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‘Frictional’ relationships . . . tension in the camp: focusing on the relational in under-represented students’ experiences in higher education

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Drawing upon data collected as part of a research project exploring diversity in Irish higher education, this article focuses on the relational realm of under-represented students’ experiences. It commences with a brief overview of the background and context as well as the methodology of the study. The article then presents and explores a number of interrelated findings with regard to the relationships experienced by these undergraduates, both with other students and with their external friends and acquaintances. Friction was evident in the accounts of the respondents and this article argues that an increased focus on the relational is required by institutions, given the central role played by the social experience in the retention of students in higher education. Further, it is argued that education for diversity and inclusion be incorporated as an explicit and integrated component in all higher education curricula in order to foster mutual understanding and respect between student groups, within the broader educational community and ultimately in the wider society.

Keywords: widening participation; higher education; student relationships; diversity; inclusion

Introduction

The ‘massification’ (Schuetze and Slowey 2002, 314) of higher education (hereafter, HE) both in Ireland and internationally has been accompanied by a widening of participation in relation to ‘non-traditional’¹ student groups (such as students from lower socio-economic groups and/or access students,² students with disabilities, and mature students, as well as international and part-time students). Research suggests that the various student groups encounter quite different barriers in HE (c.f. Lynch and O’Riordan 1998; Bowl 2003; Shevlin, Kenny and McNeela 2004; Kember and Leung 2004; Littlemore 2001). There is a paucity of research on the experiences of such students in the Irish context, particularly in relation to the academic and relational realms.

This article focuses on the relational realm of under-represented students’ experiences, and the accompanying need for an emphasis on education for diversity and inclusion in HE. The article draws on data collected as part of a wider institutional research project focused on the implications of increasing student diversity in HE. The article commences with a brief consideration of the international and national contexts in relation to widening participation in HE, and an exploration of the literature with a specific focus on the relational experiences

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of under-represented students. Following an overview of the methodology employed, the study's respondents' relational experiences in and outside of HE are presented. The findings are then considered and discussed in the context of the international literature. The implications of the respondents' 'frictional' relationships are discussed, particularly in terms of potential institutional responses to increasing student diversity.

Background and context

Significant increases in the proportion of young people progressing to HE are being witnessed both in Ireland and internationally. Twenty percent of 17–19 year olds entered HE in Ireland in 1980. This figure increased to 44% by 1998 and to 55% by 2004 (O'Connell, Clancy and McCoy 2006). In England, 43% of 18–30 year olds participated in HE in the 2005/2006 academic year (Department for Education and Skills 2007) and the Scottish target of 50% participation (also of 18–30 year olds) has already been reached (Anderson, Murray and Maharg 2003). Concerns about unequal rates of participation of different social groups in the new 'mass' (Schuetze and Slowey 2002) HE context have led to an increasing focus on the recruitment and retention of under-represented students, both in terms of policy (c.f. the Kennedy 1997; National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education (hereafter, NOEAHE), 2006) and practice. We have witnessed the establishment of access offices, disability support services, mature student offices etc. within most Irish higher education institutions (hereafter HEIs), and increasing numbers of mature, international and part-time students as well as students with disabilities and from lower socio-economic groups, at both national and international levels (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2004; Higher Education Authority (hereafter, HEA) 2006a; Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) 2004; Clancy 2001; O'Connell, Clancy and McCoy 2006). Also of note in this context is the Irish HEA's move (from 2007) to gather, at institutional level, information on students' social, economic and cultural backgrounds.

Very little research has been reported on the *relational* aspect of under-represented students' experiences in HE. That which exists points to tension in both their internal and external relationships and social experiences. Whilst mature students are generally very positive about their experiences, they may encounter difficulties in their relationships with younger students, which can impact on their academic experiences (e.g. Bowl 2003; Merrill 2001; Inglis and Murphy 1999; Edwards 1993). The tutorial context has been found to be a particularly likely site for conflict, with tension resulting from the two groups' differential participation rates (e.g. Merrill 2001; Edwards 1993). Mature students feel frustrated with what they perceive as the immature behaviour of their younger counterparts and the latter's apparently less serious attitude towards academic work, as well as isolated as a result of being older and having more life experience (e.g. Bowl 2003; Merrill 2001; West 1996; Edwards 1993). Having in many cases to 'juggle' multiple responsibilities – study and coursework, employment, families – also means they have less time and energy to engage in extra-curricular and social activities on campus, which in itself can lead to a sense of separateness and difference. Students from lower socio-economic groups can feel out of place in HE (Bufton 2003; Weil 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). They may also experience difficulty making friends (Lynch and

