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## **Access to 3rd-Level Education: Challenges to the Participation of Adult Non-traditional Learners**

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### **Abstract**

Persistent educational inequalities in Irish society calls for an in-depth analysis on the failure of the system to ensure each individual the right to participate fully at all levels of the education spectrum. Literature is marked by a clear correlation between poverty and inequality in education where those coming from marginalised communities are sorely under-represented in the third level sector while others fail to complete second level education. While targeting such deficits has been the focus of policy and programme initiatives, much of these interventions have not impacted positively on those most marginalised. The issue of access to third-level education for non-traditional students from lower socio-economic groups is one area that warrants investigation. In more recent years there has been a renewed focus on improving participation levels at third level through the development of equal access policies and initiatives. However, while participation rates have increased, structural and psycho-social barriers to third-level participation continue to exist and the literature points to continued and sometimes widening inequalities despite targeted interventions. This paper examines these issues from a local perspective and outlines the complex nature in which inequality operates. The paper presents some findings from a study conducted through the Strategic Innovation Fund (Cycle 2) entitled the 'Connections Project', a joint initiative between University College Cork (UCC) and Cork Institute

of Technology (CIT). The focus of the study was addressing barriers to education for adult non-traditional learners at local level in Cork City. The research findings strongly reflect the view within the literature on educational inequality with the study pointing to no significant change in participation levels particularly for those most susceptible to poverty and exclusion. The findings point to a number of areas that warrant attention: the need to move beyond a 'deficit model of disadvantage'; the recognition that standardised approaches may not meet the needs of all; the need to recognise the complexities and range of supports required to tackle educational inequality; and the need for more collaborative and interactive consultation processes in representing communities that are persistently marginalised.

**Keywords:** educational inequality; adult non-traditional learners; access; participation; marginalisation

### **Introduction**

Addressing lifelong learning and equity of access requires redressing important ideological and practical issues relating to educational inequality in Ireland. Despite a number of policy responses and access initiatives during a period of economic prosperity, there remains a continued divide between those who access education and those who do not. O Connell et al (2006) note that while there has been a continued expansion in those accessing higher education since the 1960's, such expansion has not been to the benefit of all groups in Irish society. They argue that there remain deep-rooted social inequalities in participation and attainment rates which highlight wide disparities in educational participation despite a succession of targeted policies and initiatives (O Connell et Al., 2006: 315). Smyth (1999) argues that while there has been an overall increase in participation since 1979, the gap between professional and working class who complete leaving certificate has not changed to any great significance. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) has also pointed to differing participation rates between social groups and highlights that rates of participation within third level institutions are significantly lower for those coming from low income backgrounds (HEA, 2005), a view more recently echoed by McCoy et Al, 2010.

Hannan and O' Riain's (1993) study indicates a strong link between levels of educational attainment and social mobility. More recent studies indicate that little has changed since then (Clancy, 2001; Lynch, 2006; Mc Coy et Al. 2010). Studies undertaken on participation rates at third level also indicate that students entering professional faculties such as law, medicine and dentistry are disproportionately represented by those coming from middle and upper class backgrounds with little change to entry patterns for those coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Lynch, 2006; Clancy 2001). . In essence, this suggests that 'effectively maintained inequality' (Lucas in McCoy et al, 2010: 167) appears to be characteristic of higher education as socio-economically advantaged groups are over-represented in specific areas. Despite interventions, economically generated inequality continues to be a major factor in inequality of outcomes for those coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2008-2013) highlights the continuing under-representation of lower socio-economic groups in higher education and continuing spatial disadvantage.

Smyth and Hannan (2000) argue that much of the problem lies with how educational policy is constructed and point out that this has generally been more concerned with expanding participation rates rather than a focus on addressing social class inequalities. Focusing on changes that took place throughout the 1980's and 1990's, they argue that efforts were made to reduce educational disadvantage but that such efforts were based on a 'deficit model of disadvantage'. This model, located the problem in under-performance rather than addressing wider structural inequalities (Smyth and Hannan, 2000:109-126) and the widening gap between rich and poor. This view was echoed by Gilligan (2002) in the action plan produced by the Forum on Primary Education *Primary Education: Ending Disadvantage* which addresses a number of concerns with the 'deficit model of disadvantage', its negative implications, and its failure to consider the complex levels of disadvantage experienced by marginalised communities (2002: 144).

The HEA National Plan for Equity of Access (2008) further points to similar issues and argues the need to promote equality of access to higher education for under-represented groups; it directly places the onus on higher education institutions to promote equity of access through strategic planning with concomitant funding. This

effectively requires third level institutions to become agents of social change, having the potential to promote social mobility through programmes designed to address educational inequality.

