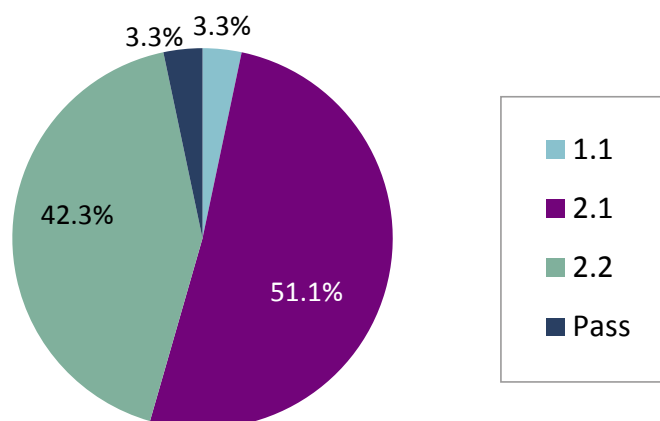


Figure 5.3: Undergraduate Award Level

Considering the 'Impact' of Access and Widening Participation:

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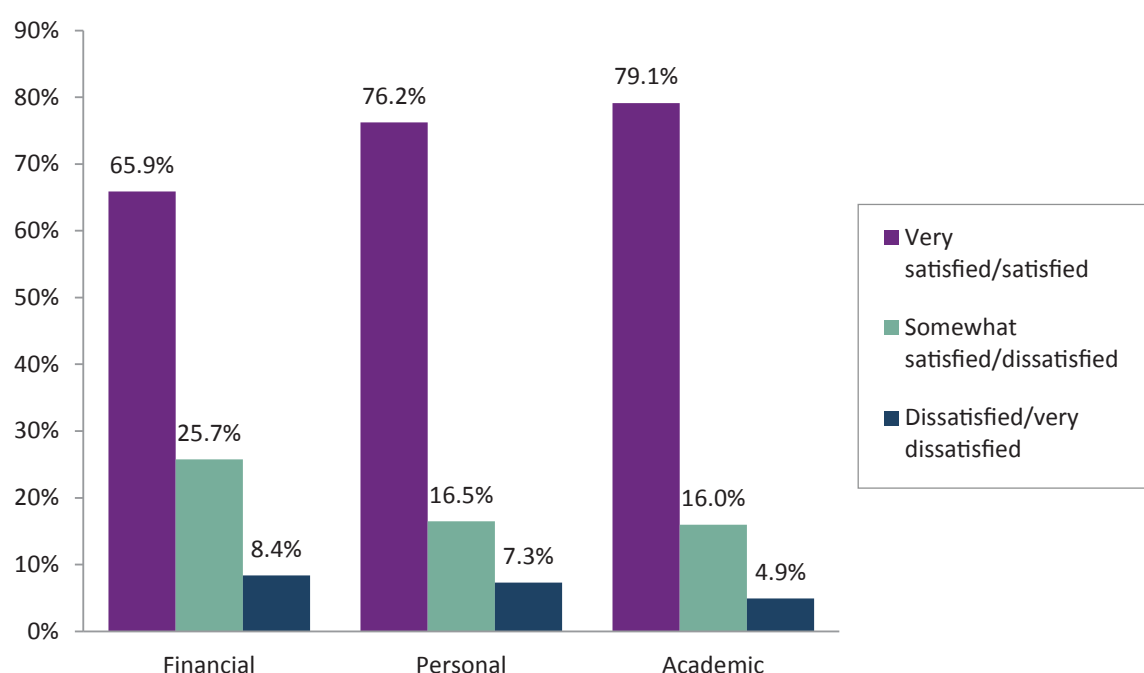


Figure 5.4: Satisfaction with Post-Entry Supports

Several of the SLAs interviewees also reported finding the CDC useful and helpful, and the staff “very good [and] ... very approachable” (Malachy, SLA). It was through their consultations with the CDC that both Paul and Jamie had come to a decision about which postgraduate option to pursue, based on their interests and qualifications. Others found advice regarding interviews, and the opportunity to do mock interviews, “useful” (Marion, SLA) and “really helpful” (Oscar, SLA).

A significant minority of questionnaire respondents reported less positive experiences, however, and pointed to the need for more time and more individual attention from staff. They explained that they felt the service was “quite impersonal”, “gave you very little time”, and “not very helpful ... for a career path other than a few flyers”(QR). The majority of the MA interviewees reported finding the CDC of limited usefulness.

... I've got to be honest, didn't find them overly, no disrespect to the staff, I just didn't find the set up any way helpful at that time ... just felt it was like a collection of 'what do you want to be when you grow up?' leaflets. (Jude, MA)

... I didn't get a lot out of careers really. There was a lot of forms and stuff like that, booklets, you know I found it better going in and meeting people, meeting the students and doing a bit of research myself and studying the subject. (Mark, MA)

... just having a big careers office full of leaflets ... that's really not, very helpful, particularly if what you're looking for is a bit of feedback ... you need more human interaction ... it needs to be more on a personal scale as well ... (Penelope, MA)

The MA interviewees argued that targeted and specific sessions for mature access students on career possibilities were required, particularly given their particular backgrounds, motivations, and life situations.

... maybe someone go and sit down with the mature students who have kids and things and just see where they could go from there A little more support for them ... What next ... before it [undergraduate] finishes ... maybe have

a session where you could explain and sit down and say 'well look, for mature students there's this, this, this'. (Clare, MA)

... as a mature student you're under a lot of pressure anyway ... many people like have the family life ... to have something structured that could have helped you out from once you had your Arts degree, it would be wonderful. It probably would have put people into things that they were more suited for as well. (Penelope, MA)

Several SLAs were also critical of what they perceived as 'fleeting meetings' and leaflet-gathering, when they felt they needed one-to-one support and advice.

... I went to careers like a couple of times after my degree. And it just wasn't very helpful at all. It was like real fleeting meeting ... it just wasn't really helpful advice or you know they didn't really give me anything to take away that was helpful ... Not really kind of like this one to one kind of like support ... I guess some more help with like CVs or just like more thorough help with CVs. (Cynthia, SLA)

Of those who reported not using the CDC, the main reasons given by both questionnaire respondents and interviewees were not being aware of their services or feeling they did not need assistance as they already knew what they wanted to do. Others had found out through their own research what was required for a specific career (for example, in Law, or Teaching). Some of the older MA interviewees¹⁷ did not use the CDC because they were not "career-minded" (Amelia, MA) or felt that they were too old to pursue a career at the time, a point to which we will return in Chapter Six.

56.3% of the questionnaire respondents reported that they did something to improve their employability during their undergraduate years, with no differences between the SLA and MA groups. The main examples given were engaging in part-time employment and/or volunteering activities, or prioritising their academic work, in the

expectation that the better their degree results, the better their employment prospects.

5.6 Social Experiences

44.8% of respondents reported that they had engaged in extra-curricular activities during their undergraduate years, with slightly more of the SLAs answering 'yes' than the MAs. Reasons for not engaging in extra-curricular activities included a lack of time and/or external commitments. 34.3% reported that they had opted to do an optional service learning course as part of their degree programme. Two main reasons were provided: 1) to gain experience in their work area and 2) to 'give back', that is, to reciprocate for the opportunities afforded to them by the Access programme.

Approximately two-thirds of the questionnaire respondents who described their undergraduate social experiences reported having engaged socially with other students and described their experiences as positive and enjoyable. A substantial minority noted, however, that they had only or mostly socialised with other access students or their non-HE friends. Of the third who reported not having engaged socially, important reasons were having outside commitments (such as children or part-time work) and a number also emphasised that their focus was solely on their studies, and some expressed regret in this regard.

I never mixed socially as all I did was work and study. (QR: MA)

I tended to focus more on my studies than social experience in college. If I had to do it again, I would change this. (QR: SLA)

Non-existent. Too focused on studying and working part-time. As I was a mature student I felt somewhat socially awkward. In hindsight, this is the one area I would change. (QR: MA)

The relevant MA interviewees shed light on their lack of social and extra-curricular engagement, explaining that they were not in HE for a social life;

¹⁷ Those over the age of 50 at the time of interview

instead it was a "means to an end" (Melissa, MA) in terms of reaching a personal or employment goal, and they emphasised they were very grateful for the opportunity:

... I was there to study ... I wasn't there to, you know to form a great social life, it was more a means to an end ... (Melissa, MA)

... I looked at going to college almost like I had a job to do. Like I appreciated the opportunity, I didn't waste my time ... (Heather, MA)

... I had a goal and that's what I was here for ... finish college, get my degree ... I just got tunnel vision ... (Sarah, MA)

The younger students were seen as being "on a different page" and "immersed in college life" (Sarah, MA), and the "student bar may well have been their main focus" (Penelope, MA). Instead, for the MAs, socialising and going to the college bar "weren't our priorities" (Penelope, MA). The MA interviewees expressed a strong sense of putting themselves under pressure to perform, with Alice (MA) explaining they felt "very tense and worried ... in case of failure ... so there was a lot of study being done".

The academic focus was not, however, the only reason for the general social and extra-curricular disengagement of the MA interviewees. Several, particularly the older female MAs, noted that their external (family, home, and sometimes part-time work) commitments were such that they simply were unavailable for a HE social life.

... I couldn't join the clubs and societies because my kids here and I had to be home and I was working as well so I just couldn't do it. I was juggling three things at the one time ... I wouldn't be out socialising now at night or anything like that, no. Plus I couldn't afford it. (Clare, MA)

Some were also constrained by having to travel a distance in and out to campus from home.

... I needed to drive forty-five miles home ... I was juggling, I was trying to do the two things ... keep the home fires burning, it was very important that I was very professional in my approach ... So I treated college like some sort of a professional experience. (Heather, MA)

Many of the SLA interviewees expressed similar sentiments, noting that they did not go to HE to make friends, or for the social life, but to make something of their lives.

... I wasn't going to university to like have a great time and like meet new people and get pissed every weekend ... I wasn't going there for the social aspect ... It was like not important to me. (Cynthia, SLA)

... I was like, I'm just going to focus ... I'm going to try so, so hard because ... this is my golden ticket ... this is my chance to go to college and make something of my life ... So I was like I'm just going to work so hard at it ... I didn't socialise ... (Harriet, SLA)

... I didn't really come to college to make friends like ... and I didn't, I didn't really. ... I wouldn't have mixed a lot with the other students ... (Helena, SLA)

Almost 44% of the questionnaire respondents reported spending time only or mostly with their non-HE friends, family, or access peers. Just over 21% reported having a mix of close friends, both access and 'traditional-entry' students, spending time with both, but only on campus. 32.9% reported having a mix of friends and spending time with them on and off campus. Over 90.7% reported that they were still in contact with their undergraduate peers, with almost 34% reporting only or mostly being in contact with their access peers.

