
‘You Can Only Get a Degree!’ Theoretically Situating the Alterations to the Back to Education Allowance Welfare to Education Programme of 2003/04

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ABSTRACT This article critically examines the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) as a mechanism of social inclusion for Irish welfare recipients through participation in third-level education. The article is based on empirical data from focus group and in-depth qualitative interviews with third-level students on the BTEA, and key informants. The article adopts a strong ‘structural’ position, situating the source of social exclusion in the structured inequality of the labour market and the state, which disadvantages particular groups in society. In an era of unprecedented growth in Ireland, the first signs of a fiscal crisis saw cuts made to welfare programmes in 2003/2004. The article examines the resultant changes made to the BTEA, utilising Mutch’s adaptation of Bourdieu’s field theory to form a theoretical understanding of how and why these restrictive changes to the BTEA occurred.

Introduction

The provision of education, and of third-level education in particular, is a key means of addressing social exclusion. The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) is the flagship welfare to education programme of the Irish Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA), and more than 4000 welfare recipients have availed of the third-level option of the BTEA every year since 1998/1999. This article critically examines the alterations that were made to the BTEA scheme in 2003/2004. Three restrictive changes were introduced, two of which remain in place to date. The article will use Mutch’s (2006) adaptation of Bourdieu’s field theory to form a theoretical understanding of how and why these restrictive changes to the BTEA occurred. It will argue that a discourse of ‘undeserving’ welfare recipients has been used to justify minimalist social welfare provision (Lens, 2002, p. 143) and a short-term approach to the provision of the BTEA on the grounds that expansive schemes cannot be allowed as there are too many people who will fraudulently avail themselves of them. The article adds to the existing international body of knowledge on welfare to education programmes and, more importantly, it adds to the limited body of Irish literature in this area (Healy, 1997; McCashin, 2004; Power, 2008).

Methods

This research is concerned not only with the experiences of the participants, but also with the subjective meanings that these experiences have for them (see Flick, 2006, p. 16). I would argue that qualitative research also complements my philosophical perspective, as I believe that even though the organisation of society curbs the agency of individuals, they experience such limitations in diverse ways. In the context of my research I would argue that qualitative research offered the

best opportunity to discover how individuals with an apparently similar set of circumstances experience educational inequality differently.

Most qualitative research is guided by purposive sampling (Lindloff, 1995) with the sample chosen to provide conceptual richness. My sample consisted of individuals who were theoretically meaningful and information rich, and reflected important aspects of my research question. Additionally, as my sample represented conflicting positions (those in receipt of the BTEA, those charged with advancing the BTEA, government ministers and opposition politicians), it meant that I could produce true-to-life explanations. As a result of this sampling strategy, a total of 25 individuals (20 BTEA participants and 5 key individuals) [1] participated in this research. Eighteen individuals participated in the focus groups, and a further fifteen individual interviews were completed. The focus of the research was to explore the experiences of the BTEA interviewees in relation to their participation on the scheme. It sought their views on any positive and/or negative impacts the scheme had for them and on what could be done to improve levels of participation. I enquired about the value, implementation and administration of the BTEA scheme from my key informants.

The data collection generated a massive amount of data, consisting of audio-taped interviews, which were transcribed. Therefore my analysis was based on data reduction and interpretation of those data. I used grounded theory as my chosen method of qualitative data analysis. Grounded theory provided a procedure for developing categories (open coding), interlocking these categories (axial coding), building a story that joins the categories (selective coding) and ending with a set of discursive theoretical proposals (Creswell 1998, p. 150; Flick 2006, pp. 296-303). A number of macro- and micro-level findings were identified, but for the purpose of this article I concentrate on evaluating the changes made to the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) scheme in 2003/2004.

Many qualitative researchers have focused on the potential for 'theoretical generalization' (Hillebrand et al, 2001, p. 653). Theoretical generalisation is achieved by generating and developing a framework to analyse comparable cases or through devising logical arguments in support of causal relationships, which may also hold explanatory power for similar cases (Hillebrand et al, 2001, pp. 651-654). The generalisability of the research is thus derived from framing the research findings in terms of theoretical concepts and relationships which, through their abstract form, provide for application to other settings (Greene Rodriguez, 1999; see also Hillebrand et al, 2001, p. 654). The 'comparative approach' (Hammersley, 1992, cited in Silverman, 2005, p. 128) saw me compare my data and emergent concepts to other studies which share my theoretical direction. Additionally I endeavoured to attain information concerning pertinent aspects of similar cases and compare my case to them (Silverman, 2005, pp. 128-132). The comparative approach consequently allows me to make stronger claims about my analysis and 'directly tackles the question of generalisability by demonstrating the similarities and differences across a number of settings' (Perekyla, 2004, p. 296, cited in Silverman, 2005, p. 129).

Theoretical Framework

There are many good reasons for utilising a stated theoretical framework, particularly when it comes to focusing your research. By acting as a 'lens' (Harris, 2006), the framework aids the researcher in sifting through the large amounts of data they will have collected. Indeed, it frames all aspects of the study from start to finish and provides important concepts that are used in the coding and analysis of the data generated (Mertz & Anfara, 2006, pp. 192-193).

