

# Why Positive Access Policies in Higher Education can Contribute to Active Citizenship

MICHAEL LANIGAN

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## **Introduction**

This article deals with the role of Irish Higher Education (HE) in the context of the promotion of citizenship. It examines the circumstances in which Irish Higher Education currently operates in terms of access and participation with particular reference to the recent OECD Report (2004), *Review of Higher Education in Ireland*. The article will also highlight the efforts of the Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) to promote access to Higher Education and the benefits which accrue to mature students from engaging with such a process in terms of their self-confidence, consciousness-raising and sense of citizenship.

## **Citizenship and Higher Education**

The year 2005 has been designated the European Year of Citizenship through Education. The Government White Paper on Adult Education (2000), *Learning For Life*, refers to citizenship as follows:

Citizenship refers to the role of adult education in enabling individual members of the society to grow in self-confidence, social awareness and social responsibility and to take an active role in shaping the overall direction of the society – culturally, socially and economically and environmentally and to engage proactively in community and societal decision-making (p. 29).

On looking more closely at this reference one notices that this definition of citizenship hinges upon one precept, namely, that individual self-confidence can be brought about through the adult education process. One would imagine, therefore, that anything society could do to promote or instil such a sense of

self-confidence in the individual would be one of its key priorities. Adult education has, according to the State, an integral part to play in promoting citizenship.

In the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* (2000), the Government undertook to increase mature student participation in Higher Education to 15% of total student intake by the year 2005 and to maintain this level of intake in each subsequent year. However, this target has not been reached. It is against this background that adult education in the Higher Education sector operates. Recent changes in Government policy in the area of access to Higher Education for mature students since 2000 have severely impacted on potential mature student access. I would suggest that the current circumstances have made it more difficult for mature students to gain access to higher education. The WIT experience would suggest that the lack of finance is one of the main reasons for adult learners failing to access and dropping out of Higher Education. In addition, Social Welfare initiatives designed to encourage participation, such as the Back To Education Initiative (BTEI) (formerly the Back To Education Allowance), and the Third Level Allowance (TLA) have been tinkered with to such an extent that potential students are finding it even more difficult to go to college. This situation is further exacerbated by the continuing difficulties in relation to childcare. One wonders how these practical realities for mature students can be reconciled with the aspirations and targets set out in the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness*.

According to the OECD *Education at a Glance: Policy Report*, (1997), one of the reasons why Ireland has amongst the lowest mature student participation rates in the industrialised world is due to our traditional systems of access to Higher Education. The Irish system is sequential and offers limited alternative access for adults. The report shows that in 1995 Ireland had just 2% mature student participation compared to 19% in all other OECD countries. Having been a mature student myself, I understand only too well the difficulties faced by adults returning to education and embarking on a college course. I was fortunate enough to be eligible for the financial supports available and I am one of a group of staff in WIT attempting to address the needs of mature students in our Institute. Over the last four years I have been closely involved with the WIT Certificate in Foundation Studies, a one-year course designed to help adult learners assess their own suitability for entry into Higher Education.

### **WIT Foundation Course**

The Foundation Course, as it is commonly known, began as a result of work carried out with a number of community groups in the nearby working class city council housing estates in Ballybeg. Although the setting and venue have changed, the aim of the programme is to equip adult learners for life in higher education and to promote their personal development through a process of self-discovery and empowerment. The course is offered on both a full-time and part-time basis with the adult learner choosing from a number of elective subjects from a Science/Technology, Business/Humanities or Art/Design stream. These electives are designed to introduce learners to the rigours of their chosen discipline and to impress upon them the standards required of graduates within industry.

The students are given credit for prior experiential learning and the student support services available include guidance support, counselling and pastoral care, mentoring through a 'study buddy' system which includes previous graduates and ongoing assistance from the Foundation Course Leader while undertaking the first year of their undergraduate programme in WIT. The adult learners are integrated into all aspects of college life and encouraged to become involved with other student groups in the college. Each year the adult learners also organise a number of social events. The organisation of these events helps to develop the self-confidence of the students giving them a sense of accomplishment. This ultimately contributes to their development as active citizens in the wider community.