With a small number of exceptions, interviewees from both groups tended to keep the same social circle they had built up during their Access programme, and both groups emphasised the importance of having this close group of friends

in HE. The MAs emphasised the supportive nature of their relationships with former access peers, emphasising how they were “helpful and brought each other along ... one looking out for the other” (Alice, MA), “relied on each other”, “managed to shore each other up”, “supported each other” (Heather, MA), and socialised with each other, mostly on campus (particularly for those with external responsibilities), but also off-campus for others:

... even in breaks and that we were always in touch and discussing our latest projects ... where we were getting our information and helping each other ... It was very helpful ... we often went to each other's houses and did dinner ... if I was coming into town or that we'd meet, for coffee, or ... a few drinks. We didn't really do the college bar now. We thought that really wasn't our scene I suppose. (Penelope, MA)

Many of the MA interviewees saw younger students as unmotivated, reporting that they typically had poor attendance, were “traipsing in and out” and “wouldn't have the same interest ... or dedication” (Sarah, MA). Brenda (MA) reported that she “used to look around at some of the younger people and think ‘this is wasted on you guys, you don't care, you're not interested’”. Amelia, an older MA interviewee, recounted quite negative experiences with some younger students, remembering one occasion when she was queueing for coffee, and younger students behind her were “giggling and laughing” and saying “‘Mind, your Granny is here, I thought we were in university but our Granny is here’”. The MA interviewees were also conscious of socio-economic differences between themselves and some of the younger students:

... students who had just came out of eh secondary school ... obviously the clothes ... you can see people who had money and you know very, very well dressed, you know the best of designer gear ... (Anthea, MA)

... I remember going to a lecture, eh and seeing three or four eh girls in their

pyjamas, it was about three in the afternoon and...with slightly D4 accents shall we say, complaining that their fathers only gave them €300 a week living allowance. And when you're sort of working for like a €10 an hour and trying to study and pay fees, it sort of rubs your nose in it a bit ... to me at the time it highlighted the distinction of class during the so called ‘boom’ years ... (Jude, MA)

Similar to the MAs, but more strongly, and again with some exceptions, the SLA interviewees also tended to stick only or mostly with their pre-entry access peers at undergraduate level, and they too highlighted the importance of the mutual support provided:

... a lot of us access ... would you know see each other regularly and help each other out around exam times ... I made like really close friends with two of them and one ... she's still my best friend to this day ... I don't know why but I didn't really make ... many of the like you know non-access friends, I think it was like because you had your kind of group that you knew. (Cynthia, SLA)

... I was the only person [from Access] doing science, but ... we did meet up. And at least you had somebody, if you were feeling a bit overwhelmed that you could give a call to and you knew them. And they were in the same boat. (Deirdre, SLA)

Several spent their time only or mostly with their non-university friends, explaining that their social lives were outside university.

... with some of the Access students, but we were connected then to a wider Galway group who wouldn't have been students at all ... (Helena, SLA)

I wasn't too compelled to socialise on campus ... I'd find out what my other friends were doing that maybe weren't in the university ... (Chester, SLA)

... like nothing related to the college ... the first year we'll say Access and then the second year it would have been outside friends. (Justine, SLA)

... I had a boyfriend ... and I spent a lot of time, you know hanging out with him ... a lot of my friends were working basically and I would have palled around with them more than the students. (Harriet, SLA)

Tracy felt her lack of socialising was mostly due to being a parent, but she maintained an active social life outside of college:

... I never did rag week, I never went to any of the Law balls or anything like that ... I already had a good social life with my own group of friends so I went out with them, outside college ... I had my little family life at home and I had all my own friends that I socialised with, so it wasn't a big thing for me to sort of make, you know, friends or spend a lot of time with these people ... I just never socialised with them, drinking and that ... I had responsibilities like ... (Tracy, SLA).

While prevalent amongst the SLA interviewees in various academic disciplines at undergraduate level, the level of socio-relational distancing (Keane, 2011a) from 'other' students was found in the extreme amongst those in Law. Malachy (SLA) was explicit that his Law peers were "very, very cliquey", and that it was "very hard to integrate into the class", explaining that the other students would "always sit together, socialise together, go to lunch together" and "weren't making any effort to include anybody else". He bemoaned the fact that "there was no sense of inclusiveness, or you know solidarity, among the class" and felt that he "was totally cast aside". Similarly, Justine (SLA) recalled feeling very isolated and apart from her peers in Law:

I didn't like the college life, I didn't get on with people ... I didn't mix with any of these people and I definitely felt inferior to them ... I remember being in the class and

I came in and sat down and I looked over ... my whole entire class was over there in the lecture hall and I was sitting on the other side and ... that always sticks in my head like ... I didn't do the social side with them at all ... the crowd in the university mean nothing to me ... I wouldn't even want to see them like ... (Justine, SLA)

Malachy wondered "was it because I was an access student, coming in that route" and felt it was "blatantly obvious what was going on". Both he and Tracy linked other students' 'cliquey' behaviour to their privileged backgrounds, emphasising that other students very much stayed in their exclusive groups:

... people from that background, you know from privileged backgrounds like that ... a lot of them had their mothers and fathers were in the legal industry themselves ... it was very, cliquey, it was very hard to break into the groups once they had formed ... (Malachy, SLA)

... all of them were from families that would have been better off ... people were very cliquey... everyone went in to their own groups ... two of the girls that I hung out with ... their parents were in really good jobs in comparison ... I wouldn't say 'oh yeah, my mother's waitressing' ... one of them would say 'oh my mother's a doctor'... I remember some of them, their parents were lawyers in Dublin ... (Tracy, SLA)

While Tracy (SLA) claimed that she saw this 'cliquey' behaviour as "normal" and "never took any notice of it", Malachy, like Justine, believed that it was a deliberate attempt to exclude, and hypothesised it as a form of self-protection.

... they were deliberately in these groups ... they were deliberately not making an effort to include anybody else ... I don't know is it just a tendency to just form these groups maybe kind of, I don't know, a safety thing or protection thing or something like that ... (Malachy, SLA)

For Justine, who had entered her undergraduate Law degree without any access peers, feeling so isolated significantly contributed to her non-attendance and subsequent failure of first year examinations. Malachy had had “enough” after the three years of his law degree, and subsequently took time out to work in a different field.

... it was just very difficult, I suppose it can grind you down after a while. You know because it is three years, it's a long time and like these groups formed and it's quite hard to break into them. So yeah to be honest at the end of it I was glad that it was finished, I had three years, God, that's enough you know. (Malachy, SLA)

Many of the SLAs explained their distancing from other students with reference to feeling inferior socio-economically, citing social class distinctions, including, for example, financial constraints and how other students were dressed:

I remember thinking that I had no business staying on the campus, I had... very little funds for going down to the bar say and getting lunch. I'd never eat lunch on campus because I couldn't afford to. So I'd always either go home or do without ... I wouldn't like to hang around the campus ... (Chester, SLA)

... I definitely felt inferior to them ... it was just unreal the money that these crowd had ... when you're dressed differently to people, you know the difference, they'd have had all the best of clothes and all the up to date stuff, we never had any of that stuff ... and I didn't mix with them ... (Justine, SLA)

Helena (SLA) remembered feeling “a little bit jealous of them and resentful of the fact that they seemed to have life so good and things were easy for them”, while Deirdre (SLA) felt that “people who weren't relying on the grants ... weren't as bothered about it [HE]”, whereas she “needed my grants and I had to continue to work up until I entered fourth year ... to pay my way through”,

which, she felt “really makes you appreciate it”. Additionally, Helena (SLA) and Harriet (SLA) reported feeling too different from other students in terms of their life experiences. Harriet (SLA) felt she “didn't feel that I was on the same level as everyone”, that “because of my own life and my own difficulties that they [were] ... almost they were too innocent for me, and so she “just distanced myself”. Similarly, Helena (SLA) talked about “that perception of not having things in common with each other and not wanting them to kind of know you too much either”, that “you can tell that you're not going to really understand each other” and feeling a “pressure almost to protect them from real life ... so you don't mix with them”.

A couple of interviewees questioned if keeping the same social circle from access was “a good or a bad thing”, explaining that “because we had already quite a close social network, so maybe it dissuaded me [from] making other friends” (Chester, SLA).

I'd have hung around a lot with the lads from the Access course ... I suppose maybe the little downside to that, you kind of get cocooned into that, you're not maybe as open or available to meet others ... it cuts off a lot of that experience of meeting new people ... there was probably less opportunity given the fact that you're in a gang already ... it probably reduces the chances of maybe forming friendships from the wider base. (Paul, SLA)

As access students' socio-relational disengagement and social class-based student groups clique-ing together was reported in previous research (Keane, 2009b, 2011a, 2012), the interviewees were asked if, in retrospect, they regretted their actions in this regard. A number of interviewees, several before being asked, and some questionnaire respondents (without being asked), reported that they regretted not mixing with other students:

... I would regret that, that I didn't open myself up and meet new friends or feel like I was still on the same, even though we had different experience, different

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upbringings, that I still could, you know socialise with them and communicate with them ... (Harriet, SLA)

... now I think what a great pity to have had four years where you could have mixed with other people but I mean for me it wasn't really that possible, you know, for me I looked at going to college almost like I was, I had a job to do ... (Heather, MA)

... I do actually regret that, because there's some of them that I think, yeah, I wish I'd

learned more about them or known how to. I wouldn't have had the social skills to be able to do that ... so it's easier to be with your own friends because you can talk ... so I don't think it would have worked like ... (Helena, SLA)

I didn't do the social side of being a student. I didn't join clubs or societies and I did not go out socialising with college friends. I'm sorry now that I did not participate more in the social side. (QR, SLA)



Chapter Six: Postgraduate Experiences

6.1 Progression Rates and Programmes

78.9% of questionnaire respondents who had graduated progressed to postgraduate level, with very little difference between the SLA and MA groups. Almost 65% progressed to programmes at NUI Galway, and the remainder to various HEIs throughout Ireland. Almost 33% progressed

to Certificate or Diploma programmes, 62% to Masters programmes, and almost 5% to Doctoral programmes. A breakdown of the SLA and MA questionnaire respondents' postgraduate discipline areas is provided in Figure 6.1. 43-46% of questionnaire respondents engaged in a postgraduate programmes that were Education or Community-related.

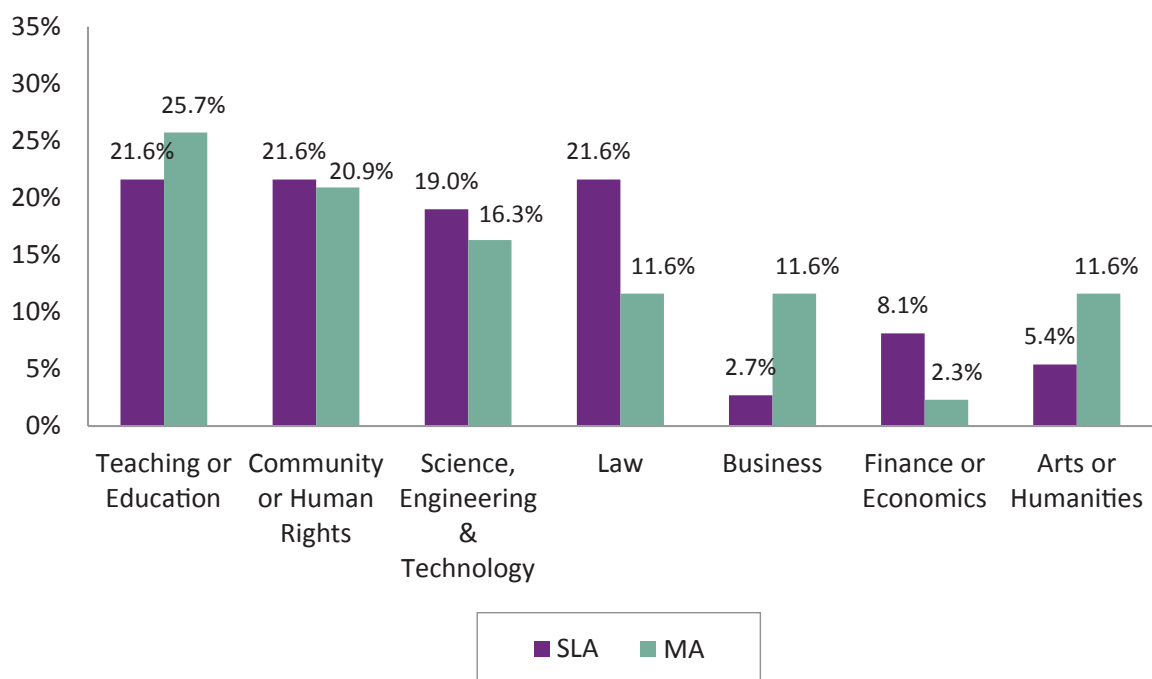


Figure 6.1: Postgraduate Subject Area

23 of the 26 interview participants completed at least one postgraduate programme (13/14 SLAs, and 10/12 MAs), with some completing two or more. Their discipline areas included post-primary Teaching (five), Community Development (four), Law (four), Social Work (two), Science (two), Business/Finance (three), as well as specific subjects followed on from undergraduate level (three).

