SUPPORT HOLES: DISTANCE STUDENTS EXPERIENCE OF SUPPORT IN A DUAL MODE UNIVERSITY

Lorraine Delaney, Mark Brown, Dublin City University, Ireland

Summary

This paper focuses on the overall supports and obstacles distance graduates experienced as they progressed through their studies in a dual-mode university. The mixed-methods case study drew on findings from an online survey (n = 126) and 17 semi-structures interviews to explore how recent distance graduates (n = 268) experienced support. Findings indicate that while support from teaching staff was noted as important to their successful completion, a lacuna in institutional supports was identified. First, systems and structures within the dual-mode university were perceived as being designed for on-campus students, with little regard to the needs of distance students. Second, students perceived their employment was unvalued by the university. There seemed little support when employment related issues impacted study, yet work-placement for on-campus students was a source of academic credit. Third, students felt excluded from the guidance and support available to on-campus students. Critically, they did not avail of the career service which can impact transitioning into graduate level employment. This paper argues that guidance and support for learning is multi-faceted and extends beyond teaching. Creating enabling conditions that encourage learner agency and self-direction is a job for the university as a whole. Policy makers too have an important role to play in this regard.

Introduction

The European Commission (2014; p.11) assert that "flexibility is essential for non-traditional learners", with older students more likely to study part-time (European Commission, 2015). In order to achieve national and international targets for broadening access to non-traditional learners it would seem imperative, in order to meet the demand for part-time study, that dual mode university provision is developed and supported. However, the development of dual mode provision is hindered by our lack of knowledge about the experience of those who successfully complete courses in this manner.

Set against the backdrop of this problem, the research question for this paper is, how have distance graduates experienced support in a dual mode university? To answer the question, the paper explores the obstacles successful students face, both inside and outside their courses, and the extent to which the university is perceived by them to support their persistence. This information is vital for institutions who wish to expand dual-mode provision and widen participation.

Literature review

A large volume of literature is available on those who have withdrawn from distance education (Simpson, 2002; Stone, 2017; Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011; Woodley, 2004). Less is known about the participation experience of those who successfully complete (Butcher, 2015; Woodfield, 2011). Within the distance education literature research on graduates relates primarily to programme evaluation. Graduates are, by definition, successful students so it is hardly surprising that graduate evaluation of courses is, in general, favourable (Richardson, 2009). Where negatives exist they relate to expectations around a lighter workload with participation requiring a greater degree of self-direction and self-management than anticipated (Draper et al., 2014; Wilde & Epperson 2006). Distance graduates often feel disconnected from teachers and other students and think the number of courses offered through distance learning is limited (Pate & Miller, 2012).

When we examine the literature in relation to the participation experience of campus based, non-traditional students we see that it is primarily grounded in sociology theory, in particular Social Reproduction Theory. Social Reproduction Theory (Bourdieu, 1973; 1977), contends that societies structures, for example higher education (HE), tend to reproduce privilege and disadvantage in a way that appears legitimate. Non-traditional (e.g. working class) students are more likely to delay their participation in HE (Croxford & Raffe, 2014).

While some studies found that social class had a strong impact on the likelihood of students completing their degrees and on the classification of the award obtained (Furlong & Cartmel, 2005; Powdthavee & Vignoles 2009), others found this not to be the case (Carroll, 2011). Indeed, working class students often focus on academic attainment to the exclusion of extra-curricular activities (Carroll, 2011), a practice which can alienate them from other students and impact negatively on their integration (Greenbank & Hepworth, 2008; Redmond, 2006).

Financial constraints impact the participation experience of non-traditional students, with many having part-time jobs and working long hours (Byrom & Lightfoot 2013). This can disrupt or impede their progression. Although optional work placements have become common for campus-based students as part of their course work, many studies identify patterns of inequality in students' experience of work placements (Allen et al., 2012). Often only the top performing students are selected. Additionally, the hidden costs of work placements (travel, clothing) can make them unattractive to working class students (Greenbank & Hepworth, 2008).

