

Paper presented at Irish Higher Education Authority Conference at launch of HEA *Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education* Keynote speaker Vincent Tinto October 28, 2010.

Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-Traditional Learners in Higher Education [RANLHE funded by the EU Commission on Lifelong Learning Programme – Project 135230-LLP-1-2007-1-UK-KA1-KA1SCR].

Retention and Progression in Irish Higher Education¹

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All of us interested in the progression of students through our higher education system will welcome this HEA research report (Mooney, Patterson, et al., 2010). It updates a number of other historical studies (Baird, 2002; Healy, et al, 1999; Eivers, 2002; Morgan, 2001) and provides a new benchmark and baseline against which future progress will be measured. Though it is a welcome and excellent report it will lead to some disappointments too for the many who have worked in this area of HE with expertise, creativity and commitment. Our celebrations and occasional successes, almost like Sisyphus, are interspersed with challenges, setbacks and complex difficulties.

This past decade has seen major changes in Irish higher education that should not be understated as they impact profoundly on the task of providing a successful learning experience for students. The relationship between the state and higher education has been the most significant change, with new funding models in operation, cutbacks and persistent under funding; the demands to provide a closer fit between the qualifications offered by colleges and the job market; the restructuring required by the EU and Bologna; a global market search for students; enhanced research imperatives along with the arrival of mature, and other non-traditional learners. More recently, and in addition to all this, the challenging economic environment makes the future increasingly unknown and unimaginably challenging.

Before I say anything in detail I want to state that the question, why do some students stay and others leave is one of those really complex questions as so many issues - institutional, personal and especially broader environmental - impact on the ambition of the student to succeed. A matrix of factors, over which students very often have little control, interact with one another making success for many a challenging experience.

¹ Published as HEA Paper at URL:

<http://www.heai.ie/files/files/file/statistics/2010/Retention%20&%20Progression/Access%20and%20Progression%20in%20Irish%20Higher%20Education%20Fleming.pdf>

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In these comments I want to address three broad areas:

I want to respond to the invitation from the Higher Education Authority to Comment on the report published today by **contextualising** the findings.

I want to comment on the preliminary findings of a longitudinal **European research** project in which I am involved called 'Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-Traditional Learners in Higher Education [RANLHE funded by the EU Commission on Lifelong Learning Programme – Project 135230-LLP-1-2007-1-UK-KA1-KA1SCR].

Finally, some policy and practical suggestions based on research as to where we could go from here.

Context is everything

It is clear that statistics have to be understood in a sophisticated way rather than in a literal fashion. I want to give some examples.

Mind the statistics: OECD and 'Education at a Glance'

Both EU and the OECD (2007) give statistics for retention across the member countries. Having looked at the ways in which a number of countries arrive at their statistics it is clear that it is very difficult to know if they actually compare like with like (RANLHE, 2010a). The UK has the most sophisticated methodology for calculating these rates and they are gathered and published by an independent agency (National Audit office, 2007). The German statistics are understandably, and in their own words, the most sophisticated as they give weight to the age of the students. Sweden has however the most sophisticated system as they do not talk about drop-out at all! Because of the open access policy in the country their emphasis is on the ability to 'drop-in.' When a student registers they can progress or complete at a pace decided by the student. So no drop outs, really. Across Europe the average rates of survival in HE are approximately 70 percent - with some countries, and some institutions and some disciplines departing significantly from those figures on either the plus or negative side. In addition, the figures are calculated across Europe on the basis of taking a start date, adding the number of years on which the degree is offered full-time and then adding 2 (sometimes 3) years to allow for completion (RANLHE, 2010b). In addition, politics and optics complicate the amount of transparency that is tolerated.

Researcher beware

It is the start date that above anything else leads to a 'researcher beware' about statistics. The excellent HEA (Mooney, at al., 2010) report uses a start date of March 1 - the year after enrolment. In other words, the start date for collecting data is six months after commencement. There is an inbuilt fairness in this March 1 census date that anyone in management will recognise as it allows time for students and the system to bed down so to speak. But by my own research (with others including Fergal Finnegan, IRCHSS Scholar at NUIM) we have found that the 4 percent estimated by the HEA report as not progressing in the November to March period is broadly accurate, if on the low side. But if we start counting from September we find

that an additional 5 percent leave in the September to November period. Some few move to other colleges, and though difficult to track they are not a good reason for ignoring the 4 or 5 or even 10 percent who are already on the exit route by March. This sets a significant challenge for higher education as the numbers leaving persist in spite of imaginative and useful interventions by the system.

