NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION

A RESEARCH REPORT

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Introduction

This report is based on 125 in-depth interviews with non-traditional students in three Irish Higher Education institutions each of which has their own distinct ethos and reputation (see Appendix 1 for more details on these institutions). The research was conducted as part of the EU funded Research into Access, Retention: The Experiences of Non-traditional Students in Higher Education[1]. The interviewees were engaged in a wide variety of disciplines and subjects ranging from anthropology to genetics. A disproportionate number of the interviewees were studying either applied and pure social sciences or Arts and Humanities and very few were in training for high status professions (the significance of this is discussed below). The majority of the participants were female and a small majority of the sample was composed of mature students in their 30s and 40s (however the cohort included students who were as young as 18 years and some who were in their 60s and 70s). Nearly all of the interviewees were the first in their families to attend Higher Education and just under two thirds of all the interviewees came from working class families. Although the majority of students we spoke to were from Ireland we also interviewed migrants from Europe (mainly from the EU but also from non-EU countries in Eastern Europe), North America and Africa. A small number of students with disabilities and Irish citizens from a 'minority' ethnic background were also interviewed.

These students' stories offer invaluable insights into their experiences of education and how this related to the rest of their lives and their sense of themselves. This yielded rich data on pedagogy and learning, on social class, on migration, on gender, on the generational changes in Irish society, on the nature of agency and resilience and above all on the relation between education and the desire for recognition and respect.

The data gathered during the research strongly suggests that access policies and initiatives, especially targeted funding and the work of access offices, have been successful in supporting the relatively small numbers of non-traditional students enrolled in Irish tertiary education. The vast majority of these students strongly value their experience of higher education and in turn have brought new skills, experiences and ideas into third level colleges. However, the numbers of 'non-traditional' participants remains quite small. The research also indicates that there is still a number of pedagogical, institutional and policy issues that need to be addressed in order to meaningfully support non-traditional students and to create fully inclusive and genuinely open third level institutions. As such the findings suggest that overcoming structural social inequalities through tertiary education requires much greater levels of investment, research and institutional change (Lynch, 2005).

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[1] For further information and all research reports of project see the project website at: http://www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl/

Methodological and Conceptual Issues

The initial analysis relied on grounded empirical research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 1990; Bryant & Charmaz, 2010). In the first phase of research we employed two main 'sensitising concepts' - 'habitus' and 'transitional space'. Our conception of transitional space was based on a number of complementary psychosocial theories (most notably Bowlby and Winnicott). One of the most consistent findings in the initial data was the importance given by students to the university as a space in which aspects of their identity were explored, renegotiated and sometimes transformed. It also became clear that the way this transitional space is negotiated depends on both the social experience and personal resources at the disposal of students and the support structures offered by the institutions. Bourdieu's (1984; 1990) concept of habitus deployed alongside his theorisation of social, symbolic, cultural and economic capitals and the way they operate in specific fields also offered tools for understanding the enduring impact of social inequality on students lives. This helped to illuminate how learners stories, especially the narratives about learner identity and educational expectations, were clearly shaped and informed by a lived experience of social power.

These concepts underpin the findings discussed below. However, several themes emerged in the data that were not fully addressed using these initial sensitising concepts. The emphasis on self-esteem, on recognition, on reflexivity and a modest but emphatic concern with personal agency in student narratives led us to supplement and problematise our initial sensitising concepts.

In trying to make sense of such data we turned to a range of theories dealing with self-esteem and respect. The ideas of Axel Honneth (1996) whose philosophically rich and ambitious work on recognition proved to be particularly fruitful for teasing out some of the most prominent themes that emerged from the data. Although these ideas do not by any means explain all aspects of the students experience they were key to grasping how the desire for social recognition might be linked to student motivation and student success.

As these ideas underpin many of the main findings it is worth exploring them in some detail here. According to Honneth, for people to achieve a productive relationship with themselves, that is a full sense of identity, requires an intersubjective recognition of their abilities and achievements (1996, p.92). Intersubjective recognition is the foundation of moral consciousness and one develops one's moral understanding of the world through the reactions, both positive and negative, that one receives from other persons in both the private and public spheres. This is part of what Honneth terms 'the struggle for recognition' through which we develop our ideas of what the necessary preconditions are for a flourishing life and our conceptions of justice.

