

Title

The role of distance education in broadening access to Irish higher education

Abstract

Although there have been distance education programmes offered by Irish Higher Education institutions for over twenty-five years, little is known about those who graduate from these online distance education programmes such as; their socio-economic profile, why they chose distance education and the effect that completing a distance education programme has had on their lives and careers. Drawing on preliminary results from a survey of distance education graduates, this paper seeks to begin to address the gap in the research on this cohort of graduates.

This paper argues that online distance education is providing opportunities for higher education attainment, in a very flexible manner, to students from a highly diverse background, who often cannot access higher education any other way. Furthermore, online distance education can play an even greater role in extending access into the future. However, to achieve this potential, the funding model will have to change to that recommended by the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* whereby 'All students, whether full-time or part-time, on campus or off-campus, should be equally supported by the funding model used to allocate resources to and within institutions' (DES 2011, p17).

Background and context

Oscail was established in 1982 as the National Distance Education Centre to provide third level programmes by distance education to adults all over Ireland (MacKeogh, 2003). Distance students are those who complete most, and sometimes all, of their studies online and at a distance from a campus. Since its inception 31 years ago Oscail has graduated over 5,500 students by 2011. By way of comparison, the DCU Access service has graduated 600 students over 21 years (DCU Access Report, 2011). Both services seek to broaden access to Irish higher education; the Access service seeks to accommodate those who would be highly unlikely to attend university if not financially supported, Oscail accommodates those who are in a position to pay fees but who are not in a position to attend. For those who can neither attend nor pay fees funding is available under the Springboard initiative for specific Oscail courses which aim to provide students with identifiable skills which are required in the labour market.

In its consultation paper on *Part-time higher education and training in Ireland*, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) states that if Ireland is to increase higher education attainment, increased flexibility and broader routes of access will have to be incorporated into higher education provision (HEA 2012a, p3). This increased flexibility will be required not only to provide 'second chance' education to adults who, due to family, work and other commitments cannot attend full-time (or part-time) on-campus, but also for the increasing number of the Irish workforce (and those not in work) who require re-skilling/up-skilling and continued professional development.

Higher education participation and the role of part-time and online distance provision

There have been a number of studies on the participation in full-time Irish higher education (Clancy 1988, Clancy 2001, O'Connell et al 2006, McCoy & Smith 2011). These studies have noted that social inequality continues to persist in accessing higher education. McCoy & Smith emphasise the importance of financial constraints while a study by Flannery & O'Donoghue (2009) found that parental education was a significant factor when deciding to proceed to higher education. A study on Irish part-time undergraduate students (Darmody & Fleming 2009) revealed that just 14% 'had a father with a third level degree' (p76).

A traditional way for adults to access higher education has been through part-time education. However, a recent HEA paper confirms that there are 'much higher levels of participation in full-time courses compared to part-time' (HEA 2012b, p11). The same paper goes on to state that 'in the university sector 12% of all undergraduates participate on a part-time basis, compared to 20% in the institutes of technology' (HEA 2012b, p11) and also notes that a large percentage of those studying part-time undergraduate courses are on Level 6 and 7 courses.

There are certainly more full-time courses available. While there is no comprehensive database of part-time or online courses, an explorative study identified approximately 760 full-time, 75 part-time and 17 online/distance courses available at Level 8 in Irish HEI's. In many ways, the lower participation in part-time courses and their lower provision is understandable given the current funding mechanisms. If students are primarily funded to attend full-time courses then institutions are incentivised to provide such courses.

Online distance education can be seen as a more flexible method of delivering part-time education. While it may not suit all students wishing to undertake part-time higher education courses, it is likely to suit an increasing number of those students and, for many potential students, it is likely to be the only way they can access third level education. The number of students undertaking flexible learning programmes (i.e. distance, e-learning and in-service) in the Irish HE sector has been published by the HEA for 2010/11 and 2011/12¹. Overall numbers are relatively small. For example, the number of students undertaking flexible undergraduate courses in HEA funded institutions was 2,954 in 2010/11 and 2,750 in 2011/12. However, it is likely that these figures are an underestimation. As noted by the HEA 'Distance education and off-campus provision in the universities are currently not included in the HEA recurrent grant allocation model (RGAM)' (HEA 2012a, p5). Therefore, it is possible that universities which are providing flexibly delivered courses are not classifying the students taking such courses as distance, online or off-campus students.