O’Riordan 1998) and/or lose contact with and grow apart from former friends as a result of their participation in HE (Bufton 2003; Thomas 2002; Forsyth and Furlong 2000; Lynch and O’Riordan 1998). For part-time students, opportunities for interaction with other (full-time) student groups are limited by definition. A sense of belongingness has been found to be an important factor in the retention of these students (Kember and Leung 2004), and they may feel cut-off and separate from the full-time student population and everyday campus life. Many work full-time whilst also tending to family and course commitments. International students may encounter difficulties on socio-cultural as well as linguistic and academic levels. A sense of loneliness and isolation is a common concern (Robertson et al. 2000; Al-Sharideh and Goe 1998). Boucher (1998), for example, notes that holding social events in establishments where alcohol is served prevents Muslim students from attending, and decreases possibilities for social interaction. Another significant barrier is linguistic; for those for whom their first language is other than English, communication and interaction with others can be limited, in both academic and social domains. The literature relating to students with a disability does not explore their relationships with other student, or external, groups. However, a noted barrier to their successful participation in HE relates to levels of awareness about disabilities, and related attitudes and assumptions on the part of all members of the educational community (e.g. Holloway 2001; Tinklin and Hall 1999).

This article argues that a focus on the relational realm of the student experience, and particularly under-represented students’ experiences, is very important, particularly as little research to date has explored this topic. The central role played by the social experience in student retention is well borne out by research (e.g. Tinto 1993; Thomas 2002). It is vitally important that students feel part of the HE community and experience positive relationships with others, in order that they persist and succeed.

Outline of the study

This article draws on data gathered in one Irish university as part of a wider research study on the topic of increasing student diversity in HE, one aspect of which focused on students’ experiences of barriers. Given the emphasis on students’ subjective experiences, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate, and eight focus group interviews were conducted with students from under-represented groups.

The research was advertised to the full populations of the relevant student groups with the assistance of the various student officers (e.g. the mature student officer). Students who were interested in participating were invited to contact the researcher. 40 students volunteered to participate: nine mature students,³ seven international students,⁴ eight part-time students,⁵ six students with disabilities,⁶ five mature access⁷ students and five school-leaver access⁸ students. Respondents’ characteristics are presented in Table 1 below:

Despite efforts being made to recruit a mix of students within each under-represented group (in terms of academic discipline, year of study, gender etc.), the majority of respondents were arts-based, female, in their final year of study, and of mature age.⁹ A majority of students from under-represented groups enter arts and humanities-type undergraduate programmes (Keane 2005). The mature age bias is a function of the focus of the study; three of the under-represented groups were

Table 1. Respondents in the study by general characteristics.

		No. of respondents (N =40)
Sex	Male	12
	Female	28
Age	Mature	23
	'Non-Mature'	17
Year group	1 st year	1
	2 nd year	9
	3 rd year	21
	4 th year	8
	5 th year	1
Academic discipline	Arts & Humanities	33
	Science	3
	Medicine	2
	Commerce	2

mature-aged by definition (mature students, mature access students, part-time students). The majority (28 of 40) were female; again this reflects the general undergraduate populations of Irish HEIs (HEA 2007).

Eight respondent-specific sessions were held in total, two with mature students, two with international students,¹⁰ one with students with a disability, one with part-time students, one with mature access students, and one with school-leaver access students. With the written, and informed, consent of the respondents, the interviews were both video- and audio-recorded. Following extensive verbatim transcription, a number of grounded theory-related procedures were employed at the analysis stage, including initial and focused coding, and the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in the development of categories.

Findings

As previously noted, research provides convincing evidence there is some conflict or tension in under-represented students' relationships with others in HE. The findings of this study resonate with, as well as extend, previous research in this regard. This section explores respondents'¹¹ relationships with others both *internally*, i.e. their relationships with other student groups within the institution, and *externally*, i.e. their relationships with friends outside of the institution.

Different agendas and suspicious minds: student-to-student relationships

Taking firstly internal relationships, several sites of conflict between different student groups were identified, including lectures, tutorials, the library and study spaces, as well as in relation to the broader context of assessment.