Extra-curricular activities, in particular career planning, help students develop competencies and get ahead in the competition for jobs. Many studies identify how working class students do not engage with extra-curricular activities. They are sufficiently out of their comfort zone by simply studying at university (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Greenbank & Hepworth, 2008, Stevenson & Clegg, 2010).

In sum, non-traditional students face significant risks when they participate in full-time HE. They are therefore more likely to seek part-time/distance learning opportunities. A cohort of such students is the focus of this study.

Methodology

The sample

This mixed methods research was implemented over a four-year period; 2012-2015 on two undergraduate programmes in the Open Education Unit (formally Oscail) at Dublin City University (DCU). Participants are those who graduated with an honours primary degree (n = 268). Findings were drawn from a web-based survey (n = 126) and face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with 17 graduates. Ethical approval was obtained from DCU's Research Ethics Committee.

Data collection

Survey data was collected from 2013-2015. Graduates were asked in the survey about the factors that supported their successful completion and also about the obstacles they faced during their studies. The face-to-face semi-structured interviews took place between April 2015 and January 2016. The interview was an opportunity to explore in more detail the participation experience of the graduates. While every effort was made to replicate as closely as possible, the overall graduate population when selecting candidates for interview, some anomalies did arise. For example, graduates who attained a first-class honours degree, and those who lived in Dublin, proved more willing to be interviewed.

While quantitative data was analysed descriptively using SPSS, qualitative data was analysed thematically (Brawn & Clarke 2006). When reporting qualitative data, in order to preserve the anonymity of participants their age is categorized as follows: 18-39 = Young (Y), 40-59= Middle aged (M), and 60+ = Old (O). Interview data is identifiable by the use of pseudonyms.

Limitations

The results suffer from the typical limitations of a case study in that they are bound to one particular institution. Additionally, the data is self-reported by the graduates. Furthermore, the approach is interpretative and is characterised by this feature. Nevertheless, some interesting findings emerge.

Findings

Support Factors

Families were by far the most important supporters of the graduates during their studies (see Figure 1). Given that disposable income and family time is eaten into by course participation, it is reasonable that many would find it difficult to complete without family support. Support from the university staff was also of key importance to graduates. Most often this was related to the support of the tutor. Having a support network of other students was important to a majority of respondents. One graduate pointed out that because you have so little time to

socialise outside the course, socialisation within the course takes on an added significance. Graduates were also keen to point out that their own individual resilience was important in their persistence:

> *"If I start something I finish it – even if I got the Ebola virus, I would have completed the degree" (BA Male M)*

Employer support was not deemed important to most graduates with only 29% ranking it as important. These graduates were more likely to see employer support as important to their successful completion.
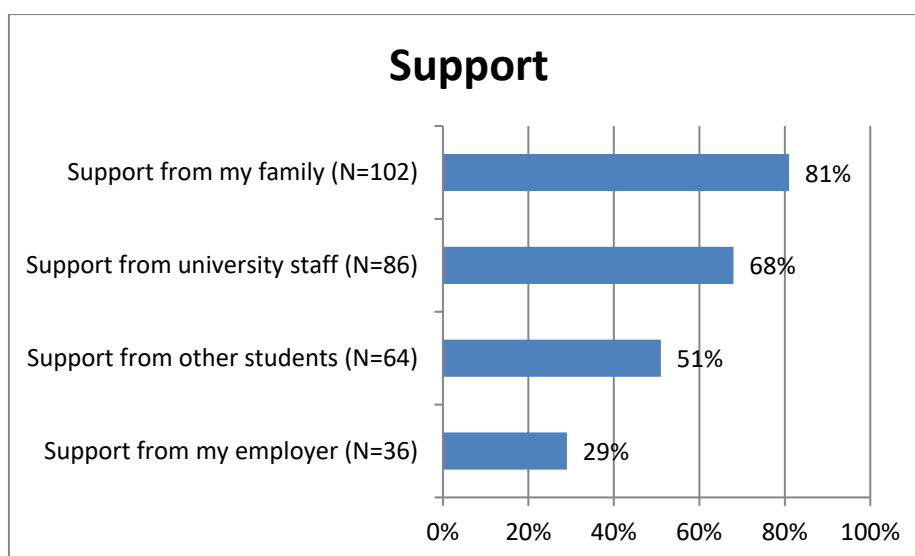