6.2 Reasons for Progression to Postgraduate Level

The vast majority of questionnaire respondents cited career and employment reasons for continuing their studies. Many noted that they needed a specific postgraduate qualification for the career they wished to pursue, and many others observed that to make themselves more 'employable', and to improve their job prospects, they required more than an undergraduate degree in today's labour market. Further reasons included having a love for a particular subject area and being encouraged by family, friends, or lecturers to continue their studies.

There was a difference between the SLA and MA interviewees in terms of how they had considered postgraduate progression. The narratives of many of the SLAs revealed an assumption about progression following undergraduate level. Indeed, most did not explain why they had progressed, simply noting that after undergraduate level they applied for a postgraduate programme.

So I finished my undergrad and I went for an interview for the Masters in Community Development, and I went for an interview for the Masters in Social Work. (Jamie, SLA)

So I finished my undergrad and ... I knew I was going doing, I'd applied for ... three Masters, I applied for two Masters in Dublin and one here in Galway. And I got offered the three of them ... (Oscar, SLA)

... I had no intention of really finishing my studies in Fourth Year, it never occurred

to me ... I never had any other career trajectory that didn't involve a higher degree ... (Chester, SLA)

Of the small number of SLAs (four) who did not progress to postgraduate level immediately, Malachy and Justine, both of whom had reported severe socio-relational distancing during their Law degree, talked about needing to take time out before progressing. Malachy was "so burned out after the three years" that he "needed a few years to recover". Having worked in a Non-Governmental Organisation for a year, he spent time volunteering before doing a Master's degree in Social Work. While Justine stayed in the field of Law, she also "took a year out" as she "was sick of it at that stage" before progressing with the King's Inns examinations. The other two SLAs who did not immediately progress (Casey and Deirdre) were planning, at the time of interview, on doing a postgraduate course in their area of interest, having taken some time out either for employment and/or family reasons.

For the SLA interviewees, specific postgraduate choices were tied to particular career plans, and for many there was a very strong sense of being *altruistically motivated*. The relevant SLAs directly tied their background and/or schooling experiences to their choice of postgraduate programme and future career path, in the sense of 'wanting to give back' or 'help others like me'. Cynthia, who did an MA in Community Development, explained:

... especially you know coming from a situation of disadvantage myself, I wanted to help other people in the same situation get a second chance like I got a second chance. So that's how I kind of focused on my career... Basically you know community development is about like helping, you know, enabling disadvantaged communities. (Cynthia, SLA)

Similarly, Helena had wanted to work as a teacher, in large part because of her own (alienated) school experiences, explaining:

... Teaching appealed to me because I could work with young people and because of my own experiences with school and I really thought that I'd have something to give in teaching ... I thought I'd be like Michelle Pfeiffer in *Dangerous Minds*, you know (laughs), that I'd be one of those teachers like that really got it. Of course it's not like that ... [previously] I thought I would ... be a psychologist [or] a youth worker and, I didn't really know how to get into youth work ... so I think teaching then for me was the obvious kind of way for working with young people. (Helena, SLA)

The relevant SLA interviewees believed they were extremely well positioned to work with and/or for those vulnerable in society, given their family histories and experiences. Jamie, who did an MA in Social Work, explained:

... I went with Social Work because I think given my own personal experience ... I felt like I was drawn towards child protection ... I guess I grew up exposed to families and peers ... that very much would have had social workers in their lives ... And I guess I could relate to that and I could connect to that and I could contribute in terms of being that social worker and being able to, you know, speak to families ... I suppose it was a common ground. (Jamie, SLA)

Similarly, Justine (SLA) explained that she was "good at what I do" because "I understand it ... from growing up in [area of city] and seeing it ... we knew all the stories of the court ... you wanted everyone to get off". The issue of altruistic motivation informing postgraduate programme choice and career planning was also relevant to the two interview participants who were doing a PhD and were nearing the end of their studies at the time of interview. Both were researching issues related to social justice and were having some difficulty focusing on their research due to their desire to contribute to social change in a more active way:

I suppose I've loads of ideas about what else needs to be done and so it's hard sometimes to keep the focus on the PhD. The PhD has to be done first but then all of the other things that need to happen ... (Helena, SLA)

In Tracy's case, moving to action would involve doing a Masters in Social Work (following her PhD), but she was not in a position to afford it financially:

... the work that I'm doing in the PhD is a lot around children's rights ... and the more I've been working the more I'm like 'oh, that's what I'd actually like to do' ... I want to be working at the frontline with the children, not researching about them ... doing, you know, whatever I can do for them ... I want to be out ... So I would have to do Social Work masters ... [but] I can't do it financially, I need to get a job like ... I need to work and have something secure (Tracy, SLA)

While some of the MA interviewees expressed reluctance to leave university and wanted to keep going, there was less of a sense of 'having a plan' in terms of what they would do subsequent to undergraduate level. In terms of employability, they believed that the "degree wasn't enough" and had become "equivalent to the Leaving Cert" (Melissa, MA). However, they commonly reported not knowing what to do next, and this was particularly the case for some of the older MA interviewees. Clare, for example, complained about a lack of support and guidance, and about "being left in limbo" following undergraduate level, and she, along with a number of other MA interviewees, called for targeted sessions for mature students about progression opportunities in certain subject areas, with a particular emphasis on what sort of career possibilities might suit mature graduates.

... when we finished the BA ... there was nothing afterwards ... no back-up ... you were kind of left in limbo ... there should have been more support, they should have come back to us and kind of explained to us more exactly where to go with the BA ...

as mature students ... we were just left on high, you know, you felt like you climbed up a mountain with the BA, you got to the top, and then there was nothing. (Clare, MA)

Well, I was very reluctant to leave the university and I wanted to continue, em, so I applied for [two Masters] and I didn't get either of them.... and I was still wondering what should I do now, and nobody seemed to be interested, it was all up to yourself, like there's no-one in there saying, 'Are you coming back?' (Amelia, MA)

Age was a key reason why several of the older MA interviewees had not planned beyond undergraduate level. Heather (MA), for example, explained that she had not "thought that far ahead ... because of my age" and noted that she had not thought of HE as "anything other than something that I would do for myself ... anything that I would be able to use ... I didn't think I was ever going to get a career". Similarly, for Penelope (MA), her "big aim ... was to get the degree" and she did not "go in with any clear notion that I'm doing this because in the end I want to be a 'x'".

For some, this lack of planning for postgraduate progression and employment resulted in some *haphazard choosing* in terms of the selection of postgraduate options, with some regretting their choices, or the sequence of their choices, at a later stage.

... I didn't know what to do after the BA ... I said sure I'll do TEFL and have that as a backup. So I did TEFL and then I didn't know what else to do and then I said sure we'll try the H.Dip. in Business. I could have done the H.Dip. in teaching but ... I thought it was more difficult with my daughter [then after] ... I said I'll try the Masters in Community Development so that we could rebuild communities and get back into the workforce, you know, that way. But that didn't work either. (Clare, MA)

Teaching - as a desire or possibility - commonly featured amongst the MA interviewees' narratives. Seven had either considered pursuing, or did pursue, (post-primary) teaching at some point during their undergraduate or postgraduate programmes, or ended up in teaching or education-related positions without formal teaching qualifications. Their narratives demonstrated a lack of understanding and/or of information about routes, requirements, and supports, as well as a lack of planning, in relation to accessing the teaching profession or specific roles or sectors within the profession, and many expressed regrets about missed opportunities.

Of the small number of MA interviewees who did not progress to postgraduate level, financial reasons were most often cited, and the student funding and support cuts at national level were frequently noted.

I was half thinking of a postgrad in Social Work but ... I couldn't see myself going back ... then I think they cut the whole funding then for post grads at that stage, you had to pay and you didn't get your grant ... I wouldn't have been able to afford it. (Anthea, MA)

... for me the difficulty there now at the moment would definitely be financially ... I pay my mortgage ... you can't leave the system when that has to be done at the end of every month. And then I would have to pay for Masters so I would have to do that plus not being paid while doing it, so that would be a massive challenge now for me. (Penelope, MA)

6.3 Experiences at Postgraduate Level

Most SLA and MA interview participants reported very positive postgraduate experiences. While some MAs reported that their feelings of insecurity remained, a key positive for most was finally gaining academic self-confidence; they felt they had proved they were able for HE, and "worthy academically" (Heather, MA), by achieving a Master's qualification.

I felt I was there by, you know virtue of my marks and so forth and I think I proved that by going and doing a Masters (Jude, MA)

... if you're out of it [education], which I was for almost thirty years, that somehow that makes you less worthy ... for me the Masters was actually the icing on the cake, that's the thing that has I think consolidated for me the idea that I am worthy academically. (Heather, MA)

The SLA reported generally engaging and appropriately challenging postgraduate programme experiences, although academic self-confidence remained an issue for some. For example, doing her examinations in King's Inns, Justine changed her answers when she saw another student's responses were different to her own:

... I looked over and I spotted your one's were different to mine and I thought she's bound to have them right and I changed my answers ... I second guessed myself because I hadn't got the confidence, I thought 'that one is from money now, she's rich, she'll know, she'll definitely have a better clue than I would' ... And sure I was right. ... But anyway I passed them so it was fine. (Justine, SLA)

Justine had also failed an examination due to not knowing notes could be brought in to a particular examination:

... I didn't realise you could bring in all your notes and everyone was coming in with bags of stuff ... they were like 'have you not brought anything?', I didn't know I could have brought them ... So I failed that but then I just did it in the summer and passed it again ... (Justine, SLA)

A lack of confidence was also seen in Harriet's decision-making about which postgraduate option to complete first. Harriet had completed the LLB following her Arts degree and while she wished to train as a solicitor at that point, she instead opted

to complete a Master's degree in Law, feeling that training to be a solicitor was too "big" for her to do at the time, although she did subsequently complete the relevant examinations.