### ***The Research Study***

The research attempts to address some of the barriers to education for adult non-traditional learners and critically assesses the success of targeted access initiatives in overcoming barriers to education. The research is small scale and confined to a local setting, namely Cork City. It is not intended to be representative of an in-depth regional analysis but rather is representative of what is currently taking place at local level. The study was undertaken as a means of exploring better ways of promoting access and to highlight the range of complexities associated with educational inequality locally. The study aimed to explore the scope for opportunities in breaking down existing barriers to education both in terms of access and progression. The findings draw attention to a range of persistent problems that prevail for adult non-traditional learners with regard to accessing education and point to a direct link between socio economic position and privilege. The findings are representative of the views of a range of key local actors and stakeholders currently employed in the education sector from community education to third level education. Based on the research findings the authors point to the need for a fundamental restructuring of the education system and point to what Spring (2007) notes as a need for a ‘radical shift in how we approach educational disadvantage’ (2007: 8). The findings highlight the need for a more joined up way of thinking between education providers at all levels which will create new space for action. Through such relationships and respectful dialogue between actors we can then begin to develop inclusive strategies representative of the diverse perspectives of all actors (Zappone, 2007)

### ***Background to the Study***

The study is a part of the Pathways to Education Initiative which is joint access initiative between University College Cork (UCC) and Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) and funded under cycle 2 of the of the Strategic Innovation Fund. The research is part of the ‘Connections Project’ with one of these strands specifically targeting barriers to education for adult non-traditional learners. The research in question

focuses specifically on this strand. The research was carried out between April and December 2009 and during November 2010 and January 2011.

There have been a number of initiatives at local level that have sought to promote access through more progressive models of learning at community level. One such initiative was *Making Education Work on Cork's Northside (1996)*. The aim of this initiative was to promote alternative access opportunities through promoting community involvement and fostering greater co-operation between third level institutions and other educational agencies operating on Cork's Northside. The study revealed that there has been 'a persistent imbalance between socio-economic development on the Northside of Cork City and the rest of the city' (Forde, 2000, 63).

The initiative revealed a number of recommendations in relation to promoting access through the lowering of the points requirements for some courses, increasing the intake of mature students, flexible learning models, and the provision of a range of courses providing skills for the economic regeneration for the Northside of Cork City (Forde, 2000: 64). While some efforts have been made to improve access through the development of the Higher Education Access Programme (HEAR) and the UCC Plus initiatives at UCC and the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) initiatives at CIT, along with the increased participation of mature students, there is, however, little evidence to suggest that the percentage of adult learners coming from the most disadvantaged communities is on the increase.

Other initiatives that have sought to tackle educational inequality are the establishment of the Cork City Learning Forum (2003) and the establishment of the Social Inclusion Unit (Education Section) which is committed to tackling educational inequality locally. The Cork City Learning Forum was developed under the auspices of the Cork City Development Board, meets twice yearly and incorporates three working groups – lifelong learning, access and participation, and economic aspects of learning. Research undertaken locally by Cork City Partnership also acknowledges that along with socio-economic barriers there are specific problems for ethnic minority groups in accessing education in Cork City. The Traveller Visibility Group in Cork City also highlight barriers for members of the Travelling Community and are

currently working with third level institutions in trying to formulate mentoring programmes designed specifically for Traveller needs.

The research undertaken in this study places an emphasis on strengthening access and identifying barriers to third-level education for adult non-traditional learners. Both UCC and CIT are cognisant of the National Access Plan for Equity of Access (2008) and its targets regarding the participation of mature students in third-level education. The national participation rates for mature students have risen (National Plan for Equity of Access, 2008) and the Census (2006) statistics indicate an increase in the Cork area. Nevertheless, there remain significant levels of low education attainment in particular sections of Cork City (SAHRU, 2006). Additionally, the study revealed on-going concern about the continued under-representation of adults from lower socio-economic groups in third-level education and a lack of clarity regarding alternative and progression paths into third-level.

### ***Research Process***

The research began with conducting an audit of educational opportunities for adult non-traditional learners and looked at opportunities for progression available within both 'community education' and 'adult education'. While these terms can often be used interchangeably, this paper makes a clear differentiation between the two, based on those they are targeted to serve and the differing approaches to education within each model i.e. the goal of community education is driven by collective ideals and community change and empowerment whereas the goal of adult education is more orientated towards individual needs and often based on the ability to pay for courses that are undertaken.

The research first aimed to interview key actors from all sectors of the education spectrum with a view to establishing what links and progression routes currently exist between the different sectors. A number of issues occurred in this process that proved challenging to the research. Given the deficit in statistical data available on socio economic backgrounds of students, trying to ascertain trends in participation proved difficult. Where data was provided it was not comprehensive or standardised creating an insufficient basis from which to draw conclusions and analysis. This was a difficulty frequently noted by key stakeholders during the interviewing process. It

was also acknowledged that there are few mechanisms to record and track students' progression from one educational sector to another and established links between the sectors was often absent.