In more concrete and empirical terms the struggle for recognition, based on the need for self-esteem and the experience of disrespect, explains social development. On a personal level it is tied to concepts of identity and worth. This personal struggle is linked to society wide struggles by individuals and social movements for respect and validation. Honneth believes these 'morally motivated struggles of social groups - their collective attempt to establish, institutionally and culturally, expanded forms of recognition' (1995, p.92) can explain the dynamics of social change. The struggle for recognition is thus a complex and layered phenomenon right at the centre of life that is linked to both individual developmental needs and the social imagination.

Recognition does not denote a singular phenomenon. According to Honneth there are three differentiated recognition orders in modern society - the development of which are crucial to understanding the dynamics and history of capitalism and modernity. Each social sphere has developed and instituted its own recognition order which responds to different types of recognition needs. In the immediate interpersonal sphere, of family life, friendship and love relations, the 'singular needy subject' requires love for the development of self-confidence. The recognition by the state and society of the existence of autonomous rights in law offers the basis for self-respect as a citizen. Finally, work and civil society, including it will be argued tertiary education, are the arenas in which we build self-esteem through the knowledge that our efforts are socially valued (Honneth in Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p.161).

Self-confidence is the primary and earliest form of relating to self and is established and developed in relationships of friendship and love and is based on the right to exist. If one experiences love, an ability to love one's self and others develops. One is capable of forging an identity by receiving recognition from others. This is the process by which individuals individuate themselves from others. Without a special relationship with another person it is not possible to become aware of one's own uniqueness and special characteristics. A positive image of one's abilities may develop. This Hegelian model of intersubjective being was developed in new directions by both Dewey and Mead and overlaps with key ideas within Bowlby's Attachment Theory (Fleming, 2008) that maps the relationships of trust that build a secure base for identity and are key to expressing one's needs without fear of rejection. These are the relationships that create trust through being accepted and recognised and they support the expression of one's' needs without fear of abandonment. If this essential ingredient of development is not available, or a negative message about self-worth is given, then the outcome is a potential hiatus or missing piece in the personality that may seek and find 'expression through negative emotional reactions of shame or anger, offence or contempt' (Honneth 1995, p.257).

Self-respect is the second type of relationship to self and develops when a person in a community of rights is given recognition as a morally and legally mature person. Respect is shown to other people by relating to them as having rights. Without rights there is no respect. Securing the rights of the individual is viewed by Honneth as an important social gain that is achieved through 'morally motivated' collective struggles.

The experience of being honoured leads to a form of self-relation that Honneth calls self-esteem - the third form of recognition. The dilemma for the person is whether the community will honour their contribution through work. Work in this sense means both jobs and non-monetary productive activity in society (so it includes activity within civil society, e.g. voluntary work and non-compulsory education). People with high self-esteem will reciprocate a mutual acknowledgement of each other's contribution to the community and provide the basis for meaningful forms of social solidarity (Honneth 2007, p.139). This reciprocal and mutual recognition of each other's work and achievements is a key part of social life. The following chart adapted from Honneth's (1996) *The struggle for recognition* gives an overview of the various elements of this theory.

The importance of respect and recognition also means that disrespect is of key importance to Honneth and he outlines three forms of disrespect that correspond to schema outlined above. At an obvious level, if a child is neglected and humiliated they may lose self-confidence. If they are denied citizenship or denied rights their self-respect may suffer and finally if one's way of life is not recognised or respected then damage is done to one's self-esteem. Abuse, insults, ignoring people, 'put downs' and mudslinging will not only be an injustice (harming people and denying civil rights) but injuries are done to their understanding of themselves, their identity. For Honneth these experiences of disrespect and social invisibility are vital to understanding social experience and need to be given due consideration and weight in any theory of social justice (Honneth, 2007).