Both groups of full-time mature respondents reported friction in their relationships and encounters with younger students. They were critical of the latter's behaviour *during lectures*; claiming that many chatted throughout, spent the time sending text messages on their mobile phones, left before the end of lectures and

caused a good deal of disruption. Respondents explained that mature students tended to sit at the front of lecture halls so that they could see and hear clearly but noted that the noise levels were increasing. One respondent reported that she could ‘... feel the knives hitting you’ (Jane, Science, MA), having turned around and asked students behind her to stop talking so loudly during a lecture. A number of the MA respondents actively tried to understand the behaviour of their younger peers and came to the conclusion that the younger students had different ‘agendas’ (Lisa, Arts, MA):

I think that’s probably where we differ, mature students from the younger students ... bang on the hour the pencil cases start to rattle and it doesn’t matter what’s being said or how interesting it is, that’s their time, and they’re gone and they’re switched off ... it’s just an age thing. (Lisa, Arts, MA)

Do you think it’s a different way of learning? ... They just want to know ‘what do I have to do ... tell me what tricks to perform’ get the mark, and we’re there ‘We want to understand it’. (Dettie, Commerce, MA)

Sometimes then at the end of a lecture, they might be like summing it up or closing it off ... he could say like really valid points ... and they’re shutting up shop and you’re like ‘You lunatics ...’ (Louise, Arts, MA)

Yeah, they’ve different agendas, I suppose. (Lisa, Arts, MA)

Respondents were critical of lecturers who did not intervene in such circumstances, claiming that disruptive students should be asked to leave the lecture hall.

The tutorial context was also a site for friction between mature and younger students; the former were critical of younger students’ apparent lack of willingness to actively participate. Mature students then often felt that they were over-participating and sensed that the younger students were getting annoyed:

... I’m usually in a tutorial with people that are younger than me. Lots of them may or may not be interested in the subject and they just sit there and don’t say anything ... it’s inevitably the mature students will ... say something but then, you start getting embarrassed after a while ... (Cherry, Arts, Mat.)

Or if you listen to the comments of the non-mature student ... afterwards ... ‘very opinionated these mature students’. (John, Arts, Mat.)

A number of the mature respondents commented on their views of the younger students’ perceptions of them. They felt that younger students believed them to be ‘super efficient’ (Mary, Arts, Mat.) and studying constantly. A number also claimed that they were often used as a resource by younger students; they reported that they were often approached by younger students for lecture notes if they missed a lecture:

... people come to me in the library or anywhere, ‘Did you get these notes ...?’ I don’t mind but like I’m not a class rep ... instead of going to the lectures, they come to you. (Joanne, Arts, Mat.)

Yeah, I think mature students are invaluable for them. (Tom, Arts, Mat.)

They don’t really integrate with the mature students unless they’re specifically looking for information ... like there’s this woman on our course and she’s like older than the rest of us and they’ll go to her like specifically to get notes ... to ask her for stuff ... she’s actually overheard them then laughing behind her back for helping them out. (Amy, Commerce, Mat.)

Friction was also reported between mature and younger students in *the library context*. The mature respondents complained that students chatting to each other and using their mobile phones was often so distracting that they had to leave and try and find somewhere else to study. Jane (Science, MA) claimed that the library had essentially become ‘a social space’ for younger students. The mature respondents admitted to feeling slightly guilty about their reaction to other students’ behaviour, wondering if they were ‘being too serious’ (Louise, Arts, MA) or ‘being an intolerant old one’ (Dettie, Commerce, MA). However, they claimed as a result of having so many other commitments, their time for study was limited and thus precious. The library appeared to be a very important study space for mature students, particularly for those who had families:

... time is so precious and you’ve so many commitments ... When you’re there for an hour, you want to get an hour’s work done and it’s so aggravating ... but if I try to work at home, I just have too many commitments and the guilt then that I’ve put everybody else aside to do this for me ... I start preparing vegetables for dinner, putting on a wash ... you just feel you have to ... I need to get into a study environment. I’m extremely intolerant of the [*makes sign with her hand indicating chatting*]. (Dettie, Commerce, MA)

Indeed, for the mature students, having so many external responsibilities and commitments was, in itself, a barrier to social integration with other students on campus.

The majority of the mature respondents in both groups claimed that they tended to stick together on campus and there was broad agreement that this was often because ‘... [at] the beginning there’s such a fear when you come in here, you’re on your own’ (John, Arts, Mat.). As a result, they felt that they could ‘... find refuge with the other mature students, they’re in the same boat and they’re feeling exactly the same as you’ (John, Arts, Mat.). Cherry (Arts, Mat.) admitted that all the mature students sitting together at the front of a lecture might alienate other, younger, students. Dettie (Commerce, MA), however, had made a deliberate effort to mix with younger students and was proud of her success in this area. She felt that other mature students should integrate much more with younger students and that the university should explicitly encourage and facilitate this.