### **Current Difficulties**

While the *Report of the Commission on the Points System*, (1999), states that "The State has a responsibility to provide third-level places for adults who did not have access to third-level when they left school", the subsequent *Skilbeck Report* (2001) reinforced this thinking by suggesting that one issue is the provision of third level places for mature students while the other is the issue of how to finance mature student participation in higher education, particularly students from disadvantaged backgrounds. By its own admission, the State is failing to address the issue of increasing the level of participation of mature students in higher education in Ireland. Remarkably, it is in relation to support services for disadvantaged students that one observes a notable contradiction in Government policy. It relates specifically to the Student Assistance Fund (formerly the Hardship Fund) which is available for students in WIT.

WIT is very fortunate to have a Centre for Helping Access Retention and Teaching (CHART). CHART is a student support unit whose resources are used to assist full-time students in WIT. Under the Department of Education and Science Student Assistance Fund, CHART provides financial support for students, like consultations with educational psychologists, dyslexia diagnosis and treatment and any emergency financial assistance which students may need during their time at the Institute. Traditionally, the beneficiaries of the fund have been those students who are disadvantaged, amongst them, mature students.

In 2002 the Student Assistance Fund was reviewed by the Department of Education and Science and now only students pursuing undergraduate qualifications are eligible for funding support. Students pursuing Foundation Courses are no longer eligible for support. It is ironic that an initiative designed to assist those experiencing disadvantage should exclude mature students who have been identified in successive reports as a particularly marginalised group in higher education. While Local Area Partnerships have been assisting a small number of mature students through the Millennium Fund, no other grants are available to them. Since WIT does not charge a fee for the Foundation Course, funding for the course comes from the capitation fees paid for full-time students in the college. Without specific financial support for this initiative it is difficult to see how it can continue to provide the much needed support required by mature students returning to higher education.

### **Wider Issues**

The 2004, OECD *Review of Higher Education in Ireland* indicated that the Institutes of Technology and WIT in particular should return to their original vocational focus, catering for the needs of those requiring technician level qualifications, while the Universities should pursue research and provide higher level qualifications. In addition, the report also recommended greater autonomy for the sector with less involvement from the Department of Education and Science in the day to day running of the Institutes of Technology and in particular in relation to the design and roll-out of new courses. If implemented these recommendations have the potential to change the way in which adults are supported on their return to higher education in WIT.

There is within the college the willingness and the expertise to provide access to modularised programmes through flexible delivery methods which could

include online and distance learning provision as well as increased outreach work through the setting up of off-campus centres. One such initiative is the Trinity Access Programme (TAP) run by Trinity College, Dublin and the City of Dublin VEC. Closer ties between the Universities, Institutes of Technology and local education providers like VECs must be developed to support greater participation by mature students in Higher Education. Currently the WIT is attempting to deal with the prevailing educational climate by developing a new model for the Foundation Course which will lead to an accredited undergraduate qualification. It will be of three years duration and will lead to a higher certificate. The first year will incorporate the current foundation year and participants will have the option to progress on or leave at the end of that year. Those who choose to leave will be awarded a foundation certificate from WIT while those who progress on will attain a higher certificate in their chosen discipline. By structuring the course as an undergraduate level programme students will become eligible for financial supports under the Student Assistance Fund. The current moves towards modularisation and semesterisation will create a more flexible learning environment and should suit the needs of mature students.

### **Conclusion**

While at a broader level government policy sees adult education as a means through which active citizenship can be promoted, its lack of support policies makes this difficult to achieve. I would suggest that national policy in relation to this needs to be revised so that access for mature students to higher education can be made easier. The access model developed in WIT is an example of an initiative which should be supported and yet its continuation each year is very precarious. The benefits to adults returning to learning must not only be measured by increased participation rates but by the sense of fulfilment, accomplishment and empowerment which such an educational encounter can bring with it. This kind of positive engagement helps individuals to step beyond what they perceive as their own limitations giving them the self-confidence to contribute actively to society.

*Michael Lanigan is the Course Co-ordinator of the Certificate in Foundation Studies at Waterford Institute of Technology.*

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