WHO GRADUATES FROM IRISH DISTANCE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION?

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Abstract

While there have been many studies on those who withdraw from distance education less is known about those who successfully complete degrees by distance education. Drawing on results from an online survey of recent distance graduates, this study, based in Dublin City University, addresses the gap in the research on this cohort of graduates. Findings indicate that graduates are primarily from lower socio economic backgrounds, a group largely under-represented in full-time university education. Significantly, a large percentage had never accessed any form of higher education before. More surprisingly, an equally large percentage had accessed full-time higher education previously, but at a lower level than the honours primary degree they obtained through distance learning. Implications regarding the role of distance education in both widening and deepening access to university education are discussed.

Introduction

The concept of access is now understood 'to encompass not only entry to higher education, but also retention and successful completion' (HEA 2008 p.14). For this reason the focus of this paper is on graduates. The purpose of the research is to explore the role played by online distance education in improving access to Irish university education. The main questions explored in the paper are:

1. Are Irish online distance graduates from a group who are new to university education?

2. Are Irish online distance graduates from groups who are under-represented in university education?

The graduates in this study are not representative of all online distance graduates in Ireland. The intention of the study is not to generalise findings but rather to provide a unique insight and interpretation of a phenomenon (Merriman, 1988). To date, no study has explored the particular position of online distance university graduates in an Irish context.

Participation in Irish university education

Successful completion of higher education has long been held as significant in conferring job opportunity, security and status on participants (Thomas & Quinn, 2007). While participation in Irish campus based full-time higher education has grown steadily over recent years, 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).

Some theorists argue that increased participation in full-time higher education will inevitably result in an increase in social inclusion (Gorard, 2008). However inequalities can nevertheless be reproduced, in terms of course level, field of study and institutional status (Fleming & Finnegan, 2011). The abolition of Irish university tuition fees for undergraduates in 1996 facilitated middle class families to invest more heavily in second level education (Lynch, 2006). The net result of this is that young people from higher socio-economic groups perform better in the competition for university places than those from working class backgrounds (Denny, 2010). Participation at higher education by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds is therefore likely to be characterised by involvement in lower status courses (Fleming & Finnegan, 2011), for example at level 6 (certificate) or 7 (diploma/ordinary degree), where the required points for entry are lower.

Where the increase in higher education participation is for qualifications below degree level 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). Additionally, in the current Irish economy those with honours degree qualifications (level 8), or higher, find it easiest to obtain employment. The possibility of economic mobility from lower level courses is often slight as they tend to have a low value in the labour market.

The profile of distance education students

Distance education research on student characteristics tends to focus primarily on psychological characteristics with a bias towards quantitative studies measuring the relationship between psychological variables (Qureshi et al., 2002; Coldwell et al., 2008; Carnoy et al., 2011). Research on demographic characteristics, such as social class, is somewhat neglected.

Where demographic research has been carried out, findings are more or less consistent; distance students in higher education are generally older than their full-time, on campus, counterparts, are more likely to be employed full-time and have family/financial commitments (Holmberg, 2005; Brown et al., 2012; Carnoy et al., 2012; Stöter et al., 2014). However, they are as a group getting younger (McLean, 2004; Guiney, 2014).

That distance students are not necessarily new to higher education is noted in a number of studies (Halsne & Gatta, 2002; Stöter et al., 2014). However, it is unclear whether the students

in these studies are undergraduate or postgraduate, whether they had previously successfully completed an award, or what the level of that award was. Therefore, information which might be significant in relation to previous education attainment, and in a related sense to social class, remains hidden.

Although socio-economic background, as a demographic variable, is underexplored in the literature some studies do address it indirectly. Qureshi et al.'s (2002) Canadian study found that distance students were less motivated than full-time students. The annual income of the majority of students in both learning formats (i.e. on-campus and distance) was less than $10,000. The distance students were more likely to be working full-time and married with dependents, while the full-time students (with the same income) were younger, unlikely to be working full-time or have dependents. It seems unsurprising that, in such circumstances, the distance students struggled with motivation. This study speaks silently of social class.