A number of the respondents with disabilities also reported conflict in their relationships with other students. The latter’s perceptions of ‘sick bay’¹² was one case in point. It was claimed that other students seemed suspicious of the motives of students with disabilities; they were of the belief that the scripts of those who sat examinations in this venue were more easily marked and that all students there got additional time to finish their papers or other privileges:

... and there’s a huge prejudice against being in sick bay ... there’s a jealousy almost. ‘Oh, you don’t need the extra time that you get’ ... There’s a perception ... from the other students ‘Oh, it’s a soft option ... special attention’ and all this rubbish. (Mark, Arts, Dis.)

And that you’re getting marked more easily ... but you don’t. (Marcy, Arts, Dis.)

This group of respondents noted that other students tended to enquire about their reason for sitting their examination in this venue and/or for using facilities designed for and allocated to students with disabilities more generally. Most of the

respondents had previously encountered negative reactions to their use of 'special' facilities:

... the attitude of 'What's wrong with you?'. There's a certain amount of jealousy and competitiveness ... (Mark, Arts, Dis.)

Well one guy ... says to me 'What are you doing going in there? What's in there?' ... I told him and then he says 'What's wrong with you?' ... As if I was an alien ... (Marcy, Arts, Dis.)

... meeting the class after the exam ... and they'd be like, 'Oh, you weren't in the lecture hall', 'No, I was in sick bay', 'Why?' ... Like the jealousy factor ... and it needs to be okay for people to have disabilities but it's never been okay, you know, in school, in college, anywhere, people just don't understand. (Lorraine, Science, Dis.)

... your problem is that you look normal you see, 'There couldn't be anything wrong with you'. That's what they say. (Mark, Arts, Dis.)

The international students, particularly those students from Malaysia, noted significant social and cultural differences between Ireland and their home countries. They claimed that international students encounter difficulties socialising with Irish students as a result of the language barrier, but also because of the central role played by alcohol in Irish social activities:

... cultural difference between Eastern and Western is too huge for us ... when we first came here we are more comfortable by ourselves ... we seem hardly integrate with the locals ... because the activities the local students carry out are really different from where we come from ... for Malaysians, most of us ... are Muslim and we ... don't really drink and the activity they have here most is go to the club or pub and ... we are very comfortable in our own group. (Robert, Medicine, Int.)

Respondents from Malaysia felt that social events held in locations other than a pub would encourage them to socialise with other students. Respondents from European countries also commented negatively on the amount of alcohol consumed by Irish students, the centrality of 'pub culture' and the poor variety of non-alcoholic drinks in pubs and other venues.

The younger access respondents claimed initially that they got on well with other students and noted that the fact that they had come into university via the access route 'doesn't really come up' (Una, Arts, SLA). They emphasised that they felt they were at an advantage to other students and that they were more dedicated than other students because '... we know what's been done for us like ...' (Una, Arts, SLA). Evelyn felt that the majority of other students were unaware of the existence of the (pre-entry) access course. Although the respondents claimed to get on fine with other students, nonetheless, each of them claimed that it was difficult to make friends:

It is difficult for people to make friends ... (Evelyn, Arts, SLA)

First year was horrible ... it was really hard to make friends. (Una, Arts, SLA)

... none of my friends from [other county in Ireland] had come down here to college ... I was on my own ... I still haven't made many friends in college ... (Julie, Arts, SLA)

Una commented that she was always on her own in first year and had felt that other students were noticing this. This made her feel paranoid and she tended to return home and miss her lectures as a result:

... I used to walk 25 minutes in, get freaked out by the thought that I was on my own, that everyone was looking at me, so I wouldn't go to lectures, I'd just turn around and go 'Oh, I'm getting out of here' and go back like. (Una, Arts, SLA).

They also implied that university was not a place for making *real* friends, but merely acquaintances, particularly as they felt that they weren't going to see fellow students again in the future. The respondents didn't feel that this constituted a problem and claimed that they were happy with the situation:

... I haven't really made an effort like because ... you won't see them again ... (Joe, Arts, SLA)

You get to know acquaintances in college ... you know some of them in that group, some of them in that group. (Una, Arts, SLA)

But not ... no friendships. (Julie, Arts, SLA)

The part-time students commented that they felt slightly cut-off from other students and everyday university activities. They suggested that a regular email to all students regarding upcoming events would be very useful. Peter (Arts, PT.) felt that such a service would '... bring you closer to the whole thing, make you feel like you were part of it'.