More importantly, there is an increasing recognition that if Ireland is to increase its international competitiveness then there will be a growing need to continually up-skill and re-skill the adult population. One of the most effective ways to achieve this goal is through flexibly delivered online distance education programmes. The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* noted 'In the coming decades, the delivery of higher education in Ireland must be characterised by flexibility and innovation' (DES 2011, p17). Given this goal, and the increasing efficacy of online technologies which assist online course delivery, it is opportune to look at the contribution which online

¹ See <http://www.heai.ie/en/statistics>

distance education has made in the past so as to give an indication of its likely contribution in the future.

Methodology

A web-based survey was designed using surveymonkey.com. Web based surveys are cost effective, fast and flexible (Cook, Heath and Thompson, 2000). They are also very suitable when endeavouring to contact widely dispersed populations. The questionnaire employed a mix of closed and open questions and consisted of twenty-one questions in total. A 5-point Likert scale was employed for 8 questions (104 sub questions), with respondents choosing between two extremes of a continuum. Positive responses (e.g. very relevant/strongly agree) are given a high score and negative responses (e.g. very irrelevant/strongly disagree) are given a low score. A numeric value is allocated to represent strength of opinion. A value of 3 represents the middle position; anything less than 3 represents varying degrees of disagreement/irrelevance etc; anything greater than 3 represents agreement/relevance etc.

The online survey was sent to two hundred and twenty six (226) recent (2012 and 2013) Oscail graduates between June and September 2013. Seventy seven (77) graduates responded to the survey representing a thirty four per cent (34%) response rate.

Key findings and discussion

The socio-economic classifications employed in this research are those used by the Central Statistics Office (CSO).

Characteristics of the sample

The majority of respondents (61%) had completed a Level 8 Bachelor degree, while thirty nine per cent (39%) had completed a Level 9 Masters' degree.

A majority (63%) of the two hundred and twenty six graduates were male. This differs somewhat from Irish (Darmody and Fleming 2009) and international (Callender et al 2006) research on part-time students which found that over half of participants were women.

The numbers of graduates are broken down as follows:

Table1 Oscail DCU graduates (2012 and 2013) by gender

	Male	Female
BA	43	65
BSc	44	2
MSc	56	16
Total number	143	83

The gender weighting is reflected in the response rate. Fifty two per cent (52%) of respondents were male while forty eight per cent (48%) were female. Seventy five per cent (75%) of respondents were from the 30-49 age groups with seventeen per cent (17%) in the 50-59 age categories. The remaining eight per cent (8%) is divided equally between age groups 18-29 and 60+.

Seventy per cent (70%) of respondents were in full-time employment and ten per cent (10%) in part-time employment.

Location of students while studying

Ninety six per cent (96%) of respondents were Irish with the remaining four per cent (4%) from other EU/EEA countries. Thirty seven per cent (37%) of Irish respondents were located in Dublin while completing their studies. The remaining respondents were widely dispersed across fifteen other counties.

It is known from research that distance from a higher level institution has a negative impact on access to full-time participation 'for those from lower social classes' (McCoy 2013). Costs associated with travelling, or having to live away from home while studying, present a significant barrier to access for many students. McCoy et al. (2010b) estimate that such costs make higher education twice as expensive. In 2013 approximately €350 million was required to fund the system of maintenance grants for Irish higher level full time students (Oireachtas report, 2013).

Online education can help overcome the barrier to access which travel and accommodation costs present.

Social class

In their study of part-time students, Darmody et al (2005 p.76) found that 'the level of attendance at part-time courses is the highest among higher professional, lower professional and non-manual groups'. The current research confirms those findings; 85% of the respondents to the survey classified themselves in the three social classes mentioned by Darmody et al (See Table 2).

Table 2: Social class of respondents

Social Class	Respondent
Employer/manager	10%
Higher Professional	44%
Lower professional	32%
Non-manual	9%
Skilled manual	1%
Semi-skilled manual	1%
Unskilled manual	0%
Own account worker	3%
Farmer	0%
Agricultural worker	0%

However, when determining the socio-economic characteristics of full-time undergraduate students we look at the social class and educational attainment of their parents.

The largest single group of respondents (30%) came from a background in which their father was a skilled manual worker (see Table 3). Fifty three per cent (53%) of respondents categorised their mother as a 'homemaker'. The National Plan for Equity of Access to higher education (HEA 2010 p21) identifies 'persistently low participation in higher education by students from low to middle income backgrounds.' Although the social class categories do not exclusively reflect bands of income, skilled/semi-skilled/unskilled manual workers tend to fall into the low to middle income bracket and homemakers are unpaid workers.