Other studies are more direct in their reference to socio-economic background. Holmberg (2005) comments that distance study contributes to upward social mobility. Brown et al. (2012) in their 'lived experience' study point out that distance students tend to be from a lower socio-economic background and are often Maori. Stöter et al's (2014) research from Germany identified socio-economic background as a differentiating factor between distance and on-campus students in tertiary education, with distance students more likely to have a lower socio-economic status. Bray et al. (2007) called for more empirical evidence regarding access to higher education, stating that there was 'little empirical evidence, positive or negative, of the ability of distance education to address these (i.e. access) problems' (p.894). They suggest more detailed comparisons on demographic backgrounds of distance and on-campus students for future research.

Methodology

For this study a web-based survey was designed using a mix of closed and open questions, consisting of twenty-one questions in total. A 5-point Likert scale was employed for 8 questions (104 sub questions), with respondents choosing between two extremes of a continuum. The survey was piloted to ensure clarity of questions, to confirm the time it would take to complete and whether it was running accurately and consistent in all popular web browsers.

The survey was sent to two hundred and twenty seven (227) recent (2012 and 2013) distance graduates. Eighty two (82) graduates responded to the survey representing a thirty six per cent (36%) response rate. Descriptive analysis employing SPSS was carried out on the data. The survey data is supplemented, where available and appropriate, by data from archival records.

Access to DCU distance programmes is open, with no minimum entry requirements for those over 23 years of age (those under 23 must meet the minimum entry requirements of the university). The minimum timeframe for completion of bachelor degrees (level 8) is three or four years and the maximum timeframe is normally eight years. The minimum timeframe for

completion of master's degrees (level 9) is two years and the maximum timeframe is four years. As students take varying lengths of time to complete their degrees, graduate figures are not compared to registration figures in any specific year in this study.

The socio-economic classifications employed in this research are those used by the Irish Central Statistics Office (CSO). While there is no widely agreed definition of social class, occupation and education attainment remain the most widely used indicators.

Findings of the study on distance graduates

Socio economic background

When determining the socio-economic background of full-time students we look at the social class and educational attainment of their parents. In order to contextualise this DCU study, parental social class (Table 1) and parental highest education attainment (Table 2) were examined.

The largest socio economic group of distance graduates (30%) came from a background in which their father was a Skilled Manual worker. Contrast this with new entrants to full-time university in 2011/12 where the background of the largest socio-economic group (18.9%) is Employer and Manager. The National Plan for Equity of Access to higher education (HEA, 2010, p.21), when examining participation in full-time higher education, identifies 'persistently low participation in higher education by students from low to middle income backgrounds'. Although the social class categories do not exclusively reflect bands of income, categories of 'Skilled Manual' and below tend to fall into the low to middle income bracket. For the distance graduates the highest participation is by those from low to middle income backgrounds. Fifty three per cent (53%) of distance graduates categorised their mother as a 'Homemaker', a category of unpaid work.

Table 1: Social class

Social class	Respondent	Distance Grads. Respondent's father	Respondent's mother	Full-time university new entrants (2011/12) **
Employer/manager	10%	12%	4%	18.9%
Higher professional	44%	23%	6%	11.0%
Lower professional	32%	7%	17%	9.3%
Non-manual	9%	4%	5%	9.3%
Skilled manual	1%	30%	5%	11.9%
Semi-skilled manual	1%	8%	4%	5.5%
Unskilled manual	0%	4%	4%	2.4%
Own account worker	3%	3%	55%*	8.4%
Farmer	0%	9%	0%	7.6%
Agricultural worker	0%	0%	0%	0.8%
Unknown				15.0%

*53% of respondents indicated that they had interpreted 'own account worker' as 'homemaker'.
**Base number = 20,692, response rate = 87%. These figures are for new entrants to full-time Irish university, not graduates. Source HEA (2013) Key Facts and Figures 2011/12 p.86

Highest education attainment in full-time education

Parental education is a significant factor when deciding to proceed to higher education (Flannery & O'Donoghue, 2009). The 2011 census tells us that young people with neither parent educated beyond primary school level are very unlikely to attend full time higher education (CSO, 2012 p.22). In comparison, the largest group (28%) of distance graduates were from backgrounds in which the full time education of their father had stopped at primary level or included no formal education (Table 2 refers). Additionally, recent survey data from the HEA states that just nineteen per cent (19%) of full-time higher education student's parent's highest qualification is low secondary level or below (Harmon & Foubert, 2011, p.21). For distance graduates, fifty-six per cent (56%) of their fathers and forty-six per cent (46%) of their mothers fell into this category.