Figure 1. Percentage of graduates who reported that the indicated sources of support were either very important or important in helping them to successfully complete the degree

Obstacles to successful completion

Time

The most important factors, mentioned consistently by respondents, related either directly or indirectly, to conflicting demands on their time (see Figure 2). Work and family commitments were the main reasons for the time pressure, closely followed by the time demands of the course. The time demands of the course were more relevant to those in full-time employment (46%) than those involved in home duties (31%) or employed part-time (29%). The majority of graduates were at an age when work and family demands are at their peak (37% n = 100 were aged 30-39; 35%, n = 93 were aged 40-49). Government policy which supports earlier participation in part-time/distance learning may in turn better support the persistence of this cohort.

Within the qualitative comments submitted in the survey, and during the interviews, more nuanced themes emerged indicating that while *time* was the problem, the support offered by the institution fell short.

Systems and Structures

Within HE there are rules and regulations which students must assimilate in order to succeed. DCU is primarily a campus-based university, set up and state funded to support full-time, on campus students. Historically the distance student population has been no more than 10% of the total student body. In the main the student body consists of well-resourced school leavers. Distance students sometimes experienced a sense of being less important than full-time students:

> *"It was as if… we weren't given as much consideration as full-time students." (Female Y)*

Interviewees too were unanimous in never having felt part of the university:

> *"I didn't feel I was a student of DCU. I wasn't quite sure what I was" (Ali M)*

> *"…when you're coming in here (DCU) on a Saturday and there isn't a coffee shop open and the place seems dead…you know…it's hard to feel part of an actual living university" (Mary M).*

Graduates perceive they are unimportant when they miss out on information because they are off-campus and removed from regular contact with other students and institutional supports:

> *"Not being on campus & having access to staff advisers meant that I did not realise (important information) until it was too late" (Emer Y).*
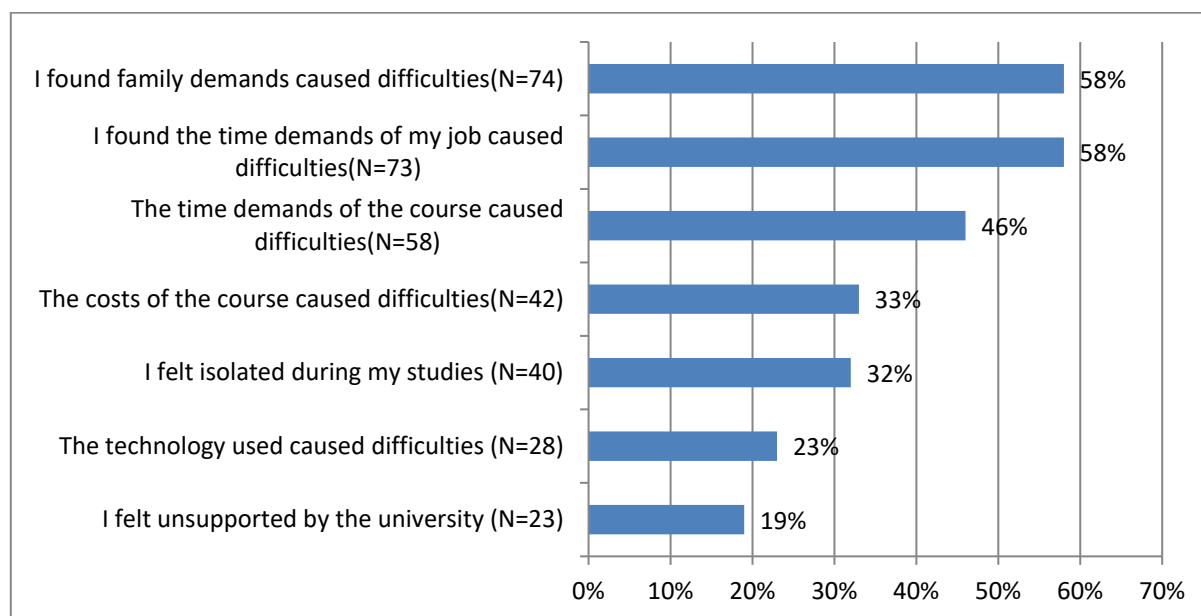

Figure 2. Percentage of graduates who reported that the indicated obstacles were very relevant or relevant to them during the course of their studies.