Within Third-Level institutions, departments that deal with applications outside of the standard Leaving Certificate route can vary with regard to entry requirements. The principal alternative route appears to be achievement of five FETAC Level 5 distinctions in outlined modules for UCC applicants. CIT requires applicants to complete 8 modules at minimum FETAC Level 5 or 6. However, interviewees suggested there is evidence to indicate that mature/non-traditional students may be required to sit specific Leaving Certificate modules to gain entry to some courses, particularly courses with modules requiring highly developed skills in maths and/or science. This was noted as an area that warrants further clarity.

While accessing data was difficult the study attempted to address this by conducting a survey on incoming mature students at UCC and CIT to try and ascertain what socio-economic backgrounds incoming students had come from and examine the progression routes if any that were followed. Primary research methodologies were also employed through the conducting of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and personnel in the Community Education sector, Adult Education, Further Education and the Third-Level sector. Focus group interviews were also conducted with mature students in CIT and UCC in September 2009. Focus groups were also conducted in the community with participants from a range of levels on the education spectrum. These were accessed through the Cork City Adult Guidance Centre, which is located within the VEC. Statistical data was drawn from comparable Census data and data was analysed from the survey conducted with incoming mature students.

It is important to acknowledge that throughout the duration of the study funding constraints and severe economic circumstances impacted on the way many of those working in the sector delivered courses. Additionally, reduced resources have meant that many of these courses have now been cut. Particularly affected have been those working with the most marginalised groups within the community sector. The uncertainty of the continuation of courses at times hampered the research process as

many interviewees had no clear indication of the impact of budget constraints as they were not yet known.

### ***Methodology***

The first stage of the research incorporated reviewing a wide range of literature on educational disadvantage while also reviewing current and past deprivation indicators derived from census data to indicate trends on issues relating to socio-economic disadvantage. Qualitative data in the form of interviews and focus groups with non-traditional learners were also employed, along with complimentary quantitative data in the form of a questionnaire to incoming mature students at both CIT and UCC and an analysis of CSO data.

When tracking deprivation indicators the 2005 study *City of Difference: Mapping Social Exclusion in Cork*, was deemed particularly relevant. From this data, comparisons were drawn and trends observed. This linked with a key source of earlier comparative data namely the 1996 report: *Making Education Work on Cork's Northside: A Strategy Statement*. This document analysed data from the 1991 Census, including key trends such as educational attainment, unemployment statistics, lone parents along with other factors reflecting levels of inequality.

Data was also requested from UCC, CIT, Cork City VEC, FAS, Colleges of Further Education and Community Organisations providing education under the following headings:

- Socio-economic status;
- Gender;
- Ethnicity
- Course of study undertaken;
- Progression/outcomes for mature students;
- Completion and achievement rates;
- Mature student participation rates.

While data is available under some headings, principally gender, participation rates and course of study undertaken, there appears to be a paucity of data under other headings which makes analysis, evaluation and comparison difficult.

### **Findings emerging from interviews with Key Stakeholders**

Overall the research was viewed positively and welcomed by all participating organisations. However, a number of issues and concerns have been raised reflecting the current economic climate and the impact this has on the provision of education at all levels. A number of themes were common to all participating organisations including funding, access to information, progression routes, flexibility, co-ordination and collaboration and the need for alternative models of practice. Other themes were organisation specific and reflected the scope and capacity for delivery and reform. A number of specific themes emerged:

### ***Institutional Issues***

The research identified a growing corporatism within the education sector. There was a general consensus among respondents on issues of unit costing and financial accountability. The perception that financial accountability is increasingly outweighing considerations of quality and delivery of education was particularly emphasised by community interviewees and participating staff at CIT and UCC. There is also a growing concern emerging from the statutory sector relating to the changing nature of delivery of programmes as a means of responding to the recession. There is a concern that this shift towards a more pronounced emphasis on those recently unemployed may overshadow fundamental problems with equity of access particularly for marginalised groups already excluded.

### ***Information points***

There was a clear consensus that lack of information points acted as a barrier in itself at all levels; respondents have indicated there are no obvious contact points for prospective students and there is no coordination of information between institutions and agencies regarding funding, social welfare entitlements and course requirements and concessions.

### ***Flexible learning models***

The research indicated a clear need for more flexible learning models such as part-time options, modularisation, credit accumulation and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Where these models have been incorporated, positive outcomes were

indicated. However, there was consensus that these need to be rolled out and mainstreamed at all levels.