The HEA report is correct also when it compares our Irish retention, progression and completions as comparable with those in other countries. I will return in a moment to the experience of interviewing these former students and the knowledge gleaned from this.

So if a small but significant percentage leave before the following March of their first year I want to suggest two things:

1. We need to find out how many (using the Student Records System) and why they leave;
2. We need to put in place a safety net for this group of mostly young people.

Mathematics and success: Post hoc ergo propter hoc

The HEA report is very careful to map the useful connections between Leaving Certificate points, mathematics and English grades on the one hand and success in higher education on the other. However, as those who make a study of these matters we must be even more careful here. In spite of multivariate analysis conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) on the HEA data the view is equally convincing from other studies that the Leaving Certificate results when linked with success in higher education may be an example of the logical fallacy well known to Classical scholars as *post hoc ergo propter hoc* – just because something goes before another it may not be the cause.

We do know that grades in mathematics are likely to be indicators of social background (socio-economic & social class) and even of school the student attended. There is a topical temptation to favour allocating extra points for mathematics or supporting better mathematics teaching in schools, neither of which I want to criticise except to say that allocating places or predicting success on the basis of points and mathematics may be a shortcut to saying that those who are advantaged will maintain their advantage in higher education. We know this for many years already. There are two ways of stating the implications of this, one is a gentle way and the other more radical. Let me say it both ways and you can choose which you want to hear. We can either say that educational and social disadvantage are reproduced and maintained through higher education [but we know this since Bowles and Gintis (1976)]. Or we can more radically assert that there is a connection between the schools where over 60 percent of students do higher level mathematics (of these 78 per cent are fee-paying) and success at college (Lynch, 2010). The well-off do better in college. We also know from many years of policy, practice and research that interventions and encouragements of this kind are generally availed of by the middle-classes in a way that is out of proportion to their numbers in society. Disadvantage is also maintained though higher education (Fleming, 2002)

Suggestion: Addressing retention and progression through the Leaving Certificate points system must be matched by public policies that address inequalities in the social and educational system. It is not new to stress that access and retention is a task that needs to be addressed by the entire educational system starting in primary (and possibly earlier).

European Research

In an EU research project I have been interviewing non-traditional students in three Irish higher education institutions and in a narrative methodology finding out why they stay or go. We have also been able to interview a sample of students who have not continued.

What are we finding out?

Firstly, students do not drop-out easily. It is a huge and troubling experience that they do not take lightly. A number of factors are crucial in influencing whether or not students progress or not. A coalition of events comes to bear on what is a determined attempt to succeed but students are confronted with vulnerabilities around every corner. Finance, the ability to select a course or programme that is satisfying and engages the students aspirations, goals and interests and other less easily addressed problems such as health, are all factors that are not new to anyone here. One factor is particularly striking and needs to be understood. The system has made many and important improvements over the past decade. I do not want to itemise them but they include changes in grading systems, open days, access courses, modular degrees, semesterisation, other structural changes and a range of Officers from Access and Mature Student to Counsellors and Tutor Support that have different titles in the various colleges. However, the system, in institutionalising many good ideas into programme, makes very little attempt to find out how the student experiences them and how college is experienced by the student. Once I raised this at a Faculty in my own university and was greeted with a (loud) chorus that there is widespread use of 'student feedback'. Student feedback is important and also a system mechanism, usually a questionnaire, that asks questions closed or open or a Likert scale. This is however a limited form of student involvement. We need to listen in quite a different way to what students have to say and how they experience the learning environment of HE. This involves collecting not just their feedback questionnaires but their stories of struggle for success, retention, progression and sometimes non-completion. Do we really know how and why they walk away from what was a dream, an expectation that this would be a wonderful moment of recognition by the education system which they hold in high esteem?

What do students say?