Forms of relating to self	Forms of recognition	Forms of disrespect	Component of personality
Self Confidence	Parent secure attachment & love and care	Neglect, abuse, emotional Neglect	Physical integrity & psychological damage
Self-respect	Legal rights	Violation of legal rights, civil and human rights and employment rights	Social integrity And treated as an object
Self-esteem	Community of practice, respect & solidarity	Bullying, ignoring, excluding, constant negative feedback	Honour, dignity,

Table 1: Honneth's Forms of Relating to Self and Forms of Recognition

The dynamics of recognition and disrespect featured prominently in this research project. Repeatedly interviewees indicated that student success and failure have a complex and significant relationship with the question of social recognition in terms which are in many ways identical to Honneth's model. Intersubjective recognition emerged as a key theme in our data and has been central in students' accounts of their motivation for applying to college and their determination 'to stay the course'. The students we spoke to were clearly not seeking status or prestige alone but rather recognition, which touches on both one's 'private' sense of self and one's 'public' self.

We believe this 'struggle for recognition' helps to frame many of the empirical findings which are explored in the following section of this report. This does not of course, mean that the other sensitising concepts are irrelevant. In fact we suggest that the interplay of the of the original sensitising concepts of transitional space and habitus with a theory of recognition offers a useful framework for making sense of the data gathered on student experience in relation to broader questions about structure, agency and identity.

Factors that Promote or Constrain Access and Retention

Student resilience and high levels of determination to succeed in education. Asked what explained their persistence and success in education participants almost invariably said '*I want this*' and '*I am going to do what it takes*'. The emphasis on personal resilience was one of the most common themes in the interviews and deserves careful consideration. Many of the students we interviewed had to overcome serious social, personal and financial obstacles to attend college. In fact a number of students drew on their 'non-traditional' status as a source of resilience. Some struggled right through their degree with financial and academic challenges, often with relatively little support, but stayed the course because getting a degree was seen as meaningful and significant.

All students offered multifactorial, complex explanations for their determination. It is possible to generalise though and for the majority it was mainly, although not exclusively, rooted in the desire for social recognition in similar terms to the model outlined above. It should be noted that this is not a simple phenomenon and takes various forms and includes a desire for greater social equality and 'inclusion', the meeting of perceived personal developmental needs and greater choice in the labour market. As such this cannot be understood simply as an 'inherent' personal characteristic but the outcome of complex interplay between structural demands and reflexive agency in search of 'a good life'.

Credentialisation, Higher Education and Social Mobility. This sense of agency and determination only makes sense if tertiary education is seen as an important sphere of recognition both by students and by society as a whole. One of the clearest themes found in the student data concerns the changing role of Higher Education in Irish society. Most of the interviewees believe that a primary degree is a basic and necessary requirement in the Irish labour market. Academic credentials are increasingly seen as 'normative' especially among the young students we spoke to during the research. For a number of students their decision to attend HE was based in part on encountering barriers to promotion in the workplace without a degree. Others felt that without a degree they would remained confined to routine and unrewarding work for the rest of their lives. A number of students were also enrolled in courses (for example Social Care) which have only recently been professionalised and where previously a job could be secured without a degree. Unsurprisingly, the large majority of the students on such courses were non-traditional. Nearly all the interviewees (except those who had already retired or were ill) believed that a degree would afford them a greater degree of social mobility or at the very least copper fasten their current social position.

Students who have migrated to Ireland from elsewhere see HE as a way of 'integrating' themselves into Irish society. It was remarkable how often migrants framed this as wholly *their* responsibility and as a way of proving their worth which may suggest that many migrants feel undervalued in Irish society. Credentials for this cohort were important not only to ensure future social mobility but as a mark of full citizenship which they believed would be important for the future integration of their family into Irish society. While the majority felt they had much to offer, most of them did not feel that this was necessarily obvious to people born in Ireland. In

other words recognition in these cases was linked to a desire to be acknowledged as a valid member of society.

External Supports Despite the emphasis on personal agency students consistently stressed that they relied on a network of financial, institutional, family and peer supports to get into HE in the first place and to succeed in completing their course.

1.　　**Financial support** Provision by the state of grants and allowances to non-traditional students had a double significance for our interviewees. Firstly, in practical terms it made access to Higher Education possible and secondly, it was seen by many as evidence that Irish society and the state recognised and *wanted* non-traditional students in Higher Education. This is important as many had previously thought of HE as being 'not for them' for cultural and financial reasons. The two most significant sources of financial support were county council grants and the Back to Education scheme (a widening access initiative see the Institutional Report for more detail). Repeatedly students stressed that without such supports they could not have enrolled in tertiary education. However, a significant minority of mature students did not rely on state funding and used personal savings and family income to pay their way through college. It was noticeable that many within this particular cohort of self-funding students found the financial burden increasingly onerous as they progressed through college.