Work and work-placement

Many of the regulations of the university are devised to deal with the predominantly full-time student population and are based on an assumption that students' priority is study. In truth, distance learners must prioritise their work and family commitments. While flexibility is highly valued by distance graduates, institutional norms and practices designed around full-time on campus delivery, can present an obstacle to that flexibility:

> *"I had work related issues and and fell behind and just couldn't catch up. I didn't get credit for the work that I had already done. I found little support from DCU when I had this problem." (male M)*

A discourse currently exists around the similarity between full-time and part-time students since most full-time students also have a job. However, there are critical differences. Part-time students often have serious financial commitments such as a mortgage. For full-time students, study is generally accepted as their primary concern. Although they often also have part-time jobs, they are more regularly in a position to give up jobs to attend to study commitments at critical times of the academic year. They can do this because they are normally supported financially by others (ILCU, 2016). Distance students, on the other hand, are more regularly providers of financial support rather than takers. Sixty-one percent of survey respondents had others who were financially dependent on them. Importantly, distance students do not gain any academic credits for course related employment, something which many full time students benefit from. These differences must frame any discussion on the blurring of lines between part-time and full-time study.

Guidance and support

The distance graduates often felt excluded from institutional supports, observing that such supports seemed to be focused on full-time students. The external face of the university; for example, the website, is overtly focused on full-time students. In effect this means that part-time students have limited awareness of available supports. This is evidenced by the fact that just 6% (n = 8) of survey respondents made contact with the careers service:

> *"Did not know about this service but doubt they have service for part-time students" (Male Y)*

Lack of connectedness with the careers service can disadvantage distance students. The careers service can link graduates with influential individuals, those who may positively influence the graduate's outcomes and future; what Feinstein et al. (2008) refer to as vertical social capital. Some graduates identified how they had been given employment related opportunities during course participation, which they did not recognize or leverage. As many of the graduates were in employment when they commenced studying, they are not always on the look-out for career related opportunities. However, their retrospective accounts indicate they would have benefited from engaging with the careers service to enhance their career development:

"I definitely needed career guidance to see where all this study will bring me. I am feeling my way in the dark most of the time." (Female O)

Conclusion

The evidence from this study suggests that distance students often feel less important to the institution than full-time students. This finding is perhaps understandable, though not defendable, as in Ireland, HE institutions are funded primarily to support full-time, on campus students. Full-time students therefore remain a more lucrative option for institutions.

Distance students in this study often felt excluded from support services. This can be potentially serious for distance students as they struggle to come to terms with institutional systems and structures which may impact on their award. In particular graduates did not avail of the Careers Service yet within a mass higher education system competition for graduate level jobs is intense and graduates need to be able to move efficiently to avail of opportunities.

In the final analysis resource constraints are a consideration in any solution. Policy makers and institutions have an important role to play in better supporting and valuing part-time distance students if they are serious about achieving widening participation targets.

References

1. Allen, K., Quinn, J., Hollingworth, S., & Rose, A. (2012). Becoming Employable Students and 'Ideal' Creative Workers: Exclusion and Inequality in Higher Education Work Placements. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 34*(3), 431-452.

2. Bathmaker, A., Ingram, N., & Waller, R. (2013). Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: recognising and playing the game. *British Journal of sociology of Education, 34*(5/6), 723-743.

3. Bourdieu, P. (1973). Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction. In Brown, R. (Ed.) *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change.* London: Tavistock.

4. Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

5. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*, 77-101.

6. Butcher, J. (2015). *'Shoe-horned and side-lined'? Challenges for part-time learners in the new HE landscape: Executive Summary.* The Higher Education Academy, York. Retrieved November 20, 2015, from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/PTN%20Executive%20summary.pdf

7. Byrom, T., & Lightfoot, N. (2013). Interrupted trajectories: the impact of academic failure on the social mobility of working-class students. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 34*(5/6), 812-828.