With regard to the graduates themselves, it was possible to construct a picture of the previous highest educational attainment in full-time education of all level 8 graduates from archival records. (This exercise was only completed for level 8 graduates since those who undertake level 9 qualifications are normally required to hold a level 8 degree.) Thirty nine per cent (39%) of all level 8 online distance graduates had finished their full-time education at second level and had never previously accessed any form of higher education. For this group, online distance higher education is truly broadening access to Irish university education. Surprisingly, a further thirty nine per cent (39%) of the total number of level 8 graduates (NB not just respondents to the survey) had completed some form of full-time third level qualification (certificate or diploma/ordinary degree) prior to completing their level 8 distance honours degree. So, full time higher education is on their radar. 24% of that group met the normal university entry requirements on completion of their second level studies, so

were deemed capable of university study. Yet they do not go on to full-time university. They take up lower level courses instead. The HE funding mechanism, and resulting competition for university places, appears to be funnelling many students, capable of university study, into lower status full-time courses and subsequent delayed participation in university education.

Table 2: Highest attainment in full-time education

Highest full-time education attained	Distance Graduates* Level 8	Distance graduate's father		Distance graduate's mother	
		Level 8 respondents	Level 9 respondents	Level 8 respondents	Level 9 respondents
Primary **	0%	18.5%	9.9%	12.3%	4.9%
Lower secondary	6%	18.5%	8.6%	21.0%	8.6%
Upper secondary	33%	7.4%	12.3%	14.8%	14.8%
Third level non-degree	39%	6.2%	2.5%	7.4%	3.7%
Third level degree or higher	6%	12.3%	3.7%	7.4%	4.9%
Not given	16%				
Total	**100%**	**62.9%**	**37.0%**	**62.9%**	**37.0%**

*Figures are for all level 8 distance graduates; not just respondents to the survey.
** Including no formal education

Gender, degree type and age

The majority (64%) of the two hundred and twenty seven graduates were male. This differs somewhat from Irish and international research on part-time students which indicates that women are more likely to participate. Overall, however, the finding is consistent with international research confirming that males are more likely to participate in Information Technology related degrees (Coldwell et al., 2008; Carnoy et al., 2011). Female participation was more prevalent on the BA degree while male participation dominated the BSc and MSc programmes. Most graduates (68%) had completed a level 8 honours bachelor's degree, with the remaining graduates completing a level 9 postgraduate/masters' degree.

International research points to the fact that distance students are generally older than on-campus students. The DCU data is again consistent with international findings. The majority (79%) of graduates were in the 30-49 age groups, a group underrepresented in full-time higher education. That distance students are, as a group, getting younger could not be confirmed by the DCU data, as it has not been analysed for a sufficiently long period of time. (The gender, age and programme of study weighting were reflected in the response rate to the survey.)

Conclusion

Despite increasing participation rates in full-time higher education, inequalities continue to be reproduced in terms of course level. This is important as the benefits of higher education normally relate to traditional degree programmes. Furthermore the possibility of economic mobility from low level courses is slight due to their diminished value in the labour market. In the early 21st century therefore, distance education continues to have an important social justice role to play by facilitating a broadening and deepening of access to university education.

Graduates in this study were primarily from groups who are under-represented in full-time university education; namely adults from lower socio-economic backgrounds. For some it was their first opportunity to access higher education. For others, who have already accessed full-time higher education at a lower level, it allowed them to upgrade and achieve an honours degree and the associated enhanced employment and life opportunities.

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