Table 3: Social class of parents of respondents

Social class	Father	Mother
Employer/manager	12%	4%
Higher Professional	23%	6%
Lower professional	7%	17%
Non-manual	4%	5%
Skilled manual	30%	5%
Semi-skilled manual	8%	4%
Unskilled manual	4%	4%
Own account worker	3%	55% ²
Farmer	9%	0%
Agricultural worker	0%	0%

Highest education attainment in full-time education

The largest group (31%) of respondents were from backgrounds in which the full time education of their father had stopped at primary level or included no formal education (see Table 4 refers). The 2011 census tells us that young people in this category are very unlikely to attend full time higher education. Fifty-seven per cent (57%) of respondents' fathers and fifty per cent (50%) of respondents' mothers had ceased education by lower secondary level.

Twenty eight per cent (28%) of undergraduate respondents had finished their full-time education at secondary school while another thirty eight per cent (38%) of undergraduate respondents had completed a third level non-degree qualification prior to completing their Level 8 degree with Oscail. Participation at third level from lower income groups is likely to be characterised by involvement in lower status courses (Fleming & Finnegan 2011), for example at Level 6 or 7, where the required points for entry are lower. What we are possibly seeing in the Oscail research is the result of this working its way through the system. Distance education appears to be providing an opportunity for those from lower socio-economic groups, who have completed Level 6 or 7 programmes of study on a full-time basis to up-grade to a Level 8 degree while working or attending to other commitments. On top of this, for substantial proportion of the Level 8 graduates (28%), this was their first entry into third-level education.

The above analysis suggests that online distance education is multi-functional, providing some with their first opportunity to complete higher education and others with an opportunity to up-skill or build on an existing lower qualification. For others who already hold a third level degree (34% of undergraduate respondents), online distance education is likely to be providing an opportunity to re-skill.

² 53% of respondents indicated that they had interpreted 'own account worker' as 'homemaker'.

Table 4: Highest education attainment in full-time education (Undergraduates and Postgraduates combined)

Highest full-time education	Respondent	Father	Mother
Primary (including no formal education)	0%	31%	20%
Lower secondary (e.g. Inter/Junior cert)	0%	26%	30%
Upper secondary (e.g. Leaving certificate)	21%	20%	30%
Third level (non degree)	28%	9%	10%
Third level degree or higher	51%	14%	10%

Table 5: Highest education attainment in full-time education (Undergraduates)

Highest full-time education	Respondent (Undergrad)	Father	Mother
Primary (including no formal education)	0%	32%	21%
Lower secondary (e.g. Inter/Junior cert)	0%	27%	31%
Upper secondary (e.g. Leaving certificate)	28%	12%	25%
Third level (non degree)	38%	12%	13%
Third level degree or higher	34%	17%	10%

Table 6: Highest education attainment in full-time education (Postgraduates)

Highest full-time education	Respondent (Postgrad)	Father	Mother
Primary (including no formal education)	0%	28%	10%
Lower secondary (e.g. Inter/Junior cert)	0%	24%	28%
Upper secondary (e.g. Leaving certificate)	7%	31%	42%
Third level (non degree)	11%	7%	10%
Third level degree or higher	82%	10%	10%