I used a combination of theoretical frameworks, each of which explained pieces of my jigsaw, with the combined pieces providing a more complete picture. Gradually, as my work with the participants and my reading developed, several theoretical viewpoints drawn from conflict theory came to inform and progress the increasing complexity of my work. As I had come to the research from a social justice standpoint, conflict theory offered me a plausible explanation of why inequalities exist in access to education in general (see Lynch & O'Riordan, 1996; Lynch, 1999; Milbourne, 2002) and for welfare recipients in particular. I made use of Mutch's (2006) adaptation of Bourdieu's field theory to theorise changes made to the BTEA in 2003/2004, and decisions taken about the future of the scheme by a working group reviewing the BTEA in 2005. Mutch identified that in coming to decisions about policy, a 'field' is created where a 'game is played' to arrive at

decisions which are then implemented. There are additional external forces at work on the field, which are historical, political, economic and social. Additionally, the 'players' involved in the 'game' 'use capital to gain access to and position themselves on the field' where the 'major groups vied for control' (Mutch, 2006, p. 156). This framework and the concept of capital allow us to understand the following:

Who was granted entry to the field and why? Which ideological positions were favoured and why? Who was excluded and why? What particular capital did members bring and how was this valued? What forces from outside this micro field influenced what happened within.
(Mutch, 2006, p. 157)

Accordingly, I felt that this element of my framework was particularly useful in developing an understanding of changes to the BTEA, and its likely future development. The various 'players' (in this instance, the DSFA and the Department of Education, both of whom are constrained by the budgets that they receive from the Department of Finance) essentially battle it out on the 'field' in order to arrive at policy decisions concerning the BTEA.

Social Exclusion

There is a consensus that social exclusion involves a much wider range of problems than concepts of poverty and deprivation based only on material deficit; it involves a broad set of interrelated issues over time (Walker & Park, 1998; CASE, 1999). Madanipour et al (1988, p. 22, cited in Byrne, 1999, p. 2) state that social exclusion is a 'multi-dimensional process, in which various forms of exclusion are combined: participation in decision making and political processes, access to employment and material resources, and integration into common cultural processes'. Similarly, the Irish Partnership 2000 Agreement (Department of the Taoiseach, 1996) defined social exclusion in terms of 'cumulative marginalisation: from production (employment), from consumption (income poverty), from social networks (community, family and neighbours), from decision-making and from an adequate quality of life'. Thus, social inclusion is essentially dependent on access to decision-making and resources (Madanipour, 2003, p. 80).

In this regard, Morris (1994, p. 80) identifies two general theoretical or ideological positions with respect to the socially excluded (who have been constructed by governments and dominant discourse as an 'underclass'). The cultural ('weak') position sees the source of social exclusion as lying in the attitudes and behaviour of the underclass itself, while the structural ('strong') position sees the source of social exclusion as lying in the structured inequality of the labour market and the state, which disadvantages particular groups in society. For those who accept the 'weak' version of this discourse, the way to bring about social inclusion is by 'fixing' the individual failings with which the excluded are afflicted. Proponents of the 'stronger' form of the discourse stress the role of elites who allow this exclusion to take place and seek solutions which address the structural aspect of exclusion (Veit-Wilson, 1998, p. 45). I would argue that 'weak' discourses are concerned with blaming the excluded for the situation they find themselves in, and conveniently ignore the structural causes of exclusion, which predominate in the current neoliberal era. 'One hears about "the marginalized" and the "socially excluded", but there is little discussion on who is excluding or marginalizing them' (Allen, 2000, p. 37).

This article adopts Morris's structural explanation for social exclusion and accordingly the monopoly paradigm, which sees exclusion as the outcome of the formation of group monopolies (see De Haan, 1999, p. 4). Exclusion is thus thought to arise from group monopolies and the relationship between class, status and political power, and is held to serve the interests of the included (Silver, 1994, p. 543). Consequently this understanding of exclusion focuses on influential elite groups restricting the access of 'other' groups to valuable resources such as education through social closure (De Haan, 1999, pp. 4-5; Edgar et al, 1999, p. 19). In this context, I would argue that the restriction of access to education for welfare recipients is a mechanism of social exclusion.

Policy Context and the Development of the Back to Education Allowance

Education is now seen primarily in terms of its relationship with the economy, which has ultimately resulted in the commodification of education (Mulderigg, 2003). The education system

selects individuals for different types of occupation through exams and qualifications, thus controlling levels of social mobility (Drudy & Lynch, 1993, p. 26). By extension it can be argued that any institution which can control social mobility rates affects social exclusion/inclusion. It is accepted that addressing educational disadvantage requires intervention at pre-school level right through to third level. However, in today's society third-level qualifications have implicit importance to the labour market. The situation in Ireland at present (as elsewhere) is that third-level education has largely replaced secondary education as the focal point of access, selection and entry to rewarding careers for the majority of young people (OECD, 1999a, p. 20, cited in Clancy, 2001, p. 16; see also DSFA, 2008). Thus, with the increasing requirements of the labour market to have third-level qualifications, it becomes ever more apparent that access to third-level education is indeed a mechanism by which people can combat social exclusion.