### ***Lack of co-ordination***

There is a need for coordination within and between institutions. A number of participating organisations indicated the need for more cohesive structures between third level and further education providers. While some links exist, these are generally predicated on goodwill and interpersonal relationships.

### ***Need for Foundation Courses***

There was a general consensus among stakeholders that there is currently a gap in pre-entry support for adult learners which could be addressed through foundation level courses. The Centre for Adult and Continuing Education (UCC) are currently exploring the feasibility of incorporating such courses within the Centre but this is only at the evaluation stage. The need for access and foundation courses was also echoed by CIT and those at FE level. Some FE colleges raised concerns about displacing current provision with access courses which may lead to FE being viewed as a feeder for third-level colleges and the significance and quality of current course provision being undermined.

### ***Progression Routes***

Respondents were alert to the difficulties in outlining progression routes and pointed to issues of access to information, institutional rigidity, and obstacles encountered by students who are caught by bureaucratic and administrative procedures encompassing everything from academic and other requirements to financial supports.

The age requirement to enter third level as a mature student is 23. Several respondents indicating there is a cohort of young people in the under-23 age group who find themselves pitched out of a system that may require them to wait for some years before they can consider progression.

Progressing from schemes like Youthreach to Further Education also emerged as problematic as welfare supports are not always available to support smooth passage between systems. Welfare supports are usually tied to specific courses and therefore

are intermittent in nature as they are suspended and reactivated to coincide with courses and life circumstances.

The consensus amongst participants in the Further Education sector is that Institutes of Technology have become more flexible and innovative in recent years in facilitating progression. Respondents point to the contrast between Ireland and the UK where higher level institutions have found flexible means of recognising talent and achievement and facilitating progression onto higher programmes.

Despite current challenges it was acknowledged that some routes have been established from Further Education to Third-Level and there is evidence of alignment between courses from FE to Third-Level to facilitate progression.

### *Maths/Science*

A recurring theme throughout this research study was the deficit in maths and science skills among students and particularly among non-traditional students. Respondents at third-level indicated that quotas for mature students on degree courses such as Commerce, Engineering and Science are not filled due to applicants' failure to meet minimum requirements in maths and/or science. Some participants at third-level indicated there is a 'mismatch' between FETAC courses offered at Further Education level and third-level courses making progression difficult. Conversely, respondents in the Further Education sector indicate that individuals, principally where maths and science are requirements, drop out of third-level courses due to inability to keep abreast of course requirements and return to further education courses to update their skills before reapplying to third-level.

### *Community Perspectives*

Research suggests that there is little or no social mobility and disadvantage has become entrenched for certain sections of the community; experiences of education play a significant role and education as an institution plays its own role in maintaining rigid structures which hinders meaningful access to education. Some respondents pointed to 3<sup>rd</sup>-level education as being framed as an individual pursuit rather than a community orientated approach. At the same time, the concentration of socio-economic disadvantage in certain sections of the city serves to focus the spotlight on

areas which are often assigned the term ‘community’ signifying dysfunction and disconnect from social norms. Respondents at community and institutional level highlight how education as an institution holds a privileged, elitist place in Irish society and therefore confers social status on individuals which can confirm a person’s place in society or elevates individuals to a social position at odds with the cultural and social norms of the community in which they grew up.

Community Education providers and statutory organisations such as FÁS recognise and are attempting to address the complex social issues associated with poor educational attainment and related unemployment, with some success. However, they point to psychological dimensions of inequality that are often omitted from discussions and analysis of unequal outcomes.

For many communities experiencing disadvantage, the prospect of accessing further or third-level education is not considered. This sentiment was clearly expressed in the research by community organisations and those who work closely with them. This was also reflected by other commentators who argue that until the psycho-social dimensions of inequality are recognised within structures of access at institution level and addressed within a holistic framework, the capacity for change cannot take place.

### **Themes Emerging from Learner Focus Groups**

For many participants making the decision to go to college incorporated making difficult decisions. A number of participants noted that while they may have wanted to return to college before now, financially it was not a possibility and that a lot of financial planning was required prior to making the choice to return to college. Most of the participants experienced costs of some sort which was placing them under financial pressure. For some child care costs were quite demanding while for others it was essentially the cost of registration and maintaining an adequate living standard while in college that posed some of the greatest challenges.

The focus groups pointed to a number of different ways that participants had experienced financial pressures and that this varied depending on their individual personal circumstances. Some of those on social welfare payments who also had family commitments were finding the cost of college life increasingly difficult. Some

noted the costs of books and IT as demanding and such costs were expenses that had not been factored into their overall college costs prior to returning to education. For some associated travel costs were causing additional financial pressure. Some students were still awaiting their grants at time of interview (Nov 09) and were finding it increasingly difficult to maintain their daily costs. A number of participants were trying to hold down part-time jobs while also attending college to meet their college payments. Other students noted that if they had previously known the full costs of returning to college they may not have opted to return to education. Overall the focus groups revealed that the financial aspect of returning to college can act as a deterrent and that meeting the financial costs of college life can place additional pressure on the overall college experience.