2.　　**Institutional supports** The students drew on a wide range of institutional supports within and outside HE. Most mature students went through access courses or attended community education projects before coming to college. Within these courses the encouragement from adult education tutors, other students and career guidance counsellors was a key part of many students access 'story'. Again this was often couched in 'recognition' terms in which capabilities or potential capabilities were acknowledged. This was, for obvious reasons, less important for young non-traditional students but a significant number of this cohort came through access courses which link colleges to designated schools in working class areas. Once in HE most non-traditional students of all ages used student support services and had contact with access offices where staff was viewed very positively. One of the most consistent findings is that 'access' staff are performing an invaluable work for most non-traditional students. In all institutions the majority of the teaching staff were described as being supportive and helpful. However, there were some notable exceptions to this and the negative impact of this on access and retention will be explored in greater depth later in the report.

3.　　**Family giving emotional and financial support** This was fundamental to most students perseverance. Repeatedly, family members' interventions were seen as the key to 'success'. When this support was not available or was more rhetorical than real the extra pressure on the student was clearly discernible. The emotional and financial support offered by families and personal sacrifices and commitment of students was regularly described as a collective investment in the family's 'cultural capital'. Acquiring a degree was seen as useful not just in personal terms but as an investment in the entire family's future. In particular, it was described as a good example to younger members of the family and as a contribution to the stock of family 'know-how' – i.e., a knowledge of how the system works, what the supports and obstacles are etc. Significantly, many mature students stressed that this lack of knowledge about how the system works had hampered them previously in making their way through the education system.

4.   **Academic support** was less forthcoming from family members as most of those
      interviewed

were the first in their family to attend Higher Education. However, in several cases the interviewees' partners were in a position to offer some intellectual support. Another indication of the changing profile of students tertiary education is that we encountered a number of families where parents along with their adult children were attending college at the same time and in some cases this led to parent and their son or daughter supporting each other as they went through college.

5.   **Peer support,** both academically and emotionally, emerged as a very important factor in student success. Strong peer groups are particularly important for overcoming challenges, stress and periods of disillusionment and especially for working out the how to deal with the sometimes unclear demands of 'college knowledge'. Mature students were more likely to stress the academic nature of peer support and young non-traditional students were more likely to emphasise the social role of peer support but it is clear that for all students peer groups offer invaluable emotional, social and academic support.

6.   **Personal development and a 'significant other.'** Many students also highlighted

and discussed one particular friend, tutor and less commonly a HE staff member that had shown interest and/or faith in them as a learner. The relationship with the significant other was seen as particularly important even if the learner was no longer in regular contact with the person. The importance stems from the recognition of an unfulfilled capacity or desire which allowed the student to imagine themselves as something 'more' than what they were.

Summary: Understanding Access and Retention in Irish HE
It is impossible to isolate one single factor or a single support that helps explain student success but student resilience comes closest to the being 'the' retention factor. As explained earlier we believe that stories of determination and resilience are stories shaped by social experience rather than being a static, inherent individual quality. In this regard it is worth noting that some of the most determined students were those who had previously dropped out of a different institution and were now returning to complete what they viewed as an 'interrupted' learning journey.

Student access and retention is shaped by labour market demands, developmental needs and external supports. Non-traditional students rely on a complex and delicate ecosystem of formal and informal supports to get through college. There is a broad pattern that financial support and institutional measures allow people to access HE in the first place while personal resilience along with the right type of peer and family support are the key factors in staying the course over the medium term. Institutional support for students facing difficulties throughout the degree is indispensible but is usually accessed episodically. The notion that there is a support structure and along with access officers were important, even for the students who did not use these services.

Retention needs to be thought through in terms of the increasingly credentialisation of Irish life and the availability of other viable life choices. For many non-traditional students a wide range of 'other' options do not always exist. Higher Education is seen as a vital part of a move away

from limited options. Consequently, withdrawal is often not even entertained as an idea. The level of stress entailed in such a firm commitment to Higher Education is difficult to overstate and in a number of cases people have put themselves under considerable pressure (especially in terms of time, curtailing family activities, severing ties with the extended family and friends) to get through courses. It also appears that in a sizeable number of cases people have not been adequately prepared for the course upon which they have embarked. For these students staying the course involves very punishing routines in which they try to balance their various responsibilities.