... finished up LLB and I wanted to be a solicitor but I still was like, God that's too big, like to go from what I've gone through to just be a solicitor ... like can you do that and I just thought maybe it would just be too hard, too difficult, people have a lot of respect for solicitors and would I fit into that, am I too rough basically. So then I got the Masters in Trinity ... (Harriet, SLA)

For several, particularly those completing a programme which included a work placement aspect, the importance of postgraduate level for learning professional skills, preparing to enter professional employment, and gain related confidence was emphasised:

... self-reflection and learning and transference ... self-development ... what I had in my undergrad was the academic and what I got in my postgrad was that professional maturity that really prepared me to go into ... a professional employment market and be successful ... (Jamie, SLA)

For those SLAs in Law, Finance and Business, social class distinctions became ever more obvious as they progressed. Justine (SLA), in King's Inns, for example, was highly conscious of "the money side of it" and noted that her peers were very wealthy:

Again, I'd have been very standoffish and the women would be all make-up and the best of clothes and the high heels, I'd have had a tracksuit and runners on ... again there would be the huge element of the money side of it and these were even wealthier, the further up you went the wealthier they got like ... (Justine, SLA)

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Harriet, doing her Masters in Law in TCD, reported that she "distanced" herself from "privileged" students:

I distanced myself from all that ... in Trinity ... people that were so privileged and they were from Dublin 4 ... they were very pretentious. But that wasn't the group that I hung around with ... a lot of people that I'd be attracted to as friends would be em modest I guess or alternative ... they definitely wouldn't be pretentious, I don't like that attitude ... just things that they talk about, like 'oh we're going here and all the top law firms' and just I could feel the divide ... always talking about what they had and where they'd been ... I did feel that they were judging me ... I purposely distanced myself ... I didn't even give it a go. (Harriet, SLA)

Oscar (SLA) reported that the students in his Master's programme in Finance in a Dublin university were "very cliquey ... very unwilling to have an outsider come in, unless you were part of the group". He felt that "there was an element of the class issue ... those people, they want to keep to themselves". He subsequently left the area, feeling it was not for him. Similarly, Marion, who was also in a Dublin institution doing a Master's programme in Business, noted that "a lot of D4s ... they kind of made sure they showed you their house or stuff ... these people have a lot of money or they're from a completely different background to me".

Social class distinctions were also reported in postgraduate programmes like Teaching and Community Development. For example, Cynthia (SLA) reported that one of the students on the programme had remarked to her that:

... 'ah I think you'd be really good at this because you're lower class'.... a lot of them in the Masters were ... from wealthy families obviously ... she's saying because like I'm disadvantaged ... so kind of like degrading. (Cynthia, SLA)

During her postgraduate teaching qualification, Helena (who subsequently left teaching), reported that her peers had very little understanding of the level of poverty and disadvantage experienced by some sections of society. She recalled a specific incident during which Frank McCourt's 'Angela's Ashes' was being discussed in class:

... [in class] ... Frank McCourt's book Angela's Ashes ... [a student said] 'as if anyone's life was that bad'. ... no one else said anything, I was afraid to say anything, and I just remember thinking, F***, like, people actually think that, that things aren't that bad, and feeling really odd like in the class, and again that's that kind of reinforcing to stay quiet about who you are because they don't understand and they would never get it ... comments like that [above] reinforced to me that I was too different to be ... I didn't feel empowered enough ... to [stay in] teaching. (Helena, SLA)

Similar to when they completed their undergraduate degrees, for many of the MAs there was a sense of not knowing what to do next after they had completed their postgraduate programmes. While a small number considered PhD options, fees and other constraints proved too much of a barrier.

Chapter Seven: Employment Experiences and Looking to the Future

7.1 'Readiness' for the Transition to Work and Obtaining First Employment

A large majority of questionnaire respondents who had graduated reported that they felt either 'very ready' (28%) or 'somewhat ready' (36.6%) for the transition to work upon the completion of their undergraduate degree, with only very slight differences between the SLA and MA groups.

A majority (57.7%) reported having commenced their first job within one or two years. 55.1% accessed full-time employment in their first job post-graduation, while 44.9% got part-time roles, with no differences between the groups in this regard. Some of the interviewees reported difficulties getting employment initially, typically reporting that they were applying for lots of positions but hearing nothing back, and most cited the recession as a key factor. Most, however, particularly the SLA interview participants, got employment in their field in under a year, and several much more quickly.

... wasn't even getting letters of acknowledgment ... Crash had happened

... I was saying Mother of God, I'm after doing five, six years in college, a Masters, and had nothing to show for it ... So I applied for [current job] and lucky enough I got an interview and that was the only interview I got. (Paul, SLA)

... I heard very little back, I didn't actually have an interview anywhere except I saw an ad then for a teacher in [school] and I did that interview ... I had only left an hour when I got a phone call to say, 'We'd love to have you' ... So I was delighted, I thought sure I'd hit the jackpot first time. Imagine ... a private school wanted me. So I got sucked into that and eh, well I have been there ever since. (Penelope, MA)

Many started with temporary and/or part-time positions, and got full-time, and sometimes permanent, positions over time. For example, before getting a full-time position in Community Development in the UK, Cynthia got a 14 hour contract far away from where she was living at the time, but viewed the position as important as it was her "first bit of paid experience":

So then I was applying for work, pretty much everywhere and I had 16 interviews maybe over the space of two years ... All over Britain and Ireland ... then I decided I'd have to go back to Ireland in order to get my foot in the door ... got my first job ... a three month contract ... I was driving five hours ... it was only a 14 hour contract, so I'd say I was paying to do this, right. So I'd stay in a B&B overnight and just do the two days together ... But it got me that first bit of paid experience. (Cynthia, SLA)

Overall, the MA interviewees reported more difficulty obtaining first employment following graduation, particularly employment related to their qualifications.

60.3% of the questionnaire respondents reported that their first job after graduation was either 'closely related' or 'somewhat related' to their degree discipline, and 39.7% reported that it was 'not related', with no significant differences between the SLA and MA groups.

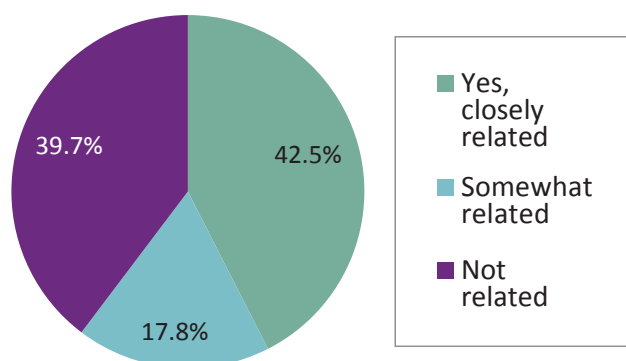


Figure 7.1: Relationship of First Job to Degree Discipline

Almost 69.1% had a gross salary level of up to €24,999 in their first year in the labour market, almost 25% earned €25-40,999; and 5.9% earned over €40,999. No significant differences were found between the groups.

57.4% reported that their experiences in the labour market in their first year met their expectations.

The job was rewarding, very closely related to my study area and well paid. (QR: MA)

I felt I was well prepared for the classroom having had a positive college experience. I also felt enthusiastic and rewarded. (QR: MA)

Having completed two placements as part of my Masters, I was already familiar with the workplace. (QR: SLA)

42.6% felt their expectations had not been met, with most citing a lack of employment opportunities (generally as a result of the recession), or suitable employment opportunities for graduates.

I felt no difference, as my area of employment was not particularly related to my degree, and I could have gotten the same job without having a third level qualification. (QR: MA)

No. I worked night shifts in a factory, I liked the job, the pay was good but it was not what I expected after graduating. (QR: SLA)

I had to return for job in same area of work I had when I started Access course. (QR: MA)

Very hard to get a job even with a Masters, it took me 16 interviews all around Ireland and the UK before I got my first job (after MA). (QR: SLA)

Differences were apparent in the SLA and MA questionnaire respondents' views: while 66.7% of the SLAs reported that their expectations had been met, the figure for the MA group was 44.8%. However, these differences were not significant. In this regard, the MA respondents blamed a lack of employment opportunities, especially for older graduates, and a lack of guidance from

the university, commenting that “work was very hard to get. I found they were looking for young people and not mature ones” (QR: MA) and that “no guidance or motivation was given, left to your own devices” (QR: MA).

7.2 Current Employment

At the time of survey, of the graduates available for work (i.e. those not engaged in further studies), 65.1% were working for payment/profit, 21.7% were unemployed, 4.8% were looking after the family home, 1.2% were retired, 3.6% were unable to work due to disability or illness, and 3.6% were in an employment scheme. A higher proportion of SLAs (83.3%) were working for payment/profit relative to the MAs (46.3%), and a higher proportion of the MA group were unemployed (31.7%) relative to the SLAs (11.9%).

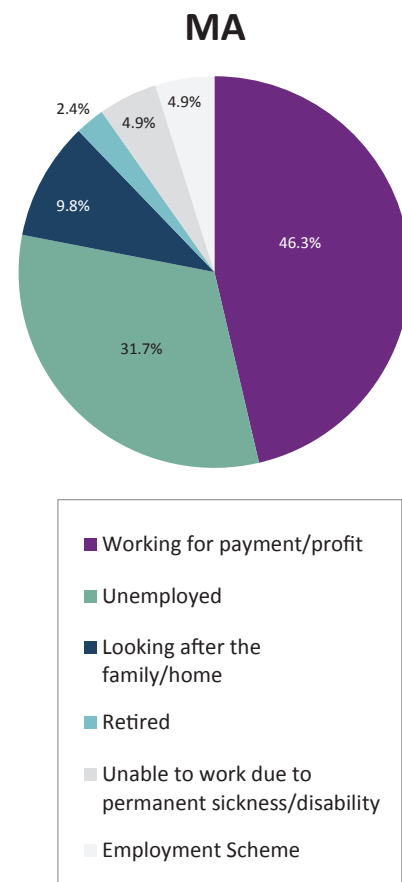
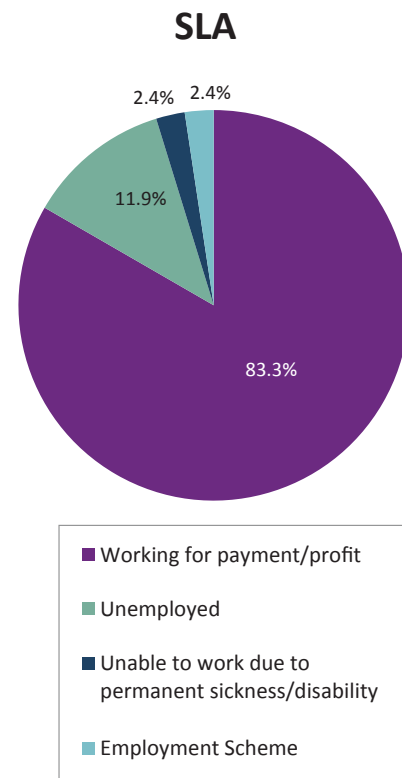


Figure 7.2: Current Employment Status

Of those graduates in employment, 65.4% were employed full-time and 34.6% part-time, with no differences between the groups. In terms of contract type, 47.8% had a permanent contract, 34.8% had a temporary contract, and 17.4% had ‘other’ (fixed-term contracts or self-employed), with no significant differences between the groups. At the time of interview, 19 of the 26 interviewees were working (mostly full-time, and almost all of those working part-time were MAs), four were unemployed (all MAs), one was coming to the end

of maternity leave, and two were still in full-time education (pursuing PhDs).

As previously noted, questionnaire respondents’ current occupations were coded using Elias and Purcell’s (2004) graduate and non-graduate occupations schema. The majority (62.7%) of graduates employed were employed in graduate occupations, with no significant differences between the SLA and MA groups.