Since the time of interviews the government have made further reductions to the college grant system and increased college registration fees. They have also made changes to those availing of the BTEA, enforcing a system where students can now only avail of either the college grant **or** retain the equivalent to their social welfare payment. Previously students could avail of both entitlements making college life somewhat manageable.

### ***Support Facilities within Institutions***

Stress management support was available in some form in both education institutions. However, during the focus groups it became clear that many students were not aware that such facilities existed. For a number of participants feelings of inadequacy, isolation, and alienation proved particularly challenging. Participants experienced a lot of emotional anxiety in relation to whether they felt competent enough to be at third level.

### ***Progression Routes***

Some participants had come through the Further Education System while others had come through having successfully completed a certificate or diploma in Adult Education. A number of students had undergone training through FÁS which had been their first point of contact with education and training since leaving school. This had led to further courses and training. However, not all participants saw value in this training and felt that the courses undertaken hadn't necessarily catered for their needs.

Others had undertaken Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses within the VEC as a means of furthering their chances to get into their desired course at third level. Overall there was a consensus from the participants that there was a need for greater coordination between further education providers and more direct links between institutions.

On the issue of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), some students stated that they had benefitted from this as a means of progressing on to third level although many noted that the RPL system favoured accredited learning over experiential learning. The establishment of RPL had been much more progressive in CIT than UCC with some students availing of RPL in CIT but none of the participating students had come through this route in UCC. Many of the UCC participants were not aware of the RPL system.

#### ***Lack of Coherent Information Points***

Many of the participants expressed concerns on the lack of information available at institutional level when considering applying to third level and that the level of bureaucracy involved in applying made the experience of getting to third level very difficult.

#### ***Learning Technology Support***

The need for student support in the area of IT was acknowledged across both institutions. The lack of IT knowledge posed specific problems for mature students in a number of areas. Students are increasingly required to use on line facilities both prior to entering college and on entering third level. Some departments had made IT classes available to students experiencing difficulties but this was not true of all departments. The expense of having to buy a home computer was not always an option for those already struggling and this again placed some participants at a disadvantage.

The final focus group took place at the Cork City Adult Guidance Centre. The staff at the centre facilitated contact with all participants and ensured that the focus group reflected a range of participants at different levels along the education spectrum.

Present at the focus group were a number of participants who had links with the Adult Guidance Centre and three members of staff. Participants came from a variety of different backgrounds along the education spectrum. A number of issues were highlighted.

### ***Funding Issues***

There was recognition from most participants that the financial cost of returning to education can cause barriers. The staff members at the Adult Guidance Centre pointed out that after weighing up the financial situation of many of their clients, the option to return to education is often not feasible without additional financial supports.

It was noted that more recent cuts in educational supports has effectively excluded a large cohort of those who cannot now afford to return to education and made accessing third level impossible for those already struggling.

### ***Emotional and Psychological Supports***

While financial supports acted as a barrier for most of the participants, it also emerged through the course of the focus group with the Cork City Adult Guidance Centre that emotional and psychological supports are a huge requirement especially for those who those who may not have come through the mainstream education route.

Self confidence was an issue for many of the participants in the focus group. One participant pointed to her own experience of opting out of the education system at the age of twelve and how illiteracy had impacted on both her family and work life. Not having adequate reading skills had caused her very low self confidence and while she knew she had ability, her low level of reading remained a stumbling block for some time.

Such feelings of disillusionment were commonplace in the work conducted by the staff at the Centre. Staff felt decisions were taken at a macro level without any way of capturing the individual life circumstances and the hardships that people endure.

All participants saw the value in education but pointed to the need for it to be a helpful learning environment with supports to help those who may struggle having not come through the mainstream education system.

All of the participants acknowledged the strong support received by the staff at the Adult Guidance Centre and felt they could not have progressed to where they are today without this support. The focus group at the Adult Guidance Centre revealed many overlapping issues to those presenting in the CIT and UCC focus groups, particularly in relation to additional supports required to help those not coming through the mainstream route. Many of the issues highlighted also featured prominently in the interviews undertaken with key stakeholders at community level in the initial stages of the research. While it is apparent that the Adult Guidance Centre provides an invaluable role in guiding their clients through the education system at all levels, it is clear that such a service cannot meet the needs of an ever increasing number of people that are finding themselves out of work in the current climate. This study points to the need for more established links between third level institutions and community providers if inclusive access initiatives are to be realised.