Tackling social exclusion through education, achieving equity of educational opportunity, and encouraging access to and successful participation in higher education have all been national policy priorities in Ireland since the mid-1990s (Higher Education Authority, 2004, p. 9; Action Group on Access, 2001). However, there are still major differences between socio-economic groups in terms of the type of college students attend (O'Connell et al, 2006, p. 50; Clancy, 2001, p. 158). Additionally, students from lower socio-economic groups continue to be significantly under-represented in third-level institutions (O'Connell et al, 2006, pp. 47-51; Clancy, 2001, pp. 158-159). While it is very encouraging to see major advancements in the numbers from lower socio-economic groups accessing higher education in absolute terms during the past number of years, in my opinion the relative participation rates must be of paramount interest. A primary reason for this belief is that we must be aware that there is competition to achieve the most highly valued credentials (Clancy, 2001, p. 174) in order to succeed in an increasingly competitive labour market.

In 1970, UNESCO helped popularise an apparently broader understanding of education; 'lifelong learning' presented education as an integral part of people's life experiences pervading all stages and areas of their lives (Department of Education and Science, 1998, p. 7; Grummell, 2007, p. 185). Irish government policy documents [2] in this area are built upon the concept of 'second chance'. The state argues that it provides for the possibility of lifelong learning for those who are welfare recipients via wider access to 'second chance' educational opportunities, supported by financial assistance and incentives for those at greatest risk of 'alienation' from society (Muldergig, 2003). Yet internationally we have seen a progressive march towards a situation where the current political climate seems hostile to efforts to further increase access to education for welfare recipients (Polakow et al, 2004). This mindset, when combined with that fact that during the past decade Europe has tended to move politically to the right, has meant that welfare is increasingly regarded as 'an expensive luxury and one upon which taxpayers' money can only be spent sparingly' (Jarvis, 1992, p. 407). As such, post-welfare reforms assume that the road to self-sufficiency begins with employment. However, the preoccupation with welfare to work programmes has merely seen working poverty replace welfare (CSO, 2005, cited in Murphy, 2007, p. 119; National Economic and Social Forum [NESF], 2005, p. 2). Thus, I would argue that there is a need for a policy which facilitates education, so that welfare recipients can obtain jobs of a sufficient standard that allows them to move away from welfare on a more permanent basis. The BTEA is a programme which can achieve such an outcome.

The forerunner to the BTEA, the Third Level Allowance (TLA), was introduced as a non-statutory scheme on a pilot basis in 1990. The primary objective was the removal of the barrier to participation in third-level education faced by the long-term unemployed. In the 1990/91 academic year, only 67 applications were approved. Between 1993 and 1995, several changes [3] were introduced which increased the number of people who could qualify for the scheme, and it was extended to include people aged at least 24 wanting to pursue a postgraduate qualification. By 1996, the DSFA moved to a more proactive position and changes were made to encourage unemployed people to try to gain educational credentials (Healy, 1997). The introduction of these measures [4] resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of participants on the scheme between 1995 and 1997 (see Table I).

In 1998 the BTEA scheme came into existence, and between 1998 and 2002 it underwent a series of changes [5] which widened the groups who were eligible to apply for the scheme. The measures introduced up to this point had extended opportunities to a broader base of social welfare

recipients in order that they could obtain qualifications necessary to participate in the modern labour market. However, in 2003 the summer payment to BTEA participants previously on an unemployment payment was discontinued. Furthermore it was decided that the postgraduate option was now to be restricted only to those who wished to pursue a Higher Diploma (H.Dip.) or Graduate Diploma in Primary School Teaching. In the Irish Parliament on 2 December 2003 Minister Coughlan said, 'It is estimated, based on the numbers who actually came forward for the scheme in the 2002-03 academic year, that up to 1,200 people who might otherwise have qualified for the scheme in 2004 will not now qualify' (Coughlan, 2003).

	Third-level option		Third-level option
1990/1991	67	1991/1992	184
1992/1993	363	1993/1994	914
1994/1995	1228	1995/1996	2228
1996/1997	3150	1997/1998	3852
1998/1999	4503	1999/2000	4765
2000/2001	4853	2001/2002	4431
2002/2003	4968	2003/2004	5458
2004/2005	4285	2005/2006	4310
2006/2007	4731	2007/2008	4641

Table I. Level of participation in the TLA/BTEA since 1990.
Source: DSFA, 2008.

Finally, 2004 saw the qualifying period for the third-level option of the BTEA being extended to 15 months. After these changes were in place, a review group was set up to examine the efficiency and effectiveness of the scheme. It was very interesting to note that, following the review process, the government performed a U-turn of sorts in 2005 in relation to the qualifying period for the third-level option of the BTEA, and from September of that year it was once more reduced to twelve months (or nine months if you were assessed and approved by FÁS – Ireland’s National Training and Employment Authority –under the National Employment Action Plan).