It should also be noted that the disciplines and subjects 'chosen' by students do not on the whole include high income and high status professional degrees (e.g., medicine). The students in the sample are far more likely to choose Arts, Social Sciences and Applied and vocational degrees than other disciplines. This differentiation within HE has public policy implications in a State where professionals are particularly well paid. Moreover, it is noticeable that non-traditional students are choosing routes through education quite different from the public policy priorities that emphasise science and engineering as drivers of economic development as well as the education of skilled workers for a high-tech knowledge economy. Currently non-traditional students are choosing and being steered towards work and careers in areas that are open to Humanities and Social Science graduates (e.g., teaching) rather than managerial, higher professional or highly specialised technical jobs.

Factors that Constrain Retention

Finance For those who did not qualify for financial assistance and did not have financial support from family or spouse, getting through the degree was difficult. Financial problems was one of the three most commonly cited causes for non-completion (it should be noted however most students' explanations of their decisions to leave college were multifactorial - this will be discussed in greater detail below).

Caring duties place a considerable burden on students. In particular looking after ill family members and young children is very difficult to combine with third level study as it is currently structured. Family care is still very gendered and although most students saw their family as supportive a number of female students found combining study with family care work extremely onerous. These students schedules were incredibly busy with college work often completed while travelling home or at quiet moments at work. In some cases women were actively discouraged or faced with deteriorating family relations as a consequence of attending college. This was rarely the case for male students.

Significant life events. When asked what might lead them to leave college before completion the interviewees invariably replied sickness, bereavement or a very marked change in their financial circumstances. A significant number of students, mainly in their twenties, who left college without completing their course, did so after a break up with their partner. It should be noted that these transformative life events are not *always* negative and in a small number of cases people left college because of new and previously unforeseen opportunities in their lives.

Mental health (and in particular depression) emerged as a highly significant factor in student non-completion. Most students faced with mental health problems did avail of institutional

supports and felt that counsellors, access officers and teaching staff had been helpful. In most cases the mental health issue pre-existed college but in some cases it was exacerbated because of the demands and stresses of study and life at college. Moreover, not completing college left some students feeling more isolated than before beginning a degree.

Some students had very **limited information before embarking upon their studies.** This manifested itself in four ways. Firstly, unrealistic expectations about the workload and/or benefits of a course. Secondly, struggling with academic demands for which they were not prepared and thirdly, though this was not common, finding themselves on a course that was not sufficiently challenging academically. Fourthly, a small number of non-traditional students were unaware of institutional and state supports.

The three case study colleges have very different **institutional habituses** which has had a clear impact on student experience but, interestingly, no clear relation to the likliehood of retention. There is no doubt that for a large numbers of students from similar backgrounds on a given campus, that the orientation of the institution to non-traditional students affects students' sense of ownership of the institution. This sense of ownership creates a more positive and less stressful college experience. As might be expected a noticeable gap between student's social habitus and the institutional habitus will lead to a sense of cultural isolation and create problems and difficulties for students. However, an elite habitus either across a whole institution or within a specific discipline, while usually alienating, was not a key factor in non-completion amongst the students to whom we spoke. Nonetheless, there is some evidence that an elite habitus appears to militate against the development of effective peer support networks either because the atmosphere is very competitive or non-traditional students remain in very small numbers. Being seen as an anomaly or being invisible can be frustrating and discouraging but it does not seem to be a key factor affecting non-completion. However, it does seem to affect students subject choice in institutions in which, as they progress, they narrow their main focus of study. A small majority of students faced with these choices moved away from the department or discipline that was 'elite'.

Summary-understanding non-completion in Irish HE
Overall, the decision to leave is usually taken in the first term when academic preparedness or incorrect subject choice clearly becomes an issue (first or second assignment/exams) or students are faced with having to repeat a year. For those who leave later it is usually prompted by an acute personal crisis or significant life event. However, these events were usually the catalyst rather than the cause of non-completion. All the students who did not complete offered multifactorial explanations for leaving college. Those at most risk of 'non-completion' are students who begin a course with little sense of focus or sense of their own resilience, with low levels of family support and/or low levels of peer support and precarious finances. Social isolation, money worries, academic difficulties are often in the