### **Analysis of Deprivation Indicators**

At local level, the issue of access to education for disadvantaged communities continues to merit attention. The relationship between uneven socio-economic development in Cork and consequent participation in education has led to a range of proposals to address access to education (Forde, 1996). What is presented below is an analysis of the socio-economic landscape reflecting differentials in socio-economic status, age at which education ceased unemployment levels and the capacity to work. This analysis is based on quantitative data drawn from a number of sources namely Edwards and Linehan (2003); Census (2006); SAHRU (2007); Haase and Pratschke (2008) and O'Donovan (2009). The data seeks to highlight the complexities associated with educational inequality and acknowledges that educational disadvantage is multi-dimensional in nature,

Reviews of data on deprivation indices and measures (Haase and Pratschke, 2008; O'Donovan, 2009) over a 15-year-period between 1991 and 2006 reveal that

disadvantage remains entrenched in areas of deprivation in Cork, despite the period of economic growth.

Patterns of spatial stratification (Edwards and Linehan, 2003) appear to be entrenched in wards such as Knocknaheeny, Churchfield, Farranferris and Fair Hill remaining representative of multidimensional disadvantage on the North side of the city and Togher and Mahon in the Southside (Haase and Pratschke, 2008; O'Donovan, 2009). These wards are recognised as 'disadvantaged urban areas' and continue to be the target of initiatives to address area-based disadvantage (O'Donovan, 2009: 25-31). Seven of the wards – Knockneeheney, Mayfield, Gurranebraher B, Gurranebraher C, The Glen A, Churchfield and Farranferris B – are listed amongst the 50 most deprived electoral wards in Ireland (Kelly and Teljeur, 2007: 18-19).<sup>1</sup>

Haase and Pratschke's review clearly demonstrates the link between educational attainment and 'social class' (2008:3) with the 'lowest class composition' found in the areas where educational attainment is lowest. Other poverty indicators prevalent in the poorest wards are high rates of lone parents (2008:2) and 'high concentrations' of social housing (2008:3). These areas also experienced higher than average unemployment rates, which persisted during the 'Celtic tiger' years, contributing to 'deeply rooted employment exclusion' and continued deterioration in terms of deprivation indices (O'Donovan, 2009: 13-14).

Furthermore, additional data from the 2006 Census points to a clear relationship between educational attainments and deprivation indicators.

### ***Deprivation Indicators within Cork's Northside***

When examining deprivation indicators a number of sources were consulted. These sources were then used as a means of drawing analysis between previous and current findings to ascertain if patterns were persistent or if any changing trends impacted on educational participation at local level. This involved an analysis of the socio-economic landscape, examining differentials in socio-economic status, age at which education ceased, unemployment levels, and the capacity to work. This analysis is

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<sup>1</sup> The SAHRU Index of Material Deprivation is based on 4 Census variables: unemployment; low social class; no car and rented or Local Authority purchased housing.

based on quantitative data drawn from a number of sources namely Edwards and Linehan (2003); Census (2006); SAHRU (2007); Haase and Pratschke (2008) and O'Donovan (2009). The data seeks to highlight the complexities associated with educational inequality and acknowledges that educational disadvantage is multi-dimensional in nature and reflecting inequalities in the wider society. The study recognises the need for a radical approach to changes at local level. Without radical reform a failure to address persistent marginalisation among different social groups will prevail.

Reviews of data on deprivation indices and measures (Haase and Pratschke, 2008; O'Donovan, 2009) over a 15-year-period between 1991 and 2006 reveal that disadvantage remains entrenched in areas of deprivation in Cork, despite the period of economic growth. As noted by Haase and Pratschke (2008), 'the most disadvantaged urban areas, particularly in Limerick, Cork and Waterford, have failed to participate in the generalised improvement in living standards, and have, as a consequence, fallen even further behind the more affluent areas of Ireland.'

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Haase and Pratschke's review clearly demonstrates the link between educational attainment and 'social class' (2008:3) with the 'lowest class composition' found in the areas where educational attainment is lowest. Other poverty indicators prevalent in the poorest wards are high rates of lone parents (2008:2) and 'high concentrations' of social housing (2008:3). These areas also experienced higher than average

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unemployment rates, which persisted during the ‘Celtic tiger’ years, contributing to ‘deeply rooted employment exclusion’ and continued deterioration in terms of deprivation indices (O’Donovan, 2009: 13-14). Educational attainment is a ‘crucial determinant’ regarding employment and this is particularly true overall of Ireland (Clancy 1995 in McCoy et al, 2010: 162). The consequences, therefore, of educational ‘failure’ are high and are reflected in multidimensional patterns of disadvantage. Furthermore, additional data from the 2006 Census points to a clear relationship between educational attainments and deprivation indicators. Presented below are a number of factors contributing to poor educational attainment levels such as the numbers of people who ceased education before 15 years of age; socio-economic class; unemployment levels and capacity to work. In each case, the overall percentage for Cork City for men and women is presented followed by a gender breakdown for selected wards highlighting the significant comparisons between overall levels and levels for lower socio-economic areas.