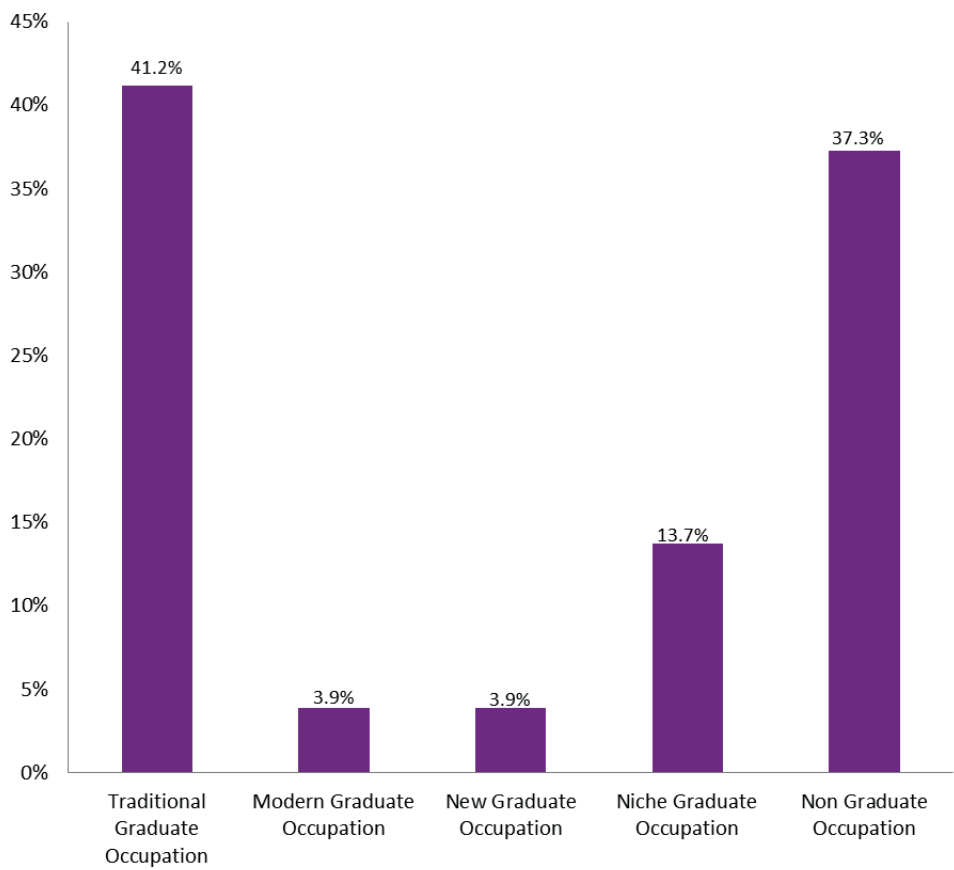


Figure 7.3: Current Occupation Types (Graduate vs. Non-Graduate)

That 62.7% of those employed were in graduate occupations demonstrates significant impact of WP on individuals' occupational status. Respondents' current occupations were also coded to ascertain current socio-economic group. Comparisons to their original socio-economic group (based on father's occupation) also demonstrates impact – in terms of 'social mobility' – in that the vast majority of respondents moved 'up' (from a lower to a higher socio-economic group), including to Employers and Managers, Higher Professional, and Lower Professional groups. Of the graduates in current employment, 71.1% were in positions related to their undergraduate and/or postgraduate degree qualification/s, with only a small difference between the groups. Of the 26 interviewees, 15 were working in areas related to their qualification/s at the time of interview, including in Law, Community Development, Social Work, Teaching, Science, and Business. Four were working in areas not related to their qualifications (three of the four were MAs), and these individuals expressed a strong sense of disappointment, as they wanted to use their experience and expertise in their work. Clare (MA) was looking for work in Community Development, noting that "I just feel that I spent seven years in university, you know, I want to use my experience" (Clare, MA). Jude and Mark (both MA) had ended up returning to their former work, in a factory and doing electrical work respectively, but were cognisant of the role of the recession and lack of employment opportunities more generally.

... it's obviously production line work ... not to be too picky but I hate to foresee myself at the exact same job in five years ... I just feel like a bit of a waste now at this stage with the education ... but in the current climate I suppose beggars can't be choosers (Jude, MA)

...just bits of electrical work ... because you know I have to look at my age as well, you know the younger students are finding it hard, at least I have a trade [to go back to] ... I can do something. (Mark, MA)

86.5% reported being 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with their current employment role, with few

differences between the groups. Reasons given mostly related to being happy to be working in their chosen field and having the opportunity to use their knowledge and skills, and enjoying their work more generally.

It's hard work, but I love teaching. I am extremely grateful to be working. I am aware that I am extremely fortunate to have a job. (QR: MA)

There is no day that I don't look forward to going to work, no two days are the same and it really challenges my ability and expertise. (QR: MA)

I am satisfied with my current employment as I have the opportunity to use some of the skills and knowledge acquired in third level. (QR: SLA)

While the job is challenging at times, there is a great level of job satisfaction. (QR: MA)

Interviewees made similar comments, emphasising that their work was challenging yet enjoyable:

... Well, it's standard child protection work ... At the moment I have 15 kids who I am responsible for ... it's quite interesting work, you know there's never a dull moment, every day there's something different coming at you so, which I quite like ... it's challenging work ... my Social Work Masters is very useful because all of those skills that I learned in that course are transferable to the work that I'm doing now ... definitely the Masters that I did has prepared me for this role. (Malachy, SLA)

... I absolutely love my job, I'm really lucky. I love working with the special needs ... they're fantastic, like there's great rewards, they're very thankful and there is days where it's very hard, we do deal with challenging behaviour ... it can be difficult but I do love it ... I feel I'm lucky to have a job let alone be permanent ... (Sarah, MA).

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13.4% of graduates in employment reported being 'dissatisfied' or 'very dissatisfied' in their current role, citing a lack of connection between their job and their HE qualifications, or a sense of not being valued or not having progression opportunities in their current role:

Not a career, not my chosen path in life.
(QR: SLA)

While I appreciate the money, I want to move into an area which is somewhat related to my degree. Hopefully this will happen after I return to postgraduate education. (QR: MA)

There are no opportunities to move up in the company and it is a very unrewarding job. (QR: SLA)

... I do care about the kids, and I like to see them doing well and I love to see them improving [but I] feel that I have gone to an awful lot of trouble ... to go to university to do the H.Dip and to work as a teacher, but I do feel that that's not respected in where I am, in what my wages are ... being someone who works hard and does a good job and would like to be properly remunerated ... a person should be paid a fair wage for a fair job ... I think it's demoralising. ... financially ... I might be better off to go down to Dunnes Stores and work. I might come out just as well money wise ... (Penelope, MA).

Figure 7.4 summarises questionnaire respondents' views about their current employment in relation to a number of criteria.

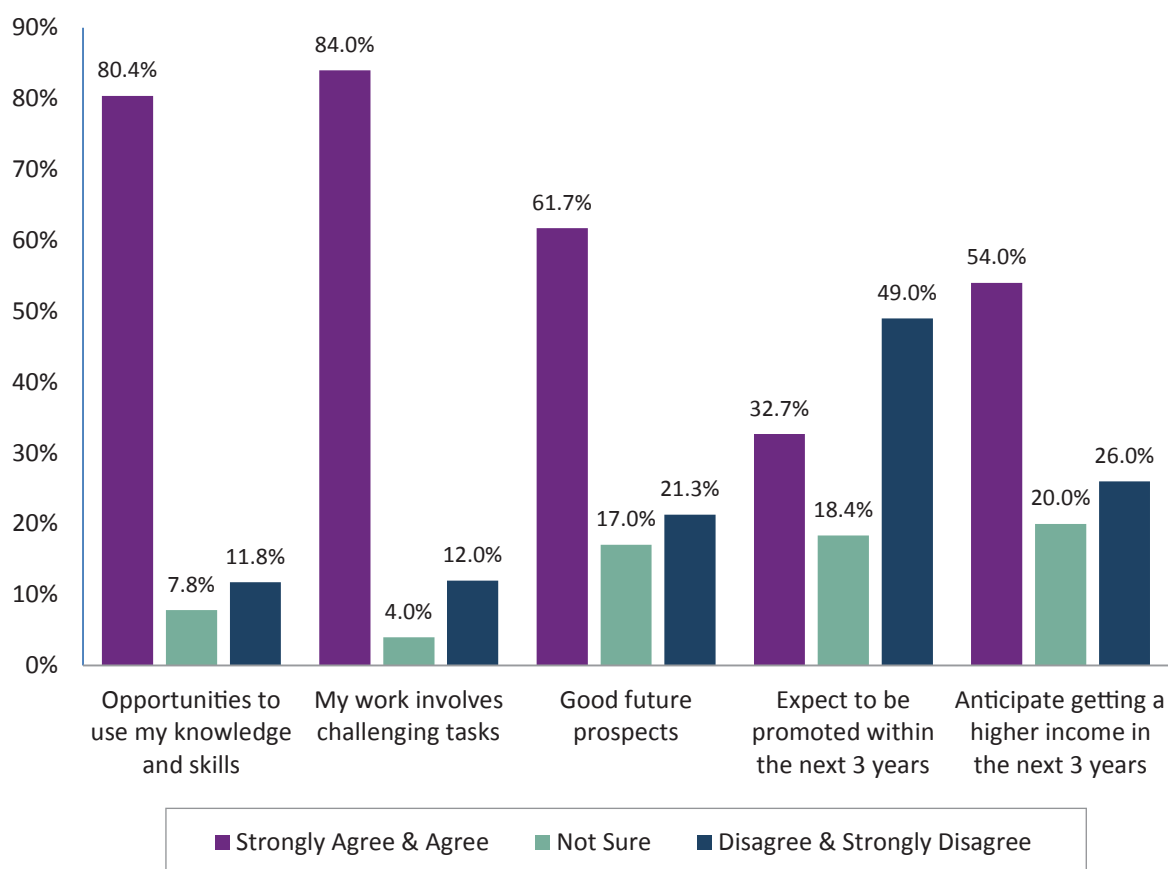


Figure 7.4: Opinion of Current Employment

As Figure 7.4 shows, over 80% agreed or strongly agreed that they had opportunities to use their knowledge and skills in their current job, and 84% agreed or strongly agreed that their work involved challenging tasks. The respondents were less positive about their future prospects, with over 61% agreeing or strongly agreeing that there were good future prospects in their employment role. They were even less optimistic about their expectation of being promoted in the following three years, with almost 49% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this as a possibility. Respondents were a bit more optimistic about earning a higher income in the following three years, with over 54% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they expected this to happen. Few differences between the SLA and MA groups were identified on these issues.

Of those graduates working full-time, 24.2% were earning up to €24,999, 51.5% between €25,000 and €40,999, 18.2% between €41,000–€56,999, and 6.1% €57,000 or above, as can be seen in Figure 7.5, with only minor differences between the SLA and MA groups.

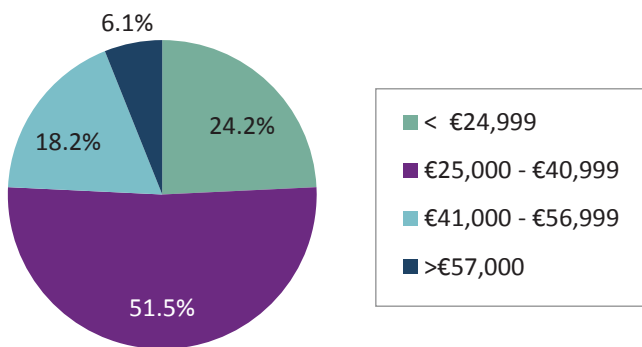


Figure 7.5: Salary Range of Graduates Employed Full-time

7.3 Impact of the Recession

The impact of the recession was keenly felt by the study's participants. As previously noted, 21.7% of graduates were unemployed at the time of the survey, and a higher proportion of the MA group were unemployed relative to the SLAs. Two main reasons were cited by respondents: a) a lack of employment opportunities in the context of the economic recession (cited by almost three times

as many MAs as SLAs), and b) not getting job offers in spite of attending interviews (cited by only MAs). An examination of the employment and related experiences of those who graduated before compared to during the recession shows that of the latter, fewer were working and more were unemployed. Of those working, more were in non-graduate occupations and were earning comparatively lower salaries. However, these differences were not found to be significant.