Growing apart from external friends and acquaintances, and distancing from domesticity

Both access groups as well as the non-access mature respondents claimed that they had become somewhat distant from former friends as a result of their participation in HE. All of the SLA respondents reported that they had grown apart from their friends from their pre-university days, the majority of whom had commenced full-time work:

No, they're kind of distant. They're gone off doing their own thing. (Joe, Arts, SLA)

... I definitely don't see my friends as much as I used to ... The majority of them work full-time ... (Francis, Arts, SLA)

Francis also noted that it was difficult to meet his old friends as they socialised at the weekend when he himself was working (part-time). The SLA respondents claimed that their old friends didn't understand what university was about and that their respective worlds were now very different.

Several of the mature respondents also commented on the difficulty of maintaining external relationships and problems relating to juggling all of their pre-university activities with the demands of studying full-time. The major difficulties were inadequate time and finance:

... I find that you can't keep up money wise with your friends, especially out at night drinking ... Now, you're watching every penny ... you do tend to lose your friends, I think. (John, Arts, Mat.)

However, it wasn't solely a case of *growing apart* from former friends. This study's findings suggest that tension and friction can develop in the relationships between students and their non-HE counterparts; tension which causes respondents

considerable distress in some instances, and at the very least, makes them feel that they and their college lives are incomprehensible to those on the outside. A number of the mature students claimed that their external friends had made negative comments about 'student life'. Mary (Arts, Mat.) reported that her external friends believed that 'Oh, you do four hours a day and that's it'. Similar comments were made by the SLA; they reported that former friends assumed they could have long lie-ins in the morning and essentially had a very easy time of it:

... I know we're not serving customers or you know working on a building site but we're still kind of working and it's still tiring. And they don't get that ... they kind of go 'Oh ... you're probably down in the college bar all day or sitting in the canteen drinking tea all day'. (Una, Arts, SLA)

John (Arts, Mat.) also claimed that he had received quite negative comments about going to university from external friends, which he found off-putting and made him question his decision to return to education. Louise (Arts, MA) found that she no longer had the financial resources to socialise with old friends and reported that some reacted negatively to this. Murt (Arts, MA) talked about his desire for a forum in which he could discuss ideas arising from his reading and other academic work; his friends had reacted negatively to his attempts to discuss what he was learning at university. He commented:

... So you can, kind of, discuss the stuff here, rather than [laughs] trying it out on your friends and stuff, you know, [laughs] looking like a total plonker ... People get the wrong idea ... that you're trying to impress ... 'a little knowledge is a dangerous thing' ... there's a kind of a need to, to express this new stuff and play with it a bit. (Murt, Arts, MA)

Feeling guilty about apparently neglecting their familial and domestic responsibilities was a source of anxiety for many of the mature students across relevant groups. As previously noted Dettie (Commerce, MA) talked about the guilt she felt when trying to study at home instead of tending to housework. Jane (Science, MA) reported similar difficulties, claiming that she had to:

... put the blinkers on and sit down at the desk and don't move and I don't care if the house is falling down around me ... You have to be really ruthless ...

Discussion

The previous section outlined the respondents' relationships in and outside of HE. The findings echo, and in some cases extend, previous research. It is clear that the mature respondents were very much cognisant of their and younger students' apparently differential conceptions of, and approaches to, study. The respondents felt that the younger students were motivated to engage in a relatively superficial or surface manner whereas they themselves were aiming for understanding. That mature students are more likely than younger students to take a deep approach and less likely to adopt a surface or superficial approach to their learning is well established (c.f. Richardson 1995). However, insofar as the author is aware, *actively seeking to uncover and understand* the reasons behind the tension experienced with younger students is not something that has been previously identified. The mature respondents also actively sought to understand the possible reasons for their and

younger students' differential approaches to study, surmising that they had different 'agendas' (Lisa, Arts, MA). They partly explained the dissonance by connecting their overall diligence and intolerance of distractions to their greater maturity. This wish to understand their relationships, in a sense their *meta-relational desires*, illustrates the importance of this realm in the wider context of the student experience in HE.