Findings and Discussion

Lifelong Learning:

All of my key informants identified a vital need for third-level education, given the direction our economy is taking. The senior civil servant from the DSFA highlighted the fact that ‘the impact of globalisation is probably going to be a key factor ... Given the way that the labour market in Ireland has gone and is continuing to go I think that over time third level will be the minimum requirement.’

Similarly, my participant from the Labour party believed that ‘the bar for a lot of jobs now is effectively a third-level qualification’. The Fine Gael party participant highlighted the link between economic globalisation and the movement of employment from one jurisdiction to another. He believes that as a consequence of a globalised labour market, Irish citizens who do not have third-level qualifications will struggle in the future to access sufficient and sustainable employment. With the identification of the increasing importance of third-level education, all of my key informants perceived a need for second chance lifelong learning. However, an important caveat to the government minister’s understanding of lifelong learning was that, unlike third-level courses eligible for BTEA support, it would not necessarily involve ‘leaving employment full time but maybe taking night courses or whatever to up-skill as the world becomes more complex’.

The role of the state in this process of lifelong learning came under scrutiny in my discussions with the BTEA participants. They perceived that the state should recognise that in the current economic context, lifelong learning is vital for those in receipt of welfare payments. Peter made an

interesting argument that the process of lifelong learning is in fact 'class-based'. He argued that lifelong learning (as it currently stands) is oriented to people already within the labour market who have specific jobs which require them to upgrade their skills (effectively mirroring the views of the government minister participant), and that it is not for those who could be termed 'worse off'.

The Undeserving Welfare Recipient

Three of my key informants spoke directly or indirectly about welfare recipients being branded as undeserving poor. The Labour party participant made reference to the dual manner in which those who avail themselves of welfare schemes are constructed as undeserving and to the inaccuracies of such wide generalisations. She spoke of how

word seemed to have somehow got around that a lot of these schemes were either feather bedding people or were the subject of abuse ... I don't think that that was so and I have never seen any evidence or research to suggest that was so. But clearly in the debates in the Dáil [6] that was the underlying message that was coming across.

Two of my BTEA participants also spoke of their experiences in this regard, which reflects an underlying assumption that all welfare recipients are potentially 'ripping off the system' and are thus undeserving:

I had contact with a former government Minister a couple of years ago and he asked me what I was doing. I said I am on the BTEA in UL and his attitude basically was oh yeah you are sponging off the state. (Frank)

Even my mother-in-law the other day said these single parents sure they are getting everything, getting houses thrown at them and all. I just looked at her and thought where did this come out of? I have been a single parent for 12 years and she knew I was struggling. (Gus)

These views are very significant. Neoliberal policies favouring the 'restructuring' of the welfare state have been aided by a 'moral panic' discourse in the media (Golding & Middleton, 1982; Roche, 1992; Clarke & Newman, 1997). Golding & Middleton (1982) show that in disseminating moral panic about welfare, the media were successful in constructing an understanding of certain sections of the poor as 'undeserving', which allowed/justified greater reduction of the welfare state (Golding & Middleton, 1982; Devereux, 1998, p. 4; Healy, 2004, p. 22; OPEN, 2006, p. 3). In this context I would argue that the promotion and indeed acceptance of this ideology has stigmatised welfare recipients (Hardey & Crow, 1991, p. 4) and serves to justify minimalist social welfare provision (Lens, 2002, p. 143) on the grounds that expansive schemes cannot be allowed as there are too many people that will fraudulently avail themselves of them.

The Impact of the Changes Made to the BTEA in 2003/04

From 2003 the BTEA was no longer payable over the summer months to those who had previously been on an unemployment payment. As a caveat to this particular change, it was decided to have a safety net in place so that those BTEA students who could not obtain employment during the summer could apply for unemployment welfare payments.[7] However, that safety net failed to catch a considerable proportion of my sample. Only one of my key informants [8] did not hold that this alteration was unnecessary and was having a negative effect on those already participating on the scheme as well as on potential applicants. Both the Fine Gael party participant and the government minister believed this policy decision was a big disincentive for BTEA participants and potential applicants. The minister stated: 'It's a big hassle to have to go back in to social welfare officials and persuade them that you are available and looking for work and sign on again ... it's a big ordeal and it's a huge disincentive.' Several of my participants spoke of the difficulties that they experienced in relation to this change. In particular, attention was drawn to the psychological impact created by the pressure to get a job when they should have been concentrating on exams:

You're doing your exams in May so your focus should be on those. Your focus shouldn't be on 'shit I am going to have to get a job'. My BTEA is going to run out and I might have to

sign on and I might be without money for a couple of weeks. Then I am going to have to sign back off, so your mind is turned up. You should be very focused on your education, which is why you came back in the first place. It beggars belief to be quite honest. (Mary)

Additionally, my participants held that there were problems in accessing employment for the summer months, which had not been given consideration when the state had arrived at this decision. Furthermore, a change in circumstances while attending college resulted in some participants no longer being entitled to a welfare payment during the summer months even if they could not source employment. Fiona no longer qualified for a payment during the summer break either and she experienced 'huge problems trying to get back on' the BTEA in September. Likewise, John experienced a two-week delay in receiving a payment when he signed on in the summer and a further two-week delay when he returned to the BTEA in September. Mary's experience was the most severe. She experienced a two-week delay in the summer but received no payment for seven weeks when she returned to the BTEA in September. These experiences contrast with the civil servant's statement that 'there would be no hardships as a result of no longer paying the BTEA over the summer'.