Clare (MA), who was unemployed at the time of interview, talked about how it was "discouraging watching the news and everything else and no jobs" and explained that she felt very degraded and demoralised:

... still looking for work ... it's fine doing all the voluntary work but it doesn't pay bills ... I've a family so it's very tough ... I apply for work but sometimes you don't even hear back from them which is degrading ... I have to go in and sign on obviously as a jobseeker and it's terrible, it's just demoralising now ... disheartening ... it makes me feel low in myself ... It's beginning now to knock my confidence again. I just feel there's no hope in there ... It is depressing ... I've come so far ... I shouldn't have to be in there. (Clare, MA)

Peter (MA), who had been so far unable to get employment as a teacher, was prepared to emigrate for work at the time of interview, as was Clare (MA):

... I mean I'm popping off applications to schools, you know, every week ... I'm registered with different agencies ... I had an interview in Dublin there for London recently ... it's worth exploring, I don't particularly want to go ... [but] ... I don't think there's any full time job going to come up here ... (Peter, MA)

I'd take office work now of any kind at this stage, you know. Or else I'm going to have to emigrate next year with my family (Clare, MA)

On the subject of emigration, Malachy and Jamie, both SLA interviewees, were clear that they had emigrated (both to Australia) for better (initial or further) job opportunities and were very satisfied with the professional experience they were gaining, as well as with the additional educational and professional opportunities which were now available to them:

... I just graduated last August ... it was very difficult to get any sort of Social Work in Ireland ... you come over here and you start work straight away ... it's great to be here, life is good and this place has a lot going for it ... people see emigration as a real negative thing but for me it's not really, it's a far more positive thing. And having experience over here gives me a comparative edge over people who haven't emigrated when I go back to Ireland ... I'm going to apply for permanent residency here and once I get that then I can ... get other roles that I'm maybe a bit more interested in and also probably go on and study to be a solicitor here ... there's lots of potential here, a lot of upward mobility and there's a lot of opportunity. (Malachy, SLA)

... the only reason that I left Dublin fundamentally was that there's no other opportunities ... it didn't offer you any scope to develop ... to advance ... but fortunately for me I have the insurance of being able to take time out and come away and learn because ... when the right position opens up to go home and contribute ... that's what I'm doing ... I currently have the option of looking at a sponsorship, PhD, here which is worth in the region of €50,000 ... I'm currently kind of in discussions with the university about that and ... I'm not going to get that kind of option at home ... (Jamie, SLA)

In spite of the problems faced by some of the older MA interviewees in getting employment, especially in their field, they were clear that they did not regret having gone to HE. They explained

that they were happy and proud to have achieved their qualifications "even if I never got anything out of it" (Mark, MA). Jude and Clare expressed similar sentiments:

... very proud of what I've achieved ... regardless if from today on I never done another thing with them, at least I know that I've done that and I've achieved that, I won't always be wondering you know 'what if?' (Jude, MA)

... but I don't regret college, I loved it, it was the best thing ever ... Again it just gave me that confidence and I just thrived on it it has put me back up on the, my ladder ... gave me a boost and a great sense of achievement (Clare, MA)

Indeed, for Heather, who was now working in the adult education sector (unrelated to her qualifications), HE had been both transformational and emancipatory. She talked about HE having given her great confidence, and having made her 'respectable':

I'm fantastically proud of myself. I feel like pinching myself every day. Like for years, occupation – 'housewife' ... it's grand but it's nothing ... now I write, 'teacher', and I think wow, I actually am something ... I hadn't actually thought that it would change my life either, and it did ... it changed my attitude towards myself, it gave me a great sense of self-worth and achievement ... I feel confident, I feel worthy ... there's a certain sense of satisfaction with being able to offer something that is, that is recognised as (pause), what is the word I'm thinking of, respectable. (Heather, MA)

Amongst many of the MA interviewees, participation in HE had also had an important intergenerational impact, in that those with children felt they had influenced them to follow in their HE footsteps:

... I feel that I have taken myself from a place where I was trapped and I had no opportunity and no expectations and because of that my children wouldn't have had opportunities and expectations and I have taken myself by the bootstraps, with the support of the college obviously and doing the Access course ... (Heather, MA)

Of the questionnaire respondents, 43% reported that one of their immediate family had since commenced in HE.

7.4 Perception of Impact of Socio-demographic Factors on Labour Market Experiences

35.3% of graduates reported that their labour market experiences had been affected by socio-demographic factors, while 64.7% did not, with more of the MAs (41%) reporting this compared to the SLAs (30.4%), but this difference was not found to be significant. Both the questionnaire respondents and the interviewees emphasised, in particular, the negative impact of (older) age, (having) family commitments/responsibilities, and (lower) social class¹⁸.

Older MA questionnaire respondents and interviewees emphasised that their age played a significant role in their un- or under-employment. They reported that employers were "looking for a younger person" (Clare, MA), and in many cases "once you get to a certain age and you put it on a CV, they don't even look at it" (Mark, MA).

I feel at this stage I am unemployable, as age is against me. (QR, MA)

I've gotten down several times to the last three, then I might go for interview, my CV says I graduated in 2006, you are expecting somebody in their what – late twenties – and in bounces Brenda. (Brenda, MA)

... I've been told there's not a hope in hell of being offered a job at sixty ... it's an ageist thing, I mean nobody's ever going

to say to you you're too old, but ... I could plaster that wall with Dear Johns from schools ... (Peter, MA)

Family-related responsibilities also significantly impacted the female interviewees who had children, particularly in relation to employment opportunities away from home. Brenda (MA) felt moving away from her family was "not really feasible". Similarly, Tracy (SLA) emphasised that employment decisions were based on what was possible for her as a parent:

... when you're working and you're a young parent, that impacts on your ... work life ... impacts the decisions I have to make, for example, about where I can work ... (Tracy, SLA)

Indeed, one of the female questionnaire respondents noted that:

I avoid telling employers my age, marital status or that I have a small child as this could be discriminatory. In the past, I have lost out to single men in interviews when I've been probed about my marital status and commitments. (QR: MA)

Social class background was also noted as a factor, with respondents noting that their name, address, limited finances, and lack of connections impacted negatively on their efforts to obtain employment generally, but also on their experiences of employment in particular sectors:

Sometimes I feel my address is a hindrance. I believe it's superficial and unfair to be judged by where you live but unfortunately it may be the case. I have experienced class discrimination in Galway ... (QR, MA)

Your address means everything. (QR: MA)

My name seems to be holding me back from interviews. (QR: MA)

Without money, there is limit to look for

¹⁸ A small number of questionnaire respondents also cited disability and ethnicity as negatively impacting their employment experiences.

employment, attend job fairs in other places, to represent yourself, travel without vehicle, no money to move for work, no connections in well paid jobs (family etc.) (QR: MA)

Coming from working class background I felt I didn't fit in in the financial sector. (QR: SLA)

Social class background (and the related issue of not having 'contacts' in a specific professional field) was raised particularly by those in the fields of Finance and Law. Most of those with qualifications in Law had difficulties initially, or were still having difficulties, gaining a foothold in the profession, even at apprenticeship level, due to not having the necessary 'connections' or 'contacts'.

Social background. Initially, it was very difficult to get an apprenticeship with any solicitor as I had no connections whatsoever ... (QR: SLA)

... at the moment there's nothing doing ... thinking about working with young people in trouble ... I might do an internship in January ... would involve the legal work I made enquiries but I hear you have to know people to get into it, very hard to get into these things. If you go into JobBridge there's nothing advertised for internships ... so you need to know somebody inside in the place ... you need a bit of contacts. Once you leave here it's who you know ... It should be open to everybody, there should be an interview basis and it should be advertised but it's not ... (Mark, MA)

... their mothers and fathers were in the legal industry themselves these ... they had very direct direction in terms of 'ok here you go now, here's your law degree and now you're going to go on and you're going to become a solicitor or barrister and we'll get you sorted after that with work and there'll be no problems' ... When you're a solicitor or barrister, a lot of it is about who you know. (Malachy, SLA)

7.5 Looking to the Future: Wanting to Progress

Several of the interviewees working in their field reported being happy to continue and/or progress in their current employment role, without moving away from what they were doing or pursuing any further educational qualifications. These individuals had reached their professional goals and were content. A couple were considering pursuing a Master's qualification in a different area to that in which they were working, but in line with their earlier academic interests, and a small number expressed the desire to pursue doctoral studies in the future, but cited finance as a significant barrier. Those not working in their field of expertise expressed a strong desire to do so but were conscious of the various constraints depending on their own circumstances.

Keeping in mind the altruistic 'wanting to contribute/give back' motivations of many of the interviewees in terms of postgraduate programme and career choice, it is interesting to note that for many of the SLA interviewees, as they gained professional experience over time, a strong desire to progress in their career, and especially to earn more money, was emerging in their narratives:

... obviously I want to see [the community] develop but I really do want to kind of like keep progressing in my career. And money as well, after spending that long in university ... I still have a lot of student debt and like I still want to kind of earn money really, like more money (laugh) Do something I'm passionate about but you know earn more money. Like be a Director or something like that (Cynthia, SLA)

Progression means I suppose bigger job ... maybe more managerial role, moving up the ladder. Obviously ... with better pay, which is always a driving point ... I'd like to maybe get into management ... [or] lecturing (Paul, SLA)

... probably go on and study to be a solicitor here ... [solicitors] get paid a lot more than what I get paid at the moment so maybe that's one of the big draws ... it's better I feel to be dual qualified than be just qualified in one thing probably just better pay and just better kind of potential ... (Malachy, SLA)

In this regard, Jamie was concerned that he was, as he said, "losing some of my leftyness", with his perspective shifting over time as he perceived his social class status changing:

... as time goes on I'm kind of shifting a little bit ... I've been paying particular interest to business in the last year ... I don't

know am I losing some of my leftyness or something ... is that some kind of natural progress as you move further along some kind of middle class status ... maybe it's now having a child and the fact that I need to financially support him ... I wonder is it that I've shifted ... I want my child to go to a private school and I want him to have certain things that ... ten years ago they didn't mean something to me, now all those things mean something to me. (Jamie, SLA)

As previously noted, the two SLA interviewees who were completing PhDs were anxious to move to action and work in social justice-related fields as soon as possible.





Deimhnítear leis seo gur éirigh le
Michelle Hokszo
sa Chursa Rochtana do lucht Fágála Scoil
arna teachtáil ag an Ollscoil sa
Bhliain Aidiúil 2010/2011.