As has been found elsewhere (e.g. Lynch and O'Riordan 1998), each of the SLA respondents explicitly claimed that they had found it difficult to make friends in HE. This was not something that was suggested by any of the other student groups. Both access and the non-access mature groups also noted they'd grown apart from external friends. Whilst making friends may well be a concern for most, if not all, new students, it is likely that it is more so for students from under-represented groups, because many, particularly those from lower socio-economic groups and mature students, are not accompanied by friends from school and/or wider social circles, whereas 'traditional' school-leaver entrants usually are. In the same way, while it could be argued that losing touch with non-HE participant friends may not be that exceptional, students from under-represented groups have often left many, if not most, of their contemporaries behind, and therefore are more likely to feel isolated on campus. Social class disparities in HE participation are evident (O'Connell, Clancy and McCoy 2006); it remains a reality that students from lower socio-economic groups progressing to HE are likely to be accompanied by fewer peers than are students from higher socio-economic groups. For the majority of young people from lower socio-economic groups it is normal to *not* progress to university in the same way that it is *abnormal* for students from higher socio-economic groups to not progress to university (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Forsyth and Furlong 2000; Ball et al. 2002). Interestingly, however, the SLA respondents claimed that, for them, not making friends was not a problem. In their minds, university was not a place for making 'real' friends, only 'acquaintances'. They felt there was little point getting to know people with whom they would not be remaining in contact. However, it is unclear why these students assumed that they would not be in touch with fellow university students in future years. Did they feel that other (non-access) university students were not their type of people? The SLA respondents claimed to be happy with the situation but the author is unconvinced in this regard. Traditionally, HEIs, particularly universities, have been the preserve of the middle and upper social classes and have reflected middle class culture. Hence, it is perhaps unsurprising that students from lower socio-economic groups sense that their 'habitus', taken to mean dispositions, as well as norms and values (Thomas 2002), is somewhat in opposition to that of the institution and its members.

Some tension was also evident in the anecdotes recounted by students with disabilities. They sensed that they were perceived in a rather hostile manner by other students, as a result of the accommodations accorded to them. Respondents linked other students' suspiciousness to 'jealousy' and 'competitiveness' (Mark, Arts, Dis.). Jealousy and suspiciousness of 'special' treatment received by some students indicates a lack of awareness and understanding amongst the general student body of the diverse needs (and entitlements) of different student groups. It points to a lack of understanding about the philosophy behind the accommodation of disability; instead of viewing it as a necessary levelling of the 'playing field', as a means of equalising access to the curriculum, it is instead regarded as giving some students the 'edge' over others. The suspiciousness may also be related to the 'visibility' of the

disability, however. As was apparent in Mark (Arts, Dis.) and Lorraine's (Science, Dis.) comments, where a student's disability is not as apparent or visible to others, the latter may question the provision of 'special' treatment. Lorraine's comment also requires our attention, however. She claimed that '... it needs to be okay for people to have disabilities but it's never been okay ... in school, in college, anywhere, people just don't understand'. Not only does she perceive a lack of awareness about disability on the part of her fellow students but also *a lack of acceptance of the validity of accommodating disabilities* in the educational context.

Echoing previous research, entering into the world of HE presented challenges to the respondents in terms of the maintenance of their relationships with external friends, particularly for the SLA and the mature respondent groups. Former friends were reported as occupying a different world (the world of work) and as being somewhat sceptical that any 'real' work was being done by the respondents at university. The respondents generally had inadequate finance, and time, to participate in their former, external social lives. Negativity expressed by external friends about the respondents' participation in HE occurred in some instances, and caused considerable distress. It would appear that a high level of motivation on the part of students is required in order to counter such negativity.

What are the implications of these 'frictional' relationships experienced by under-represented student groups? The degree to which a student feels *involved*, i.e. academically and socially integrated into his/her institution, is crucial in the context of student retention (e.g. Tinto 1993). Students' social experiences, particularly their relationships with other students, is a centrally important factor (c.f. Tinto 1993; Thomas 2002). It is vital that students experience a sense of connectedness to their institution and its members and this is achieved, in part, through social and friendship networks. Indeed, it has been reported that the most significant factor in determining whether or not a student chooses to stay at university is the degree to which he/she feels that he/she has access to support via good friendships and social networks (Thomas 2002). Research suggests that the frequency and quality of students' interactions with other students and staff in fact constitutes an *independent* predictor of student persistence (Tinto 2002). The realm of relationships and the social experience is arguably even more important for students from under-represented groups. Growing apart from their former friends as a result of their HE participation means that the development of social networks in their new environment is even more vital, in order for them to overcome any additional sense of isolation and disconnectedness.

This article argues that HEIs have a key role to play in facilitating and supporting a richer social and relational experience for all students, especially in an era of widening participation. Institutions can do this by a) explicitly promoting social networks among students, and b) providing education for diversity and inclusion to all members of the educational community. Thomas (2002) identifies three ways institutions may promote social networks: a) through students' living arrangements, b) by providing appropriate facilities and c) through *collaborative* teaching and learning practices. Many Irish HEIs have dedicated student residences on their campuses. However, while living in such accommodation (or similar) *facilitates* it does not guarantee interaction and relationship-building between students. Further, students originally from the local area are likely to remain living at home. Irish HEIs provide relatively good facilities for students. However, while these facilitate social