Additionally, many of my sample had previously used the summer period to read ahead on modules they would be taking in the autumn semester. These participants held that being able to read and study during the summer period was crucial to their ultimate outcome. However, this particular change to the BTEA now impacts upon their ability to do that.

A second change saw the postgraduate option of BTEA restricted to only those wanting to pursue a higher diploma in education or a graduate diploma in education. Minister Coughlan reasoned in her Dáil defence of this change [9] that 'few members of this House have postgraduate qualifications and they have done quite well'. I would argue that the restriction of the postgraduate option of the BTEA reflects the neoliberal ideology of personal responsibility where individuals are responsible for and invest in their own economic welfare through continuous education, meaning that the state no longer bears that responsibility. The situation where on the one hand the state is promoting the idea of lifelong learning, yet on the other it is denying the chance for welfare recipients to further their education to postgraduate level is identical to the situation in the USA (see Adair, 2001, p. 225), where neoliberal ideology has resulted in education being seen as being vital to the future of the state and the individual, but the message is that it is not to be made available to those who are most in need of that assistance (*I.E.* welfare recipients).

The dominant belief among almost all of my participants was that an undergraduate degree has become devalued. It was now seen by some as effectively the 'new leaving certificate', resulting in an increased need to undertake postgraduate study:

Have you heard the notion that the degree is the new leaving cert? I think that they raise the barrier every ten years. Fifteen years ago the leaving cert was all that you needed, now it's a degree, next it will be post-grad, then it will be the fourth level. (Denis)

The restrictions imposed on the postgraduate option of the scheme cause difficulties for BTEA students, as there is an important dichotomy between the personal responsibility to educate yourself and the cost of education. In essence, my participants hold that they are trying to react to the market as the state requires under neoliberalism, by gaining essential educational qualifications, but they are not being facilitated in achieving this because of the ideology of personal responsibility. One informant thus explained the inconsistency in, and difficulty with, this 'New Right' ideology:

The government want people to get educated but they don't want to use **our** money to educate us. They want you to use your own money to educate yourself and where are you going to get that money if you are a working class person? (Peter)

Consequently, my participants perceived that postgraduate qualifications are becoming the property of the middle classes and the onset of degree inflation will 'once again leave the best-paid jobs to people whose families can fund them' (Carmel).

It appears that because we come from a social welfare background we are only entitled to so much of a job, a certain type of job, we are not entitled to go on and become a professor or

whatever. ‘You will only get your degree? Sure you are on social welfare, you should be glad of that!!’ (Diane)

The BTEA participants perceive that those in positions of power in relation to the design of the BTEA have made decisions which are protecting the interests of those sections of society. Frank thus argued that the BTEA will be ‘tinkered with to make it look like it’s being made available to more people when in actual fact the numbers who participate in it may increase slightly but are more likely to stay the same’.

My BTEA participants strongly and very vocally argued that these policies are essentially paying the subject matter lip service, which ensures that those in positions of power can protect their privileges while at the same time be seen to be addressing these inequalities. Figure 1 shows that the number of BTEA students progressing to master’s courses increased from 2001/02 to 2002/03 before falling considerably in 2003/04. Thus the decision to restrict access to postgraduate courses for BTEA students can only be seen in a negative light.