9 Samhain, 2011

Chapter Eight: Summary, Discussion and Conclusion

8.1 Summary of Research and Findings

Using a mixed methods research design involving a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, this research report has presented evidence of the 'impact' of WP at NUI Galway, through a consideration of the 'performance' and 'progression' of SLA and MA groups, focusing on their background, schooling and Access experiences, their experiences of undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and their early employment experiences. Key findings include the:

- considerable fortitude and resilience of the study's participants in their pursuit of and engagement with a higher education (HE), in spite of challenging life circumstances and schooling experiences;
- importance placed on both career/employment, and personal achievement, reasons by participants in terms of their motivations for HE;
- overwhelmingly positive experiences of the Access programme reported by the study's participants, who emphasised its many benefits and its significant role in their subsequent success in HE and beyond;
- relatively similar academic experiences and 'performances' of the participants relative to the general student population: in spite of their lower Leaving Certificate points' level, or their 'non-traditional' entry qualifications, almost 80% reported that they found their undergraduate academic work the same, less, or a lot less difficult relative to other students. Almost 97% achieved a 1.1, 2.1, or 2.2 degree. 25 of the 26 interviewees achieved a 2.1 or a 2.2 degree. 89% of respondents graduated;
- persistence of MAs' low level of academic self-confidence throughout their undergraduate years, linked to feeling a 'fraud' and worrying about not understanding the academic 'system' relative to their younger peers;
- high levels of satisfaction reported in relation to financial, personal, and academic post-entry Access supports, although a significant minority called for more personal time and attention in relation to careers,

including more targeted and relevant support for mature-aged students;

- lack of extra-curricular and/or socio-relational engagement (regretted by several in retrospect) of a significant portion of the study's participants, which participants linked to having different HE goals, having external commitments (MAs), feeling inferior academically and socio-economically (especially the SLAs), relative to 'traditional' students, and the strong supportive relationships with fellow access students. Extreme socio-relational distancing was reported by the participants in the Law undergraduate degree;
- high level of postgraduate progression (almost 80%, and 23 of the 26 interviewees), with the majority citing career and employment reasons for their progression. Over 40% progressed to Education or Community-related programmes. Differences between the SLA and MA interviewees were evident: many of the MAs had not planned beyond undergraduate level, resulting in haphazard choosing, with some later regretting their choices, whereas the SLAs' narratives revealed assumptions about postgraduate progression. Further, the SLAs' choices were strongly tied to specific careers, and many were altruistically motivated in their desire to enter professions through which they could contribute to society;
- generally positive experiences reported by interviewees at postgraduate level, including the great sense of achievement and confidence gained by the MA interviewees having achieved at this level. However, socio-relational distancing continued, and became more extreme in some disciplines (Law, Finance, and Business);
- majority of graduates reporting that their first year in employment met their expectations, with the remainder citing a lack of employment opportunities (generally as a result of the recession), or suitable opportunities for graduates. The majority

obtained employment within one to two years post-graduation, and accessed employment related to their degree;

- generally very positive outcomes for the study's participants in terms of current employment, with over 65% of graduates employed (mostly full-time), almost 63% employed in graduate occupations (demonstrating significant impact in terms of social mobility), and over 71% of the questionnaire respondents, and 15 of the 26 interviewees, in positions related to their qualification/s;
- high levels of satisfaction with current employment roles that were reported (over 86% were satisfied or very satisfied) although respondents were less confident about their future prospects, particularly in the context of the recession. Not working in their field was a source of significant dissatisfaction for the relevant study's participants;
- impact of the recession, seen through the poorer employment-related experiences of those who graduated during, compared to before, this time. The main reason given by those who were unemployed was a lack of employment opportunities related to the recession; and
- 35% of questionnaire respondents who reported that their employment experiences had been affected by socio-demographic factors, citing especially age, family responsibilities, and social class. These factors were also identified by the interviewees. In spite of the additional difficulties experienced by the MAs in relation to employment, especially by the older MAs, they were clear that they did not regret HE.

8.2 Discussion

In spite of the often very challenging home and life circumstances, the research participants demonstrated considerable fortitude and resilience in their quest for improved life chances through HE. For many, negatives schooling

experiences (including not being encouraged at school and low school and teacher expectations) was a key factor in their educational disengagement and/or underachievement. In spite of significant improvements in initial teacher education and further professional development for teachers in the last decade in Ireland, including in relation to educational disadvantage, work remains to be done with schools and teachers, particularly those working in DEIS schools and/or with students from minority and disadvantaged groups, especially in relation to the key role of teacher expectations, and professional understandings of the link between socio-demographic factors and achievement (HEA, 2014a; Keane, 2009b). The research participants' main motivations for HE progression related to employment and career factors, but for many, the need to prove themselves academically constituted an additionally important motivator. Reflecting previous research (Keane, 2009b, 2011b; Sanders and Daly, 2013; Share and Carroll, 2013; TAP, 2010; UCCPLUS+, 2011), the interviewees' experiences of the Access programme were overwhelmingly positive. They emphasised academic writing support, confidence-building, and making good and supportive friendships as key benefits, and all reported feeling very well prepared for HE.

Just over 93% of the questionnaire respondents progressed to undergraduate level, with over 80%, and 17 of the 26 interviewees, selecting a Bachelor of Arts degree. In spite of feeling prepared, the transition to HE was very challenging for some of the older MA interviewees, and they reported feeling intimidated by younger students in this regard, which linked in with their general lower level of academic self-confidence. Almost 97% of the questionnaire respondents achieved a 1.1, 2.1. or 2.2 degree award. Over 78% reported finding their academic work about the same or less or a lot less difficult than other students, although more of the MA respondents reported finding their work more difficult than did the SLAs. Again, in large part, this was related to their lower level of academic self-confidence and reported feelings of being 'a fraud' and worrying about being 'found out' academically, and this has commonly been found in research, particularly

with older female mature students (Burke, 2002; Edwards, 1993) and working class students in HE (c.f. Crozier et al., 2008; Reay, 2005; Skeggs, 1997). The MA interviewees also highlighted a lack of knowledge of the academic system relative to their younger peers as a key factor, which has also been found in previous research (Bowl, 2003; Fleming and Murphy, 1997; Keane, 2009a), pointing to the need for more explicit instruction in and about HE learning approaches and practice (Keane, 2009b). As also noted by Byrne, Doris, Sweetman, Casey and Raffe (2013), further focus on improving the HE teaching and learning experience of all students, including embedding inclusive pedagogies and related academic staff development (cf. Ashwin et al. 2015), is required.

High levels of satisfaction with post-entry Access supports were reported by the questionnaire respondents, including mostly positive feedback in relation to the Careers' service. A substantial minority of research participants, however, were critical of what they perceived as largely a 'leaflet-gathering' approach, without adequate time for individuals. The MA interviewees called for targeted careers sessions for mature students, which would take into account their particular circumstances and motivations. HEIs commitment to WP must extend – in a meaningful way – beyond the focus on meeting targets in terms of the numbers of certain under-represented groups progressing to HE, towards a commitment to system adaptation and development such that these students are not seen as peripheral to a more 'traditional' student core. This will mean commitment to the development of targeted student support services, including careers and employability, directly relevant and useful to all student groups.

An aim of this study was to explore the issue of extra-curricular and socio-relational engagement amongst a wider group of access students, following on from previous research which found significant distancing and disengagement in this realm (Keane, 2009b; 2011a; Share and Carroll, 2013). Over 55% of questionnaire respondents did not participate in extra-curricular activities during their undergraduate years, citing external

commitments and a lack of time. Almost 44% reported only or mostly spending time with their family, access peers, or non-HE friends. Both SLA and MA interviewees emphasised that they were not in HE to make friends or to socialise, but to reach personal and/or employment goals, and the MAs were also constrained by their external life circumstances. Many of the interviewees kept the same social circle from their Access programme, citing supportive peer relationships, although some questioned, looking back at their undergraduate years, if having formed such close bonds had subsequently inhibited them from making 'other' friends. Several of the MAs viewed 'younger' students as unmotivated. Similar to what was found in previous research (Keane, 2009b, 2011a), the SLAs were clear that their 'distancing' (ibid.) resulted from a sense of inferiority relative to other students, both academically (worrying that other students thought they were not 'able' for HE having entered via an Access route) and socio-economically, given the rationale of the Access programme. They explained that they felt too different to other students, and at times 'jealous' of their apparently 'easy' lives. In retrospect, many regretted not mixing with other students at the time, but even years later they understood their reasons for not doing so. This sense of inferiority was also demonstrated through many of the SLAs' deliberate non-disclosure of their Access route entry to HE, as also found in previous research (ibid.). In this study, extreme socio-relational distancing was reported by interviewees in Law at undergraduate level, and the relevant (four) SLAs were clear about how social class distinctions drove the 'clique-ing' (ibid.) together of the 'other' students, and their own relative isolation and sense of inferiority.

In the context of discussions about equitable access to the professions, the impact of differential socio-demographic positioning, including social class, on the student experience in and beyond HE, generally but also in specific disciplines, requires more in-depth attention, not just from a research perspective, but also on the part of HEIs and policy-makers. If WP is to meaningfully involve a focus on equitable outcomes, inequitable processes enacted at institutional level, including

in the socio-relational realm, are part of what needs to be attended to, however challenging they may be to address (although Thomas (2002) and others (Ashwin et al., 2015; Keane, 2009a,b) have offered suggestions in this regard). As noted in Chapter Two, attention to the socio-relational is of particular import if we consider the potential role of the social and extra-curricular experience (which facilitates building social networks, including contacts) in employment, including accessing work placements (Allen et al., 2013; Rivera, 2011; Van Dyke et al., 2005). Indeed, in relation to elite employers in professional fields in the US, Rivera (2011) found that employers screened candidates for attendance at elite universities and their extra-curricular achievements, "favoring high status, resource-intensive activities that resonated with white, upper-middle class culture" (ibid., p. 71). Rivera argues that extra-curricular engagement has become a credential in the employment market. In relation to access to high-prestige professions, a number of study's participants who had completed qualifications in Law reported difficulties coping with the financial demands at various junctures throughout their training, but also cited difficulties accessing apprenticeships due to a lack of contacts, and considerable socio-relational issues, as already noted.

In terms of academic 'performance' and outcomes, 89% of questionnaire respondents graduated, with 11% having withdrawn, citing health/personal/family, as well as academic, reasons for their non-progression. This compares very well with the average retention rate reported of 84% for the 2010/2011 new entrant cohort (HEA, 2014d), and equates with figures of 89% in TCD (TAP, 2010) and UCC (UCCPLUS+, 2011). Over 50% obtained a 2.1 undergraduate award, with over 95% obtaining a 1.1, 2.1, or 2.2 degree. 21/26 interviewees obtained a 2.1. High levels of satisfaction with their level of award were reported. Again, these findings compare very well with those of the other institutional and related studies (cf. DCU Access Service, 2011; Staunton, 2009; TAP, 2010; UCCPLUS+, 2011).

As noted by McCulloch and Thomas (2013), WP at postgraduate level has received relatively little attention in research, and in Ireland this is particularly the case beyond the consideration of postgraduate progression rates and subject areas. The postgraduate progression rate of the questionnaire respondents also compares very well to findings from other institutional studies, with almost 80% progressing to some form of postgraduate programme (the majority of which were Master's degree programmes), higher than the 72% found by UCCPLUS+ (2011), significantly higher than that reported in the TCD (57%, TAP, 2010) and DCU (53%, DCU Access Service, 2011) studies, and significantly higher again relative to the HEA (2014d) figure for graduates generally (40%). 23 of the 26 interviewees completed at least one postgraduate programme. The majority of this study's participants cited career and employment reasons for progression to postgraduate level, noting that a primary degree was no longer 'enough' for employability purposes, similar to what has been reported in other institutional studies (cf. TAP, 2010; UCCPLUS+, 2011). Interestingly, the SLA interviewees progressed to postgraduate level almost unquestioningly; this is of significance if we consider previous research which has found that progression to HE initially is not part of lower socio-economic groups' 'normal biography' but rather their 'choice biography' (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998), in that it is an active and conscious choice, a formal decision (Ball, Davies, David and Reay, 2002), without any sense of assumption or entitlement (Evans, 2009). This has also been found in previous research with access students in Ireland (Keane, 2009b, 2011a, 2012), and for the current study's participants, progression to undergraduate level was also very much contrary to their educational and life trajectories. In that sense then, the almost 'non-decision' (Ball et al., 2002) of the SLAs' progression to postgraduate level is notable and could be argued to indicate a normalisation of educational 'credentialing' amongst their group.