**Percentage of persons – male and female – with primary education only**

Area	Total	Male	Female
<b>Cork</b>	18.92%	18.05%	19.74%
Blackpool A	32.00%	29.83%	33.96%
Blackpool B	20.67%	21.28%	19.92%
Churchfield	41.48%	38.73%	44.53%
Fair Hill A	42.41%	35.98%	48.40%
Fair Hill B	26.56%	22.36%	24.20%
Fair Hill C	24.00%	21.55%	6.58%
Farranferris A	34.29%	29.60%	39.23%
Farranferris B	40.03%	38.14%	41.90%
Farranferris C	34.81%	31.28%	37.76%
Gurranebraher A	38.79%	38.14%	39.44%
Gurranebraher B	27.82%	25.50%	30.27%
Gurranebraher C	37.71%	34.56%	40.90%
Gurranebraher D	33.18%	32.30%	33.98%
Gurranebraher E	32.48%	30.15%	34.77%
Knocknaheeney	31.63%	31.35%	31.87%
Mayfield	27.51%	26.98%	27.95%
The Glen A	26.13%	22.97%	29.76%
The Glen B	19.05%	17.25%	20.81%

The above table demonstrates the percentage of people both male and female whose education ceased at primary school level. This indicator is drawn from the 2006 Census and shows that overall that 18.92% of the population of Cork City has primary

education only while the percentages are 18.05% and 19.74% for men and women, respectively. Several of the selected areas demonstrate considerably higher levels of population whose highest level of educational attainment is primary school level. Among the most notable are Churchfield at 41.48% with some disparity between the sexes with men and women at 38.73% and 44.53%, respectively; Fair Hill A (42.41%); of which the gender breakdown is 35.98% and 48.40% for men and women, respectively and Farranferris B (40.03%) with men at 38.14% and women at 41.90%.

**Percentage of persons – male and female – with a *primary degree***

Area	Persons	Male	Female
Cork	5.8%	5.9%	5.7%
Blackpool A	2.58%	2.52%	2.64%
Blackpool B	7.9%	5.70%	7.90%
Churchfield	0.88%	1.11%	0.61%
Fair Hill A	1.64%	2.65%	0.70%
Fair Hill B	0.60%	0.31%	0.87%
Fair Hill C	1.7%	1.59%	1.8%
Farranferris A	2.61%	2.30%	2.95%
Farranferris B	1.75%	2.88%	0.63%
Farranferris C	1.63%	2.05%	1.28%
Gurranebraher A	1.37%	1.37%	1.38%
Gurranebraher B	2.71%	2.23%	3.21%
Gurranebraher C	2.7%	2.6%	2.90%
Gurranebraher D	1.75%	1.80%	1.67%
Gurranebraher E	2.04%	2.06%	2.00%
Knocknaheeny	1.79%	1.52%	2.02%
Mayfield	6.80%	5.80%	7.50%
The Glen A	2.44%	2.46%	2.43%
The Glen B	2.80%	1.95%	3.63%

The above table demonstrates the percentage of population in the Northside of Cork City with a primary degree and is drawn from the 2006 Census. The overall percentage of the population with a primary degree stands at 5.8%: 5.9% and 5.7% for men and women, respectively. The majority of the areas selected demonstrated lower levels of attainment at this level. For example, Fair Hill B (0.60%) and 0.31% for men and 0.87% for women; Churchfield (0.88%) and Farranferris C at 1.63% emerged among the lowest indicators. However, other areas such as Mayfield (6.80%) demonstrate rates above the average indicator for Cork City overall with women achieving a rate of 7.50% to men’s 5.80% while in Blackpool B the overall rate is 7.90% and 5.7% and 7.9% for men and women , respectively. While Blackpool B is close to the average rate for primary education (see Table 1.2), rates for

Mayfield are above the average for Cork City in both the primary education and primary degree categories.