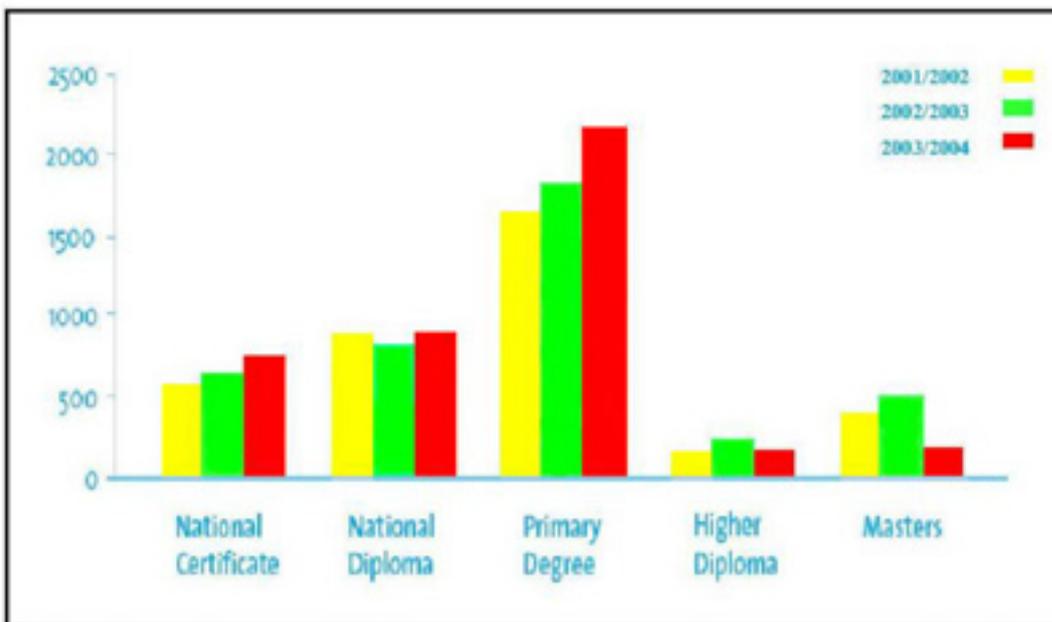


Figure 1. Qualifications pursued through BTEA (third-level option).
Source: DSFA, 2005, p. 38.

From 2004 the qualifying period for the third-level option of the BTEA was extended to fifteen months. I argue that extending the qualifying period was a justifiable policy decision; however, I believe that extending the qualifying period to fifteen months was too severe, and had a detrimental impact on potential applicants. On 2 December the Minister for Social and Family Affairs responded to questions from two members of the Irish Parliament asking for the reasons behind her decision to increase the unemployment period for eligibility to access the BTEA from six months to 15 months, and for estimates of the numbers applying for BTEA who would be affected by the change in qualification criteria (Coughlan, 2003). Minister Coughlan replied: ‘One of the factors that influenced me in taking this approach is the concern that some people are going on the live register for six months or so specifically to qualify for the Back to Education Allowance.’

The civil servant from the DSFA reiterated this argument: ‘Internal research would have indicated to us that you had situations where people may have been actually gravitating to unemployment to qualify for the BTEA support.’

Both of these statements reflect a view of welfare recipients as undeserving. Moreover, they promote the idea of welfare recipients acting fraudulently, which can in turn be absorbed as ‘welfare as fraud’. The Labour party participant identified problems with this approach, stating: ‘I

think Mary Coughlan was of the view in her statements that people were scamming in relation to BTEA. Now perhaps some people were ... but the vast majority of people who take up these schemes are genuine.'

BTEA participants also perceived that welfare recipients would have been hindered in their plans to go to college as a result of this change to the scheme. They held that an individual could have applied and or been accepted, and then the criteria for entitlement to BTEA could change, meaning that an applicant who was eligible when they applied was no longer eligible by the time it came to enrol. I would argue that the change which saw the qualifying period extended from six to fifteen months was too restrictive and served to discourage potential applicants rather than to optimise the chances of those who were most distant from the labour market.

A Short-Term Approach to the BTEA

All of my key informants who spoke about these changes [10] believed them to have been unnecessary and wrong. The Fine Gael Party participant believed that they affected the 'most vulnerable in society'. He stated: 'What really upset me was the mean fisted, it was the amount of money that they were saving and the people that they were targeting...it was actually keeping them out of the whole system and making sure that they never got anywhere and it was wrong.'

The government minister was adamant that he wouldn't have recommended the changes to the government had he been in the Department of Education or the Department of Social & Family Affairs. He further stated: 'I wasn't persuaded of the need for the changes and I remain unpersuaded.' As most of my key informants were against the changes, I sought to use Mutch's adaptation of Bourdieu's field theory to form a theoretical understanding of how and why these restrictive changes to the BTEA occurred. Mutch identified that in developing policy, a field is created where the 'game' to arrive at those decisions is played out. The 'players' involved in the 'game' 'use capital to gain access to and position themselves on the field' (Mutch, 2006, p. 156). There are additional political, social and economic factors at work which influence what happens within the field.

To situate this field in its context, it is important to acknowledge the political, social and economic factors that had an influence on it. In terms of the political factors at work, the field operated at a time when a global neoliberal project had very effectively embarked on a dismantling of the traditional welfare state. Even 'left-wing' politicians who once favoured state enterprise and publicly owned industry have become reluctant collectivists and succumbed to the lure of the mixed economy. The new buzzwords of the economic and political elite (and increasingly the enlarged middle classes) were 'the economy', 'enterprise culture', 'low taxation', 'the market', and 'personal responsibility' to provide for your own welfare. This served to legitimise the construction of welfare recipients as 'undeserving', and many among the general public believed that if an individual was unemployed in 'Celtic Tiger Ireland' then it must be the result of an individual failing (see Breen & Devereux, 2003). Finally, the changes made to the BTEA in 2003/2004 were ultimately implemented in the context of a recommendation in relation to the estimates as put forward by the independent estimates review committee.