The type of postgraduate programme selected by the study's participants and their related motivational processes and orientations are also of note. 43-46% of the questionnaire respondents

progressed to either Education or Community-related programmes. Of the 23 interviewees who completed at least one postgraduate programme, 11 progressed to Teaching, Community Development, or Social Work programmes. While the popularity of Education-related programmes at postgraduate level amongst access students has also been noted by Kenny et al. (2010) and TAP (2010), especially amongst their mature-aged graduates, in this study, the interviewees' narratives pointed to a strong sense of altruistic motivation in their postgraduate programme selection. The SLA interviewees' postgraduate choices were tied to particular career paths, and the altruistic motivations of many were seen in their comments about wanting to 'contribute' and 'help others' through careers such as Social Work, Community Development, and Teaching. Kenny et al. (2010) and TAP (2010) also reported the marked number of access graduates choosing to work in the field of education. The altruistic motivation of many access graduates in this study - directly tied to their circumstances of origin - is meritorious of further research, and the potential of this sort of motivational orientation in terms of positive impact at community and society levels ought to be recognised. It demonstrates the potential of HE Access and WP initiatives as a public, and not just private, good. While the individuals concerned benefitted personally in terms of their life chances through their HE qualifications, there is also grassroots' impact in terms of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups when we consider the likely positive effect of the 'been there, understand that' insider-perspectives that professionals from such backgrounds can bring to bear on their professional engagement. This is the sort of graduate that Walker (2010, p. 494) means by a "graduate citizen", who can make "a positive difference in the everyday lives of the people with whom they come into contact" (ibid., p. 487), the sort of graduate who has the capacity to be "an analytic, critical and imaginative thinker who is committed to working with others for the public good" (McLean, 2006, p. 79). That many of the SLA interviewees working in such fields were, at the time of interview, seeking to progress personally (in terms of career advancement, especially in relation to earning more money)

whilst continuing in their fields, does not detract from the importance of their contribution to society; instead, it indicates the relatively low value society places on such work, evident through its often relatively poorly-remunerated positions, and frequently unstable working conditions. However, it would be interesting to continue to track the SLAs as their careers progressed, to investigate the relationship between their philosophical and personal commitment to social justice, and their human need for financial security and professional advancement.

While several of the MA interviewees also progressed to postgraduate programmes in the fields considered above, there was a notable absence of strategic planning in relation to their progression, with many 'not knowing what to do next', and others being confused or poorly informed about requirements to access certain professions, including teaching. Some simply had not planned beyond their undergraduate degree, feeling they were 'too old for a career' or not having conceptualised HE in terms of a career, but they also perceived a lack of university 'interest' and support in relation to their postgraduate options. As a result, there was an element of haphazardness in their selection of programmes, with several regretting their choice/s, or the sequence of their choice/s, at a later stage. Given the financial limitations for access students, and the additional funding constraints at postgraduate level in Ireland, a lack of planning and/or adequate support and information can prove to be risky and costly for relevant students' employment and career development. Timely and targeted university supports, particularly for older mature-aged undergraduates, are needed to assist them in planning for their educational and employment progression (see also Share and Carroll, 2013).

Overall, the interviewees reported very positive experiences at postgraduate level, with the SLAs emphasising the professional development and preparation they gained from the work placement elements of their programme in particular, and the MAs stressing the level of academic self-confidence they gained by achieving at this level,

finally feeling they were 'able for it' and 'worthy'. However, even greater social class distinctions, and related socio-relational distancing (Keane, 2009b, 2011b), were reported by those in certain disciplines at postgraduate level - Law, Finance and Business - but were also noted in Community Development and Teaching. The inherent 'middle classness' and, at times, elitism sensed by this study's participants in their postgraduate engagement (in various HEIs) was off-putting to the study's participants, but most continued on regardless, demonstrating significant determination. The HEA is cognisant of the under-representation of certain groups in 'high prestige' subject areas and related professions (HEA, 2014a), but if this is to become a policy focus, the various relevant disciplinary socio-cultural and socio-relational contexts, and the student experience therein, require further research and critical examination, far beyond the 'increasing numbers' approach. As argued elsewhere (Keane, 2013a, 2009b, 2011a), much work remains to be done within HEIs to facilitate the development of a more inclusive environment, in which all students feel comfortable enough to fully engage in all realms, including the socio-relational. HEIs can promote social networks and integration amongst students in various ways, including through learning and teaching methodologies (cf. Ashwin et al., 2015; Keane, 2009a; Thomas, 2002). To what extent, however, can we claim that HEIs are currently performing effectively in these ways? If not explicitly facilitating inclusion, are current structures and processes fostering exclusion amongst some student groups?

We also have seen the significant impact of WP on the study's participants in relation to employment. Almost 58% of questionnaire respondents who had graduated obtained employment within one-two years following graduation from undergraduate level, with a small majority obtaining full-time positions. Some of the interviewees (most of whom had postgraduate qualifications) found it difficult to obtain work initially, especially the older MA interviewees, and pointed to the recession as a key factor. Almost 58% of questionnaire respondents reported that their first year in the labour market had met their expectations. Those

whose expectations were not met cited a lack of employment opportunities generally, and a lack of suitable opportunities at graduate level. In terms of their current employment (i.e. at the time of the survey), of those who had graduated (from either undergraduate or postgraduate programmes), over 65% were employed, and just under 22% were unemployed, with more SLAs in employment relative to MAs and more of the MAs unemployed relative to the SLAs. Of those working, 65.4% were in full-time positions and 47.8% had permanent contracts. 19 of the 26 interviewees were in employment at the time of interview (most were working full-time) and two were still in education (pursuing PhDs). Again, these findings compare well to those from the other institutional studies: 65% of UCC access graduates, and 75% of TCD access graduates, were employed at the time of survey (TAP, 2010; UCCPLUS+, 2011). Of those graduates employed, over 71% of questionnaire respondents, and 15 of the 26 interviewees, were in employment which was related to their undergraduate and/or postgraduate qualification/s.

The significant impact of WP was also seen in the type of employment accessed by the study's participants, especially when we consider these individuals' starting points and the various constraints and challenges embedded in their lives as a result of their socio-demographic positioning. Almost 63% were employed in graduate occupations (Elias and Purcell, 2004), as were most of the interviewees. A comparison of their original and current socio-economic group (based on current occupation) also demonstrated significant impact in relation to social mobility, in that the majority had moved 'up' in socio-economic groups terms. As Stuart (2012, p. 7) argues, for those from lower socio-economic groups "... what matters most is not just getting into university but succeeding there and being able to gain employment that moves them beyond their family background". However, whether movement away from one's working class roots can or ought to be unquestioningly regarded as a 'good' thing (Ashwin et al., 2015) is a matter for more critical consideration and debate (cf. Stuart, 2012).

Very high levels of satisfaction (almost 87% of questionnaire respondents) with current employment were reported, and key reasons related to working in their field, including having opportunities to use their skills and engaging in challenging work. Questionnaire respondents were far less positive about their future prospects, including in relation to promotion and increased salary, and this was particularly of note amongst the MAs. These results should be interpreted in the context of the current economic recession in Ireland. Further, many of those in employment were in 'traditional' graduate occupations, very often in public service roles, where job losses and pay cuts have had a significant impact in recent years. The interviewees not working in their field, most of whom were older MAs, expressed disappointment about the 'waste' and noted a lack of opportunities due to the recession, but also perceived that their older age was an issue in the employment market.

At just under 22%, the unemployment rate reported in this study is higher than that reported in the other Irish institutional studies, and a higher proportion of the MA group were unemployed relative to the SLAs. While being of 'younger' mature-age seems to lead to similar, or better, employment experiences relative to 'traditional' students (Blasko et al., 2002; Purcell and Elias, 2004), the poorer experiences of (particularly older) MA questionnaire respondents and interviewees in relation to employment in the current study point to significant labour market discrimination in relation to age, which requires further research. While a minority (just over 35%) (compared to findings from England (see Chapter Two) but in line with findings from other institutional studies in Ireland) of graduates perceived that socio-demographic factors had negatively impacted on their employment experiences, this study's participants cited age (as well as family responsibilities and social class) as key factors. The entrenchment of Ireland's economic recession at the time of the conduct of the research is also a factor; the combined and/or cumulative effect of being an older mature-aged graduate during a time of serious recession is relevant, particularly as the main reason for unemployment cited was

a lack of employment opportunities. In spite of their employment struggles, however, it was clear that even the older MA interviewees did not regret their HE engagement; for them it had been transformational at a personal level. However, if WP is to meaningfully include older mature students, HEIs will need to adapt their core services and supports to guide and facilitate more than the 'traditional' graduate career and employment trajectory, and to provide relevant targeted supports.

8.3 Conclusion

While a limitation of the study is the relatively low response rate to the questionnaire - an unfortunately common problem in research of this kind (Cohen et al., 2011; TAP, 2010; UCCPLUS+, 2011) - the findings of this study support and extend previous research about the experiences in HE and beyond of access students. As we have seen, this study's participants generally performed and progressed 'at least as well' as traditional-entry students and the findings compare very well to those of other institutional studies of access students in Ireland. Similar research focused on the particular experiences of those from various different 'categories' of under-represented groups (including direct-entry students (for example, those entering HE via the HEAR and DARE schemes), minority ethnic (including Travellers) groups, and students with disabilities) would be illuminating.

This study provides very significant evidence of the positive impact of the WP activities at NUI Galway on access students' life chances. Certainly, this is good news, but focusing only on such interpretations of 'impact' precludes the necessary critical examination of what might be happening behind the scenes. The lived experiences of those from under-represented groups at the post-entry level and beyond suggest the need for significant system redevelopment and transformation. The findings of this study underscore the complexity of conceptualisations of performance and progression, and the need to explicate the role of the various enabling and constraining factors for

different student groups as well as the associated performance of HE therein.

In an era of serious economic recession and austerity-based HE funding in Ireland, and in the context of a discourse which connotes WP to 'falling standards' (Keane, 2011b) (see Chapter Two), it is important to explore the 'impact' of what is being done to promote equality in HE. However, the current drive to do so ought to be understood in the context of neo-liberal emphases on performativity, objectivity, and accountability (Ball, 2012). This latter conceptualisation generally limits understandings (and indicators) of 'impact' to those relating to how relevant student groups are performing and progressing, often neglecting a necessary examination of how the HE system and HEIs are performing - outside of metrics, such as Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), including in terms of the numbers of students from under-represented groups admitted - with respect to wider social justice and inclusion-related societal-level objectives. Policy-level conceptualisations of 'impact' tend to be deficit in nature, thus rendering invisible questions about the 'performance' of institutions, and of the curriculum, teaching and student support, in serving students (of all backgrounds, in terms of enabling or constraining their 'performance'), and broader social justice objectives. While one of the stated purposes of the Higher Education System Performance Framework, 2014-2016 (DES, 2013) relates to the performance and accountability of the sector, indicators for the objectives relating to access for disadvantaged groups to HE and the promotion of excellence in teaching and learning again generally relate to increasing numbers of certain groups accessing and completing HE, as well as student satisfaction scores on the National Student Survey. Further work is required on system and policy levels to move away from conceiving of system performance in such narrow terms, towards a more critical self-examination that identifies and addresses the various factors which serve to simultaneously enable or constrain different students in their engagement with HE and beyond. For example, in terms of both academic and socio-relational achievement, we must question to what extent performance (however

defined and measured) may actually be a learned (and system-supported) behaviour, rooted in differential socio-demographic positionalities. Questions need to be asked about why the performance and progression of 'traditional' students is assumed to be normative, rather than produced by a Bourdieusian (1989) 'fish-in-water' HE experience. What might students from under-represented, disadvantaged and minority groups

achieve if the 'playing field' was, indeed, level? What is needed to move from deficit perspectives about under-represented groups in HE towards a recognition of their potential to enrich and transform the wider student and HE experience and system? How might the HE system 'perform' better in creating conditions which support the engagement, performance, and progression beyond HE of all students?



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Notes



The Access Team at NUI Galway



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