

## Digital learning: an important ingredient in equity of access to university

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Many countries have policies to improve the equality of opportunities afforded by higher education; to enable people from a wider range of backgrounds to benefit. In recent decades, Ireland has experienced a dramatic expansion in higher education (HE) participation. However, research indicates that certain groups continue to be under-represented; namely those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Additionally, when working class students do participate in higher education they don't necessarily complete honours degree programmes. The possibility of economic mobility provided by lower level courses is often slight as they tend to have a low value in the labour market. Furthermore, costs associated with travelling, or having to live away from home while studying, present a significant barrier to accessing full-time HE for many working class students. Based on a case study of 268 distance graduates from Dublin City University (DCU) Ireland, this paper argues that without digital higher education provision, significant progress in widening participation is improbable.

Keywords: Graduates; university; distance; access; online.

### Introduction

Many countries have policies to improve the equality of opportunities afforded by higher education; to enable people from a wider range of backgrounds to benefit (Thomas & Quinn, 2007 p.1). In recent decades, Ireland has experienced a dramatic expansion in higher education (HE) participation. The progression rate, currently at 52% (HEA 2014) is set to increase to 72% by 2020 (EGFSN 2007 p. 92). However, research indicates that certain groups continue to be under-represented; namely those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and adults over 23 years of age (Harmon & Foubert, 2011). These groups are unlikely to be mutually exclusive as adults often delay their participation in higher education for reasons related to social class (Croxford & Raffae 2014). Social class<sup>10</sup> remains one of the most significant determinants of whether or not an individual will participate in higher education in England, Ireland, Scotland and the United States (Chowdry et al. 2013, Harmon & Foubert, 2011, Ianelli 2011, Piketty, 2014).

When working class students do participate in higher education they often choose less elite<sup>11</sup> institutions (Furlong & Cartmel 2005; Gallacher 2009; Ianelli 2011; Smyth & McCoy 2009; Sutton Trust 2010). Various reasons are proposed for this in the literature. In Ireland middle class families invest heavily in second level education resulting in young people from higher socio-economic groups performing better than those from working class backgrounds in the competition for university places (Denny 2010). The costs associated with travelling, or having to live away from home while studying, also present a significant barrier to attendance (Cullinan et al. 2013). This can result in working-class students selecting institutions on the basis of proximity to where they live, rather than institutional status (Cullinan et al. 2013; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Greenbank & Hepworth 2008), a factor which may later impact on their employability. Financial concerns also result in students applying for institutions where courses will be shorter; almost inevitably less elite courses (Furlong & Cartmel 2005). Where the increase in higher education participation is for qualifications below honours degree level (level 8) this can be problematic, as it is felt that the normal arguments relating to the benefits of higher education are 'usually based on more traditional undergraduate degree courses' (Gorard, 2008 p.427). Those with honours degree qualifications, or higher, find it easiest to obtain employment (OECD 2012). The possibility of economic mobility therefore, provided by lower level courses, is often slight as they tend to have a low value in the labour market.

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<sup>10</sup> While there is no widely agreed definition of social class, occupation and education attainment remain the most widely used indicators.

<sup>11</sup> The term *elite* is commonly used in the literature in association with *institutions* which are ranked highly in national and international league tables; *employment* where graduates are fast tracked to well-paid positions of authority and *courses* which lead to elite employment.

## The Research Context

The context for this research is Dublin City University (DCU). DCU is primarily a university for full-time on campus students, and has approximately 15,000 students in that cohort. DCU has also been providing distance education since 1982 and currently has approximately 1,000 distance students on undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. DCU's distance students are primarily located off-campus and have minimal attendance requirements. It is this which distinguishes them from part-time students. The undergraduate distance degrees have a blended delivery format with mostly optional attendance and mostly digital/online delivery.

## Method

Participants in this DCU study are those who have graduated with an honours primary degree, which in Ireland is classified as a level 8 degree and is a Bologna first cycle qualification, through distance education. The concept of access is understood 'to encompass not only entry to higher education, but also retention and successful completion' (EAN 2015; HEA 2008 p.14). For this reason the focus of this paper is on graduates. All those who graduated between 2012 and 2015 (n=268) are included in this study. This paper reports on findings from institutional records (n=268) and a web-based survey (n=126 respondents, representing a 47% response rate). Ethical approval was obtained from DCU's Research Ethics Committee for this research. The main research questions are:

- Who are distance graduates? Are they new to, or from groups underrepresented in, university education?
- Why did they choose to study by distance education rather than full-time or part-time?

## Findings

### *Who are distance graduates?*

Institutional records tell us that the majority of distance graduates were male (57% n=140) and in the 30-49 age group (72% n=193). A large percentage had never been in HE before (34% n=92). A similarly large percentage (40% n=106) had participated in previous further (25%) or higher (15%) education but at a level lower than the degree they subsequently completed by distance education. Sixty-eight per cent had completed this prior learning on a part-time basis.

It was possible to establish the employment group of the majority of graduates (66% n=178) at commencement of their studies. The largest single group belonged to the non-manual group at entry (43% n=77). The Irish government targets those from this group for increased participation in full-time HE (HEA 2015, p 4) as they are significantly underrepresented compared to their numbers in the wider national population (HEA 2015 p.35). The non-manual group includes 'occupations such as clerical workers..., sales assistants and secretaries' (CSO 2011, p.24). Both European and Irish policy stress the importance of higher education being reflective of the diversity of civil society (DES 2014 p. 5). Based on their prior education and occupation a large number of the graduates in this study were characteristically working class on entry to the distance degree programme.

The survey sought information on the socio-economic background of the graduates together with the reasons why they had chosen distance education. Parental economic status at the time students' complete compulsory education influences whether and how they participate in HE (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). Survey findings (table 1) indicate that 41% of graduates in this DCU study (N=52) came from a background where their father belonged a lower socio-economic group. A further 13% (N=16) of graduates' fathers had not been contributing to the family income at the time when the graduate was leaving compulsory education. (The socio-economic categories specified in Table 1 are mutually exclusive; individuals are classified into one group only.) In contrast, 26% of *new entrants* to full-time university came from a similar background. Thirty nine per cent (N=49) of respondents categorised their mother to 'home duties', a category of unpaid work.

Parental education is a significant factor when deciding to proceed to higher education (Flannery & O' Donoghue, 2009). In Ireland, young people with neither parent educated beyond primary school level are very unlikely to attend full time higher education (CSO, 2011 p.22). It is interesting therefore that the largest single group (30% N=37) of distance graduate respondents were from backgrounds in which the full time education of their father had stopped at primary level or included no formal education (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Socio-economic status and educational attainment of respondents and their parents together with socio-economic background of new entrants to full-time Irish university**

Socio-economic status	Respondent		Respondent's father		Respondents' mother		Full-time University New entrants* (for comparison purposes)
	%	N	%	N	%	N	
Employer/manager	6%	8	12%	15	4%	5	18.8%
Professional	55%	69	24%	30	18%	23	23.8%
Non-manual	16%	19	6%	8	14%	18	9.9%
Skilled manual	3%	4	25%	31	3%	4	8.2%
Semi or unskilled manual	7%	9	10%	13	17%	21	7.8%
Farmer (200 acres or more)							7.1% (farming-general)
Farmer (less than 200 acres)			9%	12	2%	2	
Home duties	10%	13			39%	49	6.9% (own account)
Unemployed	3%	4	1%	1			
Retired			5%	6			
Deceased			6%	8	2%	3	
Absent from home			1%	1			
Missing data/unknown			1%	1	1%	1	17.6%
Total	100%	126	100%	126	100%	126	
<b>Educational attainment</b>							
Primary (incl. no formal)			30%	37	24%	30	
Lower secondary		1	20%	25	26%	32	
Upper secondary	39%	49	17%	21	24%	30	
Level 6	22%	27	7%	9	9%	11	
Level 7	18%	23	10%	13	5%	7	
Level 8 or higher	17%	21	9%	11	6%	8	
Missing	4%	5	7%	10	6%	8	
Total	100%	126	100%	126	100%	126	

\*Base number =22,904, response rate = 74%. These figures are for new entrants to full-time Irish university, not graduates. Source HEA (2015): Key Facts and Figures 2014/15 p. 21

Additionally, recent survey data from the HEA states that just 19% of full-time higher education students' parents' highest qualification is low secondary level or below (Harmon & Foubert, 2011, p. 21). For survey respondents in this DCU study, fifty per cent (50% N=62) of their parents (both father and mother) fell into this category. While we must be mindful that this is self-reported data, if we measure social class by occupation (Ianelli 2011) the indication is that graduates' current social class is regularly higher than their social class of origin as represented by parental occupation.

While absolute numbers of distance graduates are small, the evidence from this case at least suggests that distance education has an important role to play in broadening participation in university education by the targeted socio-economic groups. The numbers of working class students who *graduate* from full-time HE may be no higher; this figure is unknown as socio-economic background data on university graduates is not published. What we do know however, is that in Ireland there is a clear link between non-progression in fulltime HE and being from a non-manual or manual social background (HEA 2016, p.15)

#### *Why choose distance education?*

Most graduates had work and caring responsibilities; their choice of delivery mode was constrained by this. The majority of graduates (67% n=85) were in full-time (f/t) employment and their requirement to work, or be available for work, was the primary reason 71% of respondents gave for studying by distance rather than fulltime.

Thirty four per cent of graduates lived close to DCU, with a further 24% living close to another university. However, the flexibility afforded by distance education was the main reason why graduates preferred distance education to part-time study. Flexibility relating to attendance requirements was important to 69% of graduates.

I knew that I would not consistently attend college lectures after a full day at work.  
(Female age 40-49 f/t employment)

Sometimes, however, the flexibility related to location:

I looked at doing a degree in (named Institute of Technology) which required attendance at college up to 3 nights per week. This was impractical, especially since I live in Dundalk. (BSc Male age 30-39 f/t employment)

My job at the time involved my working in Limerick, Dublin and Cork and therefore (DCU) provided the only option for me. (BA male 30-39 f/t employment)

...flexibility. I didn't have to commit to living in one place for 4 plus years. With distance learning, if I needed to move it didn't affect my studies. (BA F Y f/t employment)

Thirty seven per cent of graduates lived in a region (county) of Ireland which did not have a local University. Digitally enhanced delivery has enormous potential to widen access to HE and support lifelong learning and continuing professional development.

## Conclusion

Despite the overall increase in higher education participation levels, class differences in educational attainment persist. Distance education would appear to be addressing this imbalance and providing an opportunity to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds to broaden and deepen their access to Irish university education. Currently funding to broaden access to Irish university education is exclusively funnelled into full-time course provision. Yet we know from the literature that older students are more likely to study part-time (European Commission 2015) and that being an older student is, in turn, often related to socio-economic background (Croxford & Raffe 2014). The existing funding mechanism means that part-time flexible HE provision is hopelessly underdeveloped in Ireland. Yet it would seem that working class students want to work and study at the same time and require flexible options regarding attendance. Without flexible, digitally enhanced, part-time higher education provision, significant progress in widening participation appears improbable.

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