In utilising Mutch's theoretical framework, we must first identify the 'players' on the field, which in this particular situation were the Minister for Social and Family Affairs, the Minister for Finance and senior civil servants from their departments. Time restrictions on individual ministers often result in them having little political input into ongoing policy development, with the civil service mainly dealing with such matters (Connolly & O'Halpin, 1999, p. 261). Research has further shown that it is general practice for ministers to consult with senior civil servants on major policy issues (Zimmerman, 1997, pp. 538-540). Such practices mean that the position of senior civil servants allows them the opportunity (if they so wish) to block policy they do not agree with and promote those that they do agree with (Connolly & O'Halpin, 1999, p. 261). Some of my key informants supported the relevance of these findings. The Labour party participant, for example, told me that there was fierce hostility to the cost of the BTEA from both the Minister of Finance and his senior civil servants when they had served in government. This participant further explained that the way the Irish budgetary process works means that 'the Department of Finance object to most expenditure unless the people putting forward the expenditures make a very strong

case'. Additionally, the government minister participant informed me that 'there isn't sufficient long-term thinking and that has traditionally been the case no matter who the Minister for Finance was. Short-termism is still too pronounced as it were in the Department of Finance and this frustrates all spending Ministers.'

This caused me to conclude that it was in fact the senior civil servants from the Department of Finance who brought the most capital, power and influence to the field in this instance. The Fine Gael party participant expressed the view that the BTEA was not a priority for the civil servants in the DSFA and that ultimately Minister Coughlan, who introduced these alterations to the BTEA, was a weak minister who allowed her department to tell her what to do. The Labour party participant concurred with this view and argued that the minister didn't 'appreciate or value the scheme sufficiently'.

My findings led me to theorise that the decision taken to introduce the cuts to the BTEA resulted in all of the players coming out of the interaction having more or less achieved their aims relative to their position on the field. The civil servants from the Department of Finance, being the most important in terms of the capital that they brought to the field, achieved the outcome they required, as the cutbacks would ensure that they could balance the books for that year. The Fine Gael participant supported this hypothesis, holding that 'Finance doesn't care once they balance the books ... That's all they care about. That's their job.' Likewise, the Minister for Finance, being next in line, achieved the outcome he desired, which was the acquiescence of the Minister for Social and Family Affairs, who bowed to his demand for a monetary saving, consequently keeping his department happy. Finally I argue that the outcome for Minister Coughlan, given her position on the field, was not too unfavourable, as while there would be a short-term political backlash, the fact that the cutbacks were imposed on welfare recipients, who were predominantly seen as undeserving, would ensure it would be short-lived. While the Irish political system is characterised by clientalism/brokerage [11] (Gallagher & Komito, 1999, p. 219), I would argue that as welfare recipients are a vulnerable and unpopular group not known for high voter turnout (Abramovitz, 2006, p. 351), welfare provision was seen a legitimate and soft target for reform, as the affected individuals were extremely unlikely (and or unable) to take electoral revenge on those introducing the cuts.

I again applied Mutch's theoretical framework to develop an understanding of the review of the BTEA undertaken by the DSFA between 2003 and 2005. When examining the 'players' on this particular 'field', we find that they comprised thirteen personnel from the DSFA, two each from the Departments of Finance and Education, one from the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment and two from FÁS (DSFA, 2005, p. 12). In examining the context within which this particular field sits, we find that it was similar to that in place when the changes were implemented in 2003/2004. In terms of the capital that the players brought to the field and the position it allowed them on it, the number of civil servants present from the DSFA suggests that they were firmly in control. There was also a reduced role for the Department of Finance, reflecting the improved financial position this field had to work with. However, the fact that individuals from the Department of Finance were on this field at all shows they still held a strategic position in policy decision-making. In terms of who else was allowed access to the field, a consultation process had taken place where various organisations offered their opinions on the future direction of the scheme. Of the eight groups mentioned in the report of the review group (including the National University of Ireland, Galway, University College Cork, and the Teachers' Union of Ireland), none were in favour of the changes made in 2003/2004. Additionally, most stated their desire to have these alterations reversed (DSFA, 2005, pp. 73-76). While there was no direct input into the field for them, given the stature of some of these interest groups, they may have held important (but limited) capital that was taken account of in the decision-making process.

I would again theorise that this field produced policy recommendations which ensured that most of the 'players' achieved positive outcomes relative to their place on the field. In essence, there were three changes (introduced in 2003/2004) that they could have reversed, and they chose the one that would cost the exchequer the least. The increase in qualifying duration would have been the easiest to reverse as there are only so many places that are available in third level each year; increasing eligibility only increases the competition for those places, and thus in theory the numbers on the scheme should remain relatively constant. This means that the costs involved in

removing that restriction were negligible. However, there would be considerably more costs involved in removing either of the other restrictions, as they apply to individuals who have already successfully accessed the scheme, ensuring that there is a high probability that payment costs will increase. This would run counter to the outcomes that were desired by the most important 'players' on the 'field'. Thus, the 'players' from the Department of Finance achieved a successful outcome, in that there were no tangible extra costs incurred as a result of the recommendations, while those from the DSFA would have been content, as the scheme continued largely unchanged and they would still administer the financial payments (DSFA, 2005, p. 72). Finally, by extending the eligibility to other groups of welfare recipient and recommending that the current BTEA summer payment arrangements for persons previously unemployed should be monitored, the working group offered the hope that the changes made in 2003/2004 might be reversed at some time in the future, thus keeping those who took part in the consultation process relatively content.