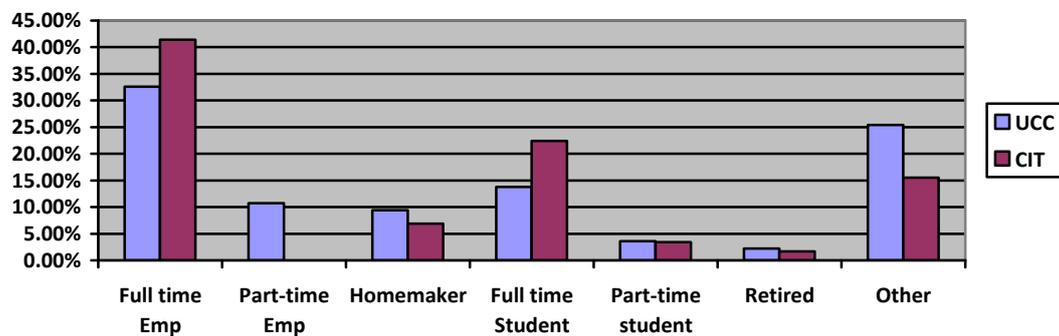
Overall, the Census data and other indicators point to little change to long-standing educational patterns and minimal change across a range of deprivation indices. The characteristics of socio-economic disadvantage remain entrenched and are likely to continue, if not increase, given the current economic climate and proposed spending cuts across the education sector. Given the extent and widespread nature of these characteristics, exacerbated by the lack of comprehensive data collection, it is likely that the cycle of social deprivation, along with educational inequality, will persist and the full complexities associated with these issues remain under explored.

### ***Mature Student Survey***

In total, 284 questionnaires were completed. The survey attempted to ascertain the socio-economic status of respondents through fielding questions regarding the employment status of respondents' parents – both mother and father. The problems and limitations of this approach has been discussed and debated by the HEA and others in attempts to gather this information on a national basis (HEA, 2010c:8). While the survey did not seek to classify parents' employment status according to the full spectrum employed by the Census and the HEA, this survey has nevertheless yielded some significant findings on this point:

- 63.8% of UCC respondents and 55.9% of CIT respondents stated that their fathers are 'working for payment or profit';
- 4.9% of UCC respondents and 5.1% of CIT respondents stated their fathers are 'unemployed';
- 7.1% of UCC respondents and 5.1% of CIT respondents are 'retired';
- 4.5% of UCC respondents and 1.7% of CIT respondents' fathers are 'unable to work due to permanent sickness or disability';
- All others fall into categories of 'looking after home/family'; 'deceased' and 'other'.

### **Employment Status of Students Prior to Entering College**



While further research is required to analyse mature students' socio-economic status, this survey appears to suggest that mature students mirror conventional age students in terms of socio-economic background. This appears to support evidence from interviews with key stakeholders that mature students in the main are often 'delayed' students and/or share cultural capital values allowing them to access third-level education.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The study has highlighted the complex nature of social disadvantage and its direct correlation to educational inequality in the Cork City Area. The findings of this study point to the need for a broader and more holistic framework in addressing structures of educational provision. The realm in which the third-level sector engages with other educational institutes and the community sector also warrants attention given power differentials between actors and their interrelationship and consequent capacity for development of initiatives and dialogue. Overall, the community sector appears to take a more collective and social activist approach, while third level institutions increasingly lean towards a more corporatist approach to education. Such conflicts of interest present deep challenges to addressing equal access issues.

This study makes a number of recommendations:

#### Guidance Services:

- Integrated guidance services between educational institutions and the VEC with outreach services in community and other settings addressing the spectrum of educational needs from literacy to third-level.

Information Services:

- Centralised Information on student finance including local authority funding, social welfare funding, VEC, HEA funding etc.

Progression Routes:

- Establish clearer, dynamic progression routes between community education, further education, institutes of technology and universities to ensure the inclusion of under-represented groups.

Support:

- Enhance and support the implementation of policies designed to address long-term issues of access from pre-school to third-level.

Part-time courses:

- Put in place institutional supports for part-time students comparable to full-time counterparts;
- Prioritise the provision of credit-based, modular learning.

Maths & Science:

- Focused, targeted cross-institutional interventions put in place to address deficits in this area through the provision of courses and up-skilling allowing quotas to be filled and generally enhancing the quality of educational provision in this area, particularly at FETAC level.

Access/Foundation Courses:

- Address the lack of pre-access courses in Cork and surrounding areas.
- Examine existing models such as the Trinity Access Programme (TAP) which operates at a variety of levels to address under-participation of various social groups *and* supports student progression through third-level<sup>3</sup>.

Until such time as these issues are addressed and embedded in the development of access initiatives, policies and programmes, disparities and differentials will continue to exist. The research indicates that there is a strong willingness among several stakeholders to form alliances across all levels of the education sector and develop more robust links that can challenge and target more equal participation. For this to happen it will require institutions to engage in more meaningful ways with all actors in the education sector. Those working at grassroots level need to have parity of

esteem with their institutional counterparts to facilitate a working relationship based on mutual understanding and fairer outcomes.

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