A great deal. But let me select one item that is right at the top of their concerns and that has very little to do with mathematics, computers, the library or the lecturer. As young people in the transition to adulthood we have in our higher education system tens of thousands of emerging adults preoccupied with many of the tasks that society is happy for them to be engaged with – what will I study? How will I emerge from this as a teacher, lawyer, etc? But the central and personal concern is this: Who is my friend? Who am I now in this environment? And who is going to be my ally in the new learning and developmental trajectory? If the student finds it difficult to negotiate a satisfactory answer to these questions, it may become a dominating preoccupation. I suggest that if we ignore the centrality of this concern we will miss what is central to

young people's concerns and what is key to their success and progression. A university system is not accustomed to addressing these developmental issues and they are easily 'sublet' to Student's Unions and other more social places. An enhanced and progressive policy and practice of creating, supporting and sustaining communities of learners will be a key intervention, I believe it will enhance retention.

In addition to this, when I talked to non-traditional students whether young or mature those who came through the access programmes were eloquent, insightful and benefited hugely from the firm collaborations, friendships and networks of support they were encouraged to form as part of their struggle for retention in college and universities.

I am suggesting that each college could address this issues by restructuring either the first year or first semester so that those students who may feel less sure of the subject they have chosen and/or wish to move into the transitional space (West, 1996) of higher education more slowly and pay greater attention to their developmental needs might be given an option to undertake a more general modular semester along the lines of a 'taster menu'. This would emphasise a range of liberal arts and sciences with the experiences of collaborative and cooperative learning activities as central to the provision.

If the system world has had some notable success in encouraging non-traditional, adult and other students to come to HE who now enjoy the benefits, this supply side of access and retention needs to pay attention not only to the demand side (student experiences) but also to those who inhabit and work in the 'fault lines between the system and the student world.' Lecturing staff have done heroic work (this is not a research finding, rather a statement of recognition) with few additional resources to deal with a fast changing student cohort. But at least one more change is required. Though we might assume that all are qualified in their subject of choice, being excellent medial practitioners, nurses, economists, etc. there is one area in which few are qualified and that involves the process educators call pedagogy – the art and science of teaching and learning. Though fewer staff are arrogant and careless today, stories and narratives of those who do not complete occasionally focus on the very rare careless or inconsiderate lecturer. The impact of careless words and deeds is always out of proportion to their intention. Few in HE are qualified teachers and this needs to change by giving not only new teachers but all staff opportunities to learn about the activity that is better known as pedagogy. Better teaching is good for retention.

One finding that is emerging from the interviews with students who leave early and is in addition to the many complex factors that impact on their plans is that of mental health. It is a finding of our research in Irish higher education that we do need to pay attention to the numbers of students who do not complete and who identify mental health issues as part of the equation. Other disabilities have been resourced with supporting structures and staff but this is I believe a new finding and needs to be addressed. So that at graduation when the academic leaders (still speaking in Latin) claim that they present these student 'in their knowledge and in their care', that they will know that this includes paying attention to more vulnerable students who find little of support in higher education for their distress.

In a world that values and prioritises the market and the economy as giving meaning to almost everything it would not be a surprise if interviewing students led to discussions about finance, careers and the economic benefits of higher education. Let me get beyond this obvious agenda by saying that funding is a major (though not the top) priority for most students; BTEA and other grants are necessary and key supports to the extent that without them most students would not make it at all. In addition, having surveyed all the mature students who graduated from Maynooth and interviewed a sample from Maynooth, TCD and DIT it is clear that a better job is not the most obvious benefit of higher education. A highly paid deeply satisfying job with major advances through the socio-economic ladder is not the reality. The family is the major beneficiary and adults in particular tell of having more time for their families, less stress on children and the social and cultural capital dividend that students are well aware of as they graduate. Having done this research (Fleming, Loxley, Kenny & Finnegan, 2010) the Irish family (at least for those who are successful at university) is a fully functioning and supportinve unit. It supports successful students both emotionally and financially. For those less fortunate in terms of family support they achieve their success in spite of their families. If career or job prospects are now diminished in the current economic climate, the family remains the main source of support and the beneficiary.

In conclusion, the tasks set by earlier reports on retention have precipitated a wide range of system responses over the past decade. Many have been well received by students and have been successful in fostering a better learning environment. There is a great deal left to do.

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