Conclusions

This article argues that the participation of welfare recipients in third-level education in Ireland via the Back to Education Allowance welfare to education programme is not being maximised. It has theorised that senior civil servants from the Department of Finance may ultimately be dictating welfare policy [12], and as welfare recipients are an unpopular group not known for strong political participation (Abramovitz, 2006, p. 351), welfare programmes are seen as legitimate (and soft) targets for spending cuts. My analysis has shown how decisions taken on the BTEA were influenced by short-term concerns about saving the state money, which may well illustrate a neoliberal functionalist logic, tolerant of a certain amount of inequality as long as the system remains functional overall. Additionally, I have attempted to provide an insight into the detrimental impact that the changes to the scheme introduced in 2003/2004 have had on existing BTEA participants. In particular, my qualitative analysis has demonstrated that these alterations have disrupted the ability of BTEA students to concentrate on their education and created major economic hardship for some participants on the scheme. These findings make a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge, given that there has been no prior independent evaluation of the effects of the changes to the BTEA scheme introduced in 2003/2004.

This article also shows that the numbers of BTEA students progressing to postgraduate study declined in the aftermath of these changes. This finding is of major significance. In particular, the article suggests that the restriction of the postgraduate option of the BTEA reflects the neoliberal ideology of personal responsibility, where individuals are responsible for and invest in their own economic welfare through continuous education. Postgraduate study remains open to BTEA students who meet the qualifying criteria, but if they wish to undertake these programmes then it is their own 'personal responsibility' to do so (and no longer with the assistance of the state). In conclusion, the macro-level understanding of the changes made to the BTEA programme which have been advanced in this article supports Morris's (1994, p. 80) 'structural' position in relation to social exclusion. Accordingly, this article argues that the current provision of lifelong learning for Irish welfare recipients appears to be to the benefit of a functionalist society, that it may actually be a mechanism through which society's inequalities are reproduced, and accordingly that it cannot deal with the 'structural' understanding of social exclusion for any great number of such citizens.

Notes

- [1] The five key individuals comprised a government minister, a member of the Irish parliament from the Labour party, a member of the Irish parliament from the Fine Gael party, an Irish MEP (Member of the European Parliament), and a senior civil servant from the Department of Social and Family Affairs.
- [2] In 1991, Ireland's Fianna Fáil government produced its Programme for Economic and Social Progress (PESP), which recommended increasing the participation rates of adult students within the higher educational system (Morrissey, 1996). In 1992, a government Green Paper, 'Education for a Changing World', was published, proposing that third-level institutions be encouraged to increase the number of places for mature students who did not necessarily meet academic requirements so as to assist

mature students in gaining access. This policy was further developed in the 1995 publication 'Charting Our Education Future' (an Irish government White Paper). The central aim of this White Paper was to maximise access for adults wishing to continue or update their education, irrespective of their prior educational attainments (Morrissey, 1996).

- [3] In 1993 the qualifying period was reduced to twelve months and the scheme was further extended to include recipients of One-Parent Family Payments, Deserted Wife's Benefit, and Widow's and Widower's Contributory Pension. The age requirement was reduced to 21 years of age and the qualifying period was reduced to 6 months (156 days) in 1995 in order to make the scheme more accessible.
- [4] Payment of the BTEA was now made at the maximum standard rate, and as the scheme was not means-tested it allowed participants to avail themselves of employment if they so needed or wished. A continuation of the payment during the summer became a feature of the scheme, and a book allowance of 127.00 was introduced. An assurance was given in 1996 that the allowance payment would be made for the full duration of the course. Another important improvement was the removal of the requirement to sign on every month at local social welfare offices, in order not to give out the message that the scheme was merely another form of social welfare payment (Healy, 1997).
- [5] In 2002 the BTEA scheme was extended in order that people in receipt of Deserted Wife's Allowance/Benefit, Widow's Contributory/Non-Contributory Pension and Prisoners Wife's Allowance without child dependents became eligible to participate. The scheme was further extended to include those people who had been in receipt of Disability Benefit for three years or more, while the qualified adult dependent of a social welfare recipient became eligible in his/her own right.
- [6] The lower house, but the principal chamber of the Irish Parliament.
- [7] In 2003, 74% of BTEA participants reapplied for their unemployment payment, a figure which dropped to 62% in 2004 (DSFA, 2005, p. 54).
- [8] The senior civil servant in the DSFA.
- [9] See Dáil debates on Social Welfare Benefits conducted on March 27th 2003.
- [10] The senior civil servant was unable to talk about them as they were the subject of court proceedings at that time.
- [11] A system where our parliamentarians believe their election prospects are affected by the work they do on the ground in their constituency, helping individual constituents with problems they are experiencing.
- [12] This finding is given greater even validity by the revelations of De Bréadún (2008), which document that a letter from the Department of Finance to secretaries-general of all departments set out how and where departments were to make savings in implementing the recent government decision to cut back on public expenditure.

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