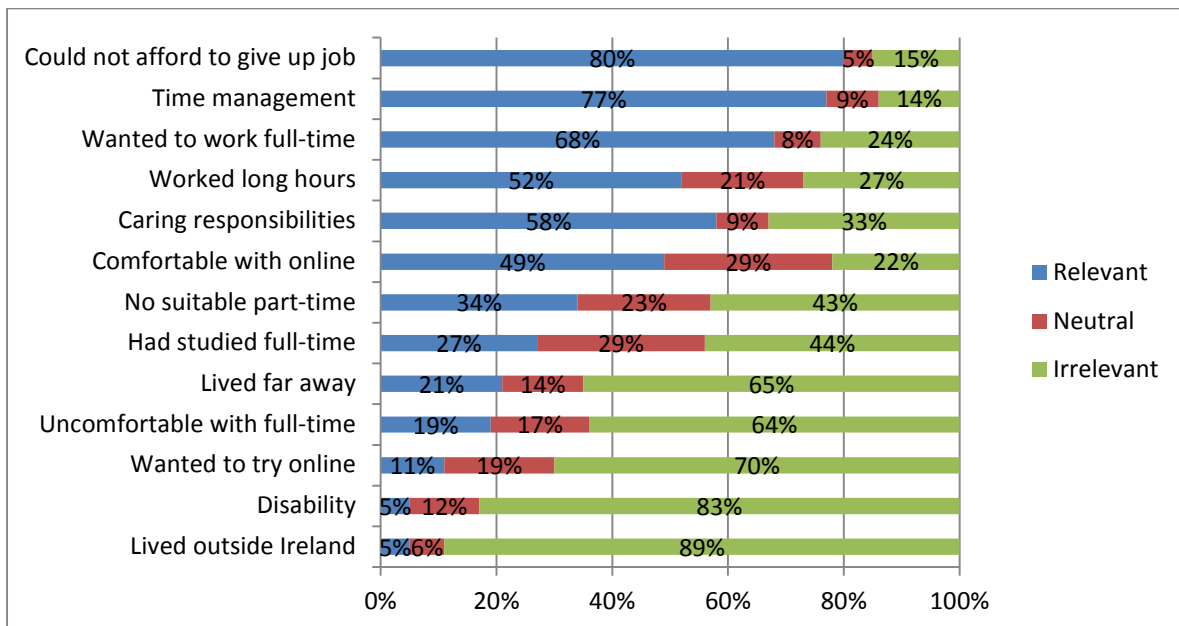
Overcoming barriers to access

Needing to work or be available for work presents a significant barrier to accessing full-time education and was the primary reason given by participants for choosing to study by online distance education (see Figure 1). Sixty nine per cent (69%) of respondents rated not being able to afford to give up their job as 'very relevant' to studying online while forty-eight per cent (48%) rated wanting to work full time as 'very relevant' to them. The second most relevant reason for choosing online distance higher education was the amount of control it gave participants over their own time management. Online distance education provides more flexibility than part-time education which is important to those who work long hours or have family commitments which militate against them committing to attend courses at specific times each week.

Most significantly, eighty six per cent (86%) of respondents either strongly agreed (51%) or agreed (35%) that given their circumstances, they could not have completed a degree any other way.

'With a full time job and a family I needed flexibility when completing my college work.'

Figure 1 Percentage of respondents who reported that the given reason was important to them in their decision to study by online distance education



Conclusion

One of the recommendations of the recent HEA report on Part-time and Flexible Education in Ireland was that 'Data collection and evaluation systems are further developed to strengthen the evidence-base on [the] background and routes of entry of part-time students' (HEA 2012b, p5). This paper is a small contribution to this data collection and evaluation recommendation.

The paper indicates that online distance education has an important role to play in broadening and deepening access to higher education in Ireland.

However, even compared to the funding of part-time provision, the funding of distance education in Irish universities is practically non-existent. As noted above, 'Distance education and off-campus provision in the universities are currently not included in the HEA recurrent grant allocation model (RGAM)' (HEA 2012a, p5). The HEA have stated that 'A proposal to include distance education and off-campus provision as part of the HEA funding model is being considered in 2012' (HEA 2012b, p9). If online distance is to fulfil its potential to act as a major facilitator of the up-skilling the re-skilling of the Irish adult population then the current exclusion of distance and off-campus provision from the HEA recurrent grant allocation model needs to be ended. In the recent paper on Part-time and Flexible Education in Ireland, the HEA welcomed the following quote from a respondent to its earlier consultation paper: "It is time to start thinking of doing away finally with the idea of full-time and part-time...then we will have only 'students' and the question will be 'how many credits are you taking?'" (HEA 2012b, p9)

On the other hand, if the system of financial support for higher education continues to be directed at full-time course provision, then it is likely to be the delivery format that will grow, and at the expense of more flexible options.

Author Information

Lorraine Delaney
Lecturer
Oscail, Dublin City University
lorraine.delaney@dcu.ie
01-7008798
(Corresponding author)

Seamus Fox
Head of School
Oscail, Dublin City University
seamus.fox@dcu.ie
01-7005502