interaction amongst students, it is not guaranteed. Students who are not interested in, or are too shy to join, such activities may not participate and with increasing numbers engaged in part- and sometimes even full-time employment (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003; Callender and Kemp 2000), students have less free time than in previous decades. Further, in the case of Muslim students, the facility of the student bar and the holding of social events in this venue *inhibits* rather than facilitates social interaction. The international students' call for non-alcohol-based activities is well founded and links with Boucher's (1998) research. A third way in which institutions can facilitate the building of social networks is through the use of collaborative teaching and learning practices; Thomas (2002) suggests team-building and group work activities during induction to assist students in getting to know each other while engaged in academic activity. However, it is necessary for institutions to continue their efforts well beyond the induction period. Student-centred and activity-based pedagogies, such as Problem- and Enquiry-based Learning require the active collaboration of students on academic activities and could go some way towards fostering more meaningful inter-student interaction.

This article also argues that the provision of *education for diversity and inclusion* by institutions to *all* members of the educational community is necessary. One of the recommendations made by respondents in the current study was for diversity (as well as pedagogical) 'training' for academic staff. Anecdotally, there is strong agreement about its necessity and the literature is also beginning to bear this out (e.g. Trant 2006; Keane 2006; Kelly 2005; Macdonald and Stratta 2001; Brown and Atkins 1986). However, because of the importance of quality student-student relationships, it is argued that diversity training *for all students* is also necessary. The findings of this study clearly indicate that friction may exist between student groups, and that this often results from a lack of understanding of, and in some cases respect for, diversity and individuals' differential needs. Students from middle class and ethnic majority groups have been found to defend the advantages of their groups, as a result of their culturally-sanctioned beliefs (Ladson-Billings 1999), and are often unable, or unwilling, to recognise their own advantageous social and cultural positioning (c.f. Mueller and O'Connor 2007). It is likely that many, if not most, students in HE have *not* considered questions of equity, equality, and diversity to any significant extent (c.f. Leavy 2005; Devine 2005). There has been significant and growing emphasis in the last number of years on the role of HE in society, particularly on its civic purpose, both in Ireland (e.g. HEA 2006b, 2008; McIlrath and MacLabhrainn 2007) and internationally (e.g. Paterson 2003; Ehrlich 2000). If one of the roles of HE is to prepare young people for active citizenship, education for diversity and inclusion assumes a role of paramount importance, particularly in the context of the vastly changed economic, social and cultural landscapes in the Ireland of the 'Noughties'. Fostering mutual understanding and appreciation between different students groups in HE may facilitate improved relations between different groups in the wider societal context.

Approaches to education for diversity and inclusion vary widely but it is generally acknowledged that an integrated approach is preferable to 'add-on' approaches (Zeichner et al. 1998). Integrated approaches mean that principles of diversity and inclusion are *infused* throughout and underpin the academic programme. 'Add-on' or segregated approaches mean that the overall programme structure and content remain unchanged and an extra element is added in. Research indicates that the

latter approach is most prevalent. Another key point is that education for diversity and inclusion is *for all members of the educational community*, not just those from under-represented or minority groups, and not just in institutions where the student and/or staff population is becoming increasingly diverse.

Making education for diversity and inclusion an explicit component of the higher education experience and a core aspect of the curriculum is something that the UK Higher Education Academy is currently implementing. The Academy is exploring and developing approaches to embedding equality and diversity at institutional and pedagogical levels in a 14-month programme (launched in April 2007) entitled 'Developing and Embedding Inclusive Policy and Practice'.¹³ At the time of writing, 10 HEIs are participating. The central aim is to improve the learning experience of students from under-represented groups through inclusive policies and practices, through accommodating diverse needs (with a particular focus on enhancing the learning and teaching environment), and celebrating and promoting equality and diversity. Such approaches are already well-established in the United States. US HEIs have a relatively long tradition of accommodating and responding to diverse student populations, not solely through additional initiatives but also through a reconceptualisation of the learning, teaching, assessment, and curricular environments (c.f. Marcy 2004; Border and Chism 1992; Richardson and De los Santos 1988). However, they also have experience of promoting diversity as a central value and mission of the HE experience (Alger 1997), often through various diversity-related experiences and/or courses within general education components of degree programmes (Umbach and Kuh 2006). A significant body of research has demonstrated a positive relationship between engagement in diversity-related activities and levels of student satisfaction (with various academic and experiential outcomes of HE participation), as well as learning, civic and attitudinal outcomes (e.g. Hu and Kuh 2003; Gurin et al. 2002; Hurtado 1999; Smith et al. 1998; Pascarella et al. 1996; Astin 1993).