8. Carroll, C. (2011). Accessing the graduate labour market: assessing the employability of Irish non-traditional graduates of Trinity College, Dublin. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 13*(2), 86-104.

9. Croxford, L., & Raffe, D. (2014). Social class, ethnicity and access to higher education in the four countries of the UK: 1996-2010. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 33*(1), 77-95.

10. Draper, J., Beretta, R., Kenward, L., McDonagh, L., Messenger, J., & Rounce, J. (2014). 'Ready to hit the ground running': Alumni and employer accounts of a unique part-time distance learning pre-registration nurse education programme. *Nurse Education Today, 34*(10), 1305-1310. doi: 10.1016/j.nedt.2014.06.007

11. European Commission (2014). *Report to the European Commission on New models of learning and teaching in Higher Education.* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/education/library/reports/modernisation-universities_en.pdf

12. European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2015). *The European Higher Education Area in 2015: Bologna Process Implementation Report.* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieved from http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/182EN.pdf

13. Feinstein, L., Budge, D., Vorhaus, J., & Duckworth, K. (2008). *The social and personal benefits of learning: a summary of key research findings.* London: Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning (WBL).

14. Field, J., & Morgan-Klein, N. (2013). Reappraising the importance of class in higher education entry and persistence. *Studies in the Education of Adults, 45*(2), 162-176.

15. Furlong, A., & Cartmel, F. (2005, October 27). Early labour-market experiences of graduates from disadvantaged families. Joseph Rowntree Foundation [Blog post]. Retrieved October 24, 2018, from https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/early-labour-market-experiences-graduates-disadvantaged-families

16. Greenbank, P., & Hepworth, S. (2008). *Working class students and the career decision-making process: A qualitative stud.* A PROP report for HECSU. Retrieved from http://www.hecsu.ac.uk/assets/assets/documents/Working_class.pdf

17. ILCU (Irish League of Credit Unions) (2016). *Cost of 3rd level education. Report.* Retrieved August 19, 2016, from http://www.creditunion.ie/communications/pressreleases/2016/title,10274,en.php

18. Pate, M. L., & Miller, G. (2012). The Off-Campus Bachelor of Science in Professional Agriculture Degree Program: A Final Alumni Evaluation. *NACTA Journal, 56*(4), 2-6.

19. Powdthavee, N., & Vignoles, A. (2009). The socio-economic gap in university drop out. *B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis and Policy, 9*(1), Article 19. Retrieved from https://www.powdthavee.co.uk/app/download/3231532/dropout.pdf

20. Redmond, P. (2006). Outcasts on the inside: Graduates, employability and widening participation. *Tertiary Education and Management, 12*(2), 119-135.

21. Richardson, J. T. E. (2009). The attainment and experiences of disabled students in distance education. *Distance Education, 30*(1), 87-102.

22. Simpson, O. (2002). *Supporting students in online, open and distance learning.* London: Kogan Page.

23. Stevenson, J., & Clegg, S. (20109. Possible Selves: Students Orientating Themselves toward the Future through Extracurricular Activity. *British Educational Research Journal, 37*, 231-246.

24. Stone, C. (2017). *Opportunity through online learning: Improving student access, participation and success in higher education* (NCSEHE 2016 Equity Fellowship Final Report). Perth: Curtin University, National Centre for Higher Education. [Online] Retrieved from https://www.ncsehe.edu.a/publications/opportunity-online-learning-improving-studnet-acess-participation-success-higher-education/

25. Subotzky, G., & Prinsloo, P. (2011). Turning the tide: a socio-critical model and framework for improving student success in open distance learning at the University of South Africa. *Distance Education, 32*(2), 177-193.

26. Wilde, M. L., & Epperson, A. (2006). A Survey of Alumni of LIS Distance Education Programs: Experiences and Implications. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship, 32*(3), 238-250.

27. Woodfield, R. (2011). Age and first destination employment from UK universities: Are mature students disadvantaged? *Studies in Higher Education, 36*, 409–425.

28. Woodley, A. (2004). Conceptualising student drop-out in part-time distance education: Pathologising the normal? *Open Learning, 19*, 48-63.