References

- Callender, C. (2011) *Widening participation, social justice and injustice: part-time students in higher education in England*. International Journal of Lifelong Education, 30:4, 469-487
- Callender, C., Wilkinson, D. and Mackinnon, K. (2006) *Part-time Study in Higher Education in Wales: A survey of students' attitudes and experiences of part-time study and its costs 2005/6*. London South Bank University, Policy Studies Institute.
- Clancy, P., (2001) *College Entry in Focus: A Fourth National Survey of Access to Higher Education*, Dublin: HEA.
- Cook, C., Heath, F. and Thompson, R.L. (2000) *A meta-analysis of response rates in web- or internet-based surveys*. Educational and Psychological Measurement 60(6), pp.821-836
- Cullinan, J., Flannery, D., Walsh, S. and McCoy, S. (2013) *Distance Effects, Social Class and the Decision to Participate in Higher Education in Ireland* Economic and Social Review, Vol. 44, No 1, Spring 2013, pp.19–51
- Darmody, M., Smyth, E., O'Connell, J. Williams & Ryan, B. (2005) *Eurostudent survey II: Irish report on the social and living conditions of higher education students 2003/2004*. Dublin: Economic Social Research Institute/Higher Education Authority.
- Darmody, M. and Fleming, B.(2009) '*The balancing act*' – *Irish part-time undergraduate students in higher education* Irish Educational Studies, Vol. 28, No. 1, March 2009, 67-83
- Department of Education (2000) *Learning for life: White paper on adult education*. Dublin: Government Publications.
- DES (Department of Education and Skills) (2011) *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* Accessed online at: http://www.heai.ie/sites/default/files/national_strategy_for_higher_education_2030.pdf
- Dublin City University (DCU) Access Report 2011 '*Celebrating success: 21 years of DCU Access service*'. Available online at: http://www4.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/students/pdfs/DCU_21Publication.pdf
- Flannery, D. and C. O'Donoghue (2009) *The Determinants of Higher Education Participation in Ireland: A Micro Analysis* The Economic and Social Review, Vol.40, pp. 7-107.
- Fleming, T. and Finnegan, F. (2011) *Non-traditional students in Irish Higher Education- A research report*. Available online at: <http://www.ranlhedsw.edu.pl/>
- Forfas /Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2013) *Springboard Guidance*. Accessed online at: <http://www.heai.ie/en/node/1502>
- HEA (2010) *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013: Mid Term Review* Available online at: http://www.heai.ie/sites/default/files/mid-term_review_national_plan_of_equity_access_2008-2013.pdf

HEA (2012a): *Part-time higher education and training in Ireland: Current policy, practice and options for the future*. Consultation paper, May 2012, accessed online at:

<http://www.ibec.ie/IBEC/DFB.nsf/690A1AD030F7966480257865003A15F3/2E461CDE12DB8A5780257A25004AF1AE>

HEA (2012b): *Part-time and flexible higher education in Ireland: Policy, practice and recommendations for the future*. October 2012, accessed online at:

http://www.heai.ie/sites/default/files/part_time_report_0.pdf

HEA (2012c) *First Stage Evaluation of Springboard 2011*, accessed online at:

<http://www.heai.ie/en/node/1463>

HEA (2013) *Higher Education Key Facts & Figures 2011/2012*, accessed online at

<http://www.heai.ie/en/Publications>

Lynch, K. (2006) *Neo-liberalism and marketisation: the implications for higher education*. European Educational Research Journal 5 no. 1: 1-17

McCoy, S. and E. Smyth, 2010: *Higher Education Expansion and Differentiation in the Republic of Ireland* Higher Education, Vol. 61, pp. 243-260.

McCoy, S., Calvert, E., Smyth, E., and Darmody, M. (2010b) *Study on the Costs of Participation in Higher Education*, Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

Mac Keogh, K. (2003) *Open Distance Learning and eLearning in Ireland: Opportunities and Challenges in Lionarakis, A (ed) Proceedings of the Second Pan-Hellenic Conference on Open Distance Learning Patras 28-30 March 2003 Patras: Hellenic Open University* pp39-49.

O'Connell, P. J., McCoy, S. and Clancy, D. (2006) *Who Went to College? Socio-Economic Inequality in Entry to Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland in 2004*, *Higher Education Quarterly*, Vol. 60, pp. 312-332.

Oireachtas debates (19th June 2013) available online at:

<http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/DebatesWebPack.nsf/committeetakes/EDJ2013061900011>

Oscail Quality Review Self-Assessment Report 2012 (Unpublished)

Smyth, E. and McCoy, S. (2009) *Investing in Education: Combating Educational Disadvantage*, Research Series No. 6, May, Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute

Woodley, A. (2004) *Earning, Learning and Paying: The results from a national survey of the costs of financing of part-time students in higher education*. DfES Research Report RR600 (Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills).