

## EQUIPE CASE STUDY

### *University of Limerick Mature Student Access Course Pilot Year AY 2000/2001*

#### **1: Rationale or Motivation**

This initiative was funded by the Higher Education Authority of Ireland ([www.heai.ie](http://www.heai.ie)) under its Targeted Initiatives Programme and was targeted at “mature students” from the city of Limerick and surrounding areas who for reasons of social and /or economic disadvantage were unable to avail of a university education through the traditional routes.

The rationale for developing Access Programmes for the socially and/or economically disadvantaged derives principally from the Universities Act 1997, which states in section 14. (b). (I)

“(A university, in performing its functions shall be entitled to regulate affairs in accordance with its independent ethos and traditions and the traditional principles of academic freedom, and in doing so it shall have regard to-) the promotion and preservation of equality of opportunity and access.”

Also under section 18. (6)(b) and (c)

“(In performing its functions a governing authority, or committee where appropriate, shall-) have regard to the attainments of gender balance and equality of opportunity among the students and employees of the university and shall, in particular, promote access to the university and to university education by economically or socially disadvantaged people and by people from sections of society significantly under-represented in the student body and ensure as far as it can that the university contributes to the promotion of the economic, cultural and social development of the State and to respect for the diversity of values, beliefs and traditions in Irish society.”

Also under section 9.2.2 of the Points Commission, Final Report and Recommendations 1999,

“The Commission recommends that by the year 2005, each institution should set aside a quota of at least 15% for students entering at age 23 or above...the 15% quota should apply to all courses...the quota of 15% places would be for those who are assessed other than on the basis of their school-leaving qualification and therefore, mature students who succeed in entering third-level education on the basis of a school-leaving qualification should not be included within this quota.”

And under section 1.1 of the University of Limerick’s Access Policy for socially or economically disadvantaged:

“The University of Limerick is an equal opportunities institution. The University’s Access Policy is designed to promote and facilitate entry to and participation in the academic programmes and student life of the University by people who are socially or economically disadvantaged.”

And in section 2.1 (ii):

“(In order to fulfil the University’s commitment to providing access for socially or economically disadvantaged people the University will encourage direct applications to the Access Office from such persons or groups including) disadvantaged mature students who may be admitted on the grounds of mature age (at least 23 years of age on 1<sup>st</sup> January of the year of registration to a degree course). Application from disadvantaged mature students will be considered on the basis of academic qualifications, work experience, motivation and overall suitability for the programme of study applied for and will be evaluated by interview. Mature candidates may be required to complete a University of Limerick mature student access programme, or an equivalent qualifying course.

#### **2. Mature Students in Ireland : Some definitions**

The following remarks made at the opening of a conference on research into Mature Students in Higher Education by John Hayden Chief Executive of the Higher Education Authority are reproduced here as background information on mature students:

“The question of the provision of opportunities for access to higher education for mature students is a highly topical and relevant issue. But firstly we should be clear what we mean by "mature" students.

The general definition of mature students in Ireland covers all those students who are 23 years of age or over on the 1 January of the year of entering third level study. However within this broad category, there is a more detailed typology, which is widely recognised by policy-makers, practitioners and researchers.

For example, the Review Committee on Post Secondary Education and Training Places (1999) also known as the "De Buitléir" report refers to

- Those students entering higher education for the first time on full-time or part-time undergraduate courses
- Those undertaking continuing education either full-time or part-time, on undergraduate, postgraduate or specially designed courses for employment related reasons to upgrade their skills, knowledge and so on.

According to the same report there were approximately 107,000 "mature" students in 1997 in various categories of education. However, the total number in full-time higher education was just 5,000 with another 22,000 in part-time higher education.

While the numbers in full-time higher education are relatively small, the total pool of mature students engaged in educational activity is very substantial. It must be stated also that international comparisons can be difficult as in some countries, like the UK, the cut-off age is 21 so the participation of mature students would appear to be significantly better than in Ireland as a result.

The "de Buitléir" Report also noted that of the 35 to 44 age cohort, only 54% had completed at least upper secondary education. This compares with over 80% for countries in the top quarter of OECD member states. Many people in this age group would have chosen to participate in third level education if they had the opportunity.

In the light of this situation, the Review Committee on Post Secondary Education and Training Places (1999) has recommended an additional stock of 10,000 places for mature students, to be built up over a number of years.”

In the White Paper “Learning for Life” there is a reminder that the Report of the Commission on the points System (1999) sets targets for the establishment of quotas for mature students : 15% by 2005 and 25% by 2015.

### **3 : Objectives.**

The primary aim of the Mature Student Access Certificate was to increase the participation rates in third level education among socially or economically disadvantaged mature students. It was aimed at providing pathways into university level education for socially or economically disadvantaged mature students, independent of CAO qualification (which is normally the entry route based on results in the Irish Leaving Certificate examination taken at the end of secondary school by 18 year olds.)

Having completed the course, mature students will have acquired the necessary skills and state of mind to progress and succeed at university. The course was aimed at socially or economically disadvantaged mature students who might have the ability and motivation but who lacked the necessary CAO points to qualify for a third-level course at the University.

Therefore the objectives of the Course were:

- To introduce students to a third-level environment
- To equip students with the necessary transferable skills to progress into and succeed in third-level degree programmes
- To promote personal and academic development
- To equip students with the necessary confidence in their ability to progress and succeed at third-level
- To increase the student's frame of reference to the level expected of an undergraduate student

In the pilot phase and subsequently the process by which the course objectives were monitored were:

- the tracking of students participating in the Access Course,
- how many had successfully completed the course,
- how many progressed to third level courses
- and subsequently the retention rates of these students at third level.

As a pilot project the course was initially only offered to students who were socio-economically disadvantaged. However, given that only a small number of students applied under this criterion, the criteria were expanded to include those who were educationally disadvantaged, irrespective of their current socio-economic status.

### **3: Model**

The model used was based on research of a number of similar Access programmes available throughout Ireland and the United Kingdom. However it made particular reference to the Access Course run for socio-economically disadvantaged students at Trinity College Dublin. This particular model was chosen primarily because of the co-ordinator's familiarity with this programme and also because she had undertaken a comprehensive research project involving the students who took part in this Access programme (in its pilot year) and their subsequent success at third level. Therefore through research this model appeared to have been successful. The additional significant difference in the model used by the University of Limerick was that all students who successfully completed the Access Course were guaranteed entry to an undergraduate course at the University; students on the Trinity College course were not offered the same guarantee. The University of Limerick Access Office believed this was an essential part of the project.

The strengths of the model chosen were that it was specifically designed to facilitate the target audience, aka socio-economically disadvantaged mature students. (Note: In Ireland a mature student is anyone who is aged 23 plus and who wants to enter full-time undergraduate university education.) As stated above the course model was designed with a specific target student in mind, a student who might not previously have had any experience of formal education, or if they had had such previous experience it might either have taken place some time ago or the experience could have been extremely negative or both of these situations might have applied. The model used was designed without reference to the level of educational attainment of the student involved. Its aim was to introduce the student to University education and to provide that student with the necessary skills to survive and thrive at third level. The Model's weakness may relate to the often wide

educational gaps between students from a similar background and the sometimes-unrealistic objectives of the learners involved.

The project started in 2000 as a pilot quality project but with the intrinsic aim of becoming an integral part of the University programme of courses offered ('mainstreaming'.) The Access Course is still operating to date. (January 2004)

#### ***4: Organisation***

The University of Limerick's Access Office, an office established to promote the participation of socio-economically disadvantaged students in third level education, runs the Access Course. Therefore the co-ordinator of the Course is the Access Officer. She co-ordinates the entire course, which includes the provision of transferable skills modules such as Personal Development, Educational and Career Guidance, Study and Academic Writing Skills and Information Technology. Also the course is designed to include undergraduate modules (called 'link-in' modules) and therefore the students were required to complete two such modules in the undergraduate course they hoped to progress through. Primarily the transferable skills modules were delivered by external consultants who had expertise in the specific areas required. University staff provided the 'link-in' modules.

Due to the incorporation of elements of the course into the core module provision of the University the costs of the course were kept to a minimum, with a one year (26 academic week) course costing €20,000 to provide. This figure does not include the time spent by the Access Officer or the Access Office staff on co-ordinating the course and supporting the students.

#### ***5: Results and Implementation***

The aim of the pilot Access Course was to develop a strategy to promote Access to third level among disadvantaged mature students. In the first year the project was assessed by way of student questionnaire in order to eliminate any elements that were not useful and to include elements that the students felt they would have benefited from. In truth there were very few changes made due to the fact the model chosen was already a tried and tested one.

The project was an extremely important one, as the targeted disadvantaged mature students did not have the skills and experience available to them, to compete with other students for entry to third-level and specifically to the University. They were failing at the interview stage for undergraduate courses, because they simply did not have the educational experiences to support their application. However the Access Course not only provided them with this experience but it also provided them with the transferable skills and confidence in their own ability necessary to survive at third level.

The results were almost entirely positive, the first cohort of students did extremely well and all (with the exception of two who deferred through illness) are still at college. In fact subsequent years courses have followed this trend. The mature students who do succeed are often very dedicated and actually achieve very high results, due to their commitment and the skills gained from the course.

#### ***6: Implementation***

The results of the project have led to some slight changes in subsequent years of the course, but to a large extent the course has remained the same. However given the positive results of the course, and the low number of targeted students who met the original criteria, it was decided to extend the qualifying criteria to

mature students who were educationally disadvantaged, irrespective of their socio-economic status. Due to the pilot project it was established that those who had successfully completed the course and progressed to third level were unlikely to drop out for academic reasons. In fact from the start of the course no students have dropped out because of academic failure. As a consequence of the good retention rates among participants, the decision was made to extend the eligibility requirements for the course to a wider pool of applicants. Furthermore some of the transferable skills modules such as academic writing, educational guidance and study skills are now being offered to mature students who have secured places on undergraduate course through means other than the Access Course. The Access Course has brought significant improvement to the third-level opportunities of both educationally and socio-economic disadvantaged mature students. Firstly they can compete for entry to third-level and also once having achieved entry they can successfully compete at undergraduate level. Secondly the Course has been extremely cost effective, particularly as the numbers of students taking part has increased. On average, (over the three years to date it has run) it has cost approximately €1,500 per student for tuition. The cost has been kept to a minimum, by the incorporation of the course into the core undergraduate modules available and the co-ordination by the Access Officer, whose time is not included in the cost per student.

The Access Course has proved a valuable tool in the promotion of Access to third level education, initially by socio-economically disadvantaged mature students and in addition, as it has developed, by educationally disadvantaged mature students and by mature students with disabilities. This is due primarily to the quality of the curriculum and of delivery as well as to the systems of support to which the development of the course has substantially contributed.

#### **Publications :**

*The Universities' Act 1997* Department of Education and Science Stationery Office Dublin

*Report of the Commission on the Points System (1999) ('the de Bútléir report')* Commission on the Points System, Dublin: Stationery Office

*Adult Education in An Era of lifelong Learning Green Paper on Adult Education (1998)*  
Dept of Education and Science Stationery Office Dublin

*Learning for Life :White Paper on Adult Education (2000)*  
Dept of Education and Science Stationery Office Dublin

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