There are signs that Irish HE policy and practice are also moving in such directions; there is an increased focus on academic staff development and on developing a broader range of innovative and student-centred teaching and learning strategies (c.f. Trant 2006; O'Neill, Moore and McMullin 2005) particularly in recognition of the need to better accommodate our increasingly diverse student populations (NOEAHE 2004). This is a significant step forward. However, an emphasis on supporting students' developing conceptions of and attitudes towards diversity is also required, in order to reduce any tension and/or discrimination experienced on campus by students from under-represented groups or, indeed, any student, but also, importantly, to contribute towards the development of all students as culturally competent citizens. Integrating education for diversity and inclusion into all mainstream higher education curricula, as an integral and integrated component, is now something that must be more actively considered by the Irish HE sector.

Conclusion

A limitation of this research is that it did not include a group of 'traditional' or 'majority' group respondents by way of comparison. However, if under-represented groups *perceive* that their relationships with other student groups are problematic and imbued with tension, then this requires our attention irrespective of the views

and experiences of the ‘traditional’ students themselves. Notwithstanding, examining the latter’s relational experiences and views about students from under-represented groups would shed further light on the student experience. Academic staff views and experiences would also further illuminate the context.¹⁴

This article has focused on the relational realm of under-represented students’ experiences in HE. Friction was reported by all of the student groups in their internal and external relationships. It has been argued that HEIs must focus on this aspect of the student experience as it is a crucial factor in terms of retention. The findings point to a need for HEIs to be more proactive in supporting students in their social experiences and to actively seek to foster meaningful interaction between student groups and, indeed, between all members of the educational community. Further, it is suggested that HEIs consider incorporating education for diversity and inclusion into their mainstream curricula, in a curriculum-based, integrated manner, in order to foster the development of positive inter-group relations as part of improving the student experience, but also as part of HE’s commitment to serving civil society. This research also suggests that education for diversity for all is required, in order to enhance mutual understanding and respect, particularly between student groups.

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Notes

1. The author concurs with Hanafin (2006) (written communication from Ms. Mary Hanafin, T.D., Minister for Education and Science, to delegates at the 4th Annual International Conference on Teaching and Learning, The Challenge of Diversity: Teaching, Support and Student Learning, 8–9 June, NUI Galway) that the term ‘non-traditional’ is becoming increasingly redundant as increasing numbers of students from previously un- or under-represented groups participate in higher education both nationally and internationally. The term ‘under-represented’ will, thus, be used hereafter instead.
2. Students, typically from lower socio-economic groups, who complete a pre-entry ‘preparatory’-type course, and who do not possess the required academic qualifications in order to progress to higher education through the ‘traditional’ CAO route, *or* who are linked to and supported by a higher education access programme via their primary or post-primary school.
3. Full-time students who were over the age of 23 on January 1 of the year of the commencement of their undergraduate studies.
4. Both visiting students and those completing full degrees at the university, typically from higher socio-economic groups, whose sole reason for being in Ireland is to study at university. Such students typically pay full or additional tuition fees. It should be noted that although international students were included in this research as a result of their status as a minority group (relative to the student body as a whole), it is recognised that, in comparison with the other under-represented student groups in the study, they, as a group, do *not* constitute an ‘equity group’ (Skilbeck and Connell 2000) *per se*.
5. Mature students completing a part-time, evening Bachelor of Arts degree.
6. Students with either a physical disability and/or a specific learning difficulty.
7. Students of mature age (as defined in footnote 5) who completed a pre-entry ‘preparatory’-type course, usually from lower socio-economic groups and who do not

- possess the required academic qualifications in order to progress to higher education through the 'traditional' CAO route.
8. Students (of school-leaver age) who completed a pre-entry 'preparatory'-type course, usually from lower socio-economic groups and who do not possess the required academic qualifications in order to progress to higher education through the 'traditional' CAO route.
 9. The researcher was reliant upon students volunteering to participate, and such were the characteristics of those who did so.
 10. Two sessions were held with each of these two student groups in order to include all those interested in participating in the context of conflicting schedules.
 11. The following abbreviations will, at times, be used to denote a particular student group: SLA (School-leaver access student), MA (Mature access student), Mat. (Mature student), Dis. (Student with a disability), Int. (International student), PT. (Part-time student). Pseudonyms are used throughout when referring to individual respondents.
 12. An alternative examination venue for students who are ill and/or who are registered with the Disability Support Service.
 13. Further information about this programme can be found at <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/learning/disability/inclusion>
 14. Both 'traditional' students and academic staff are being included in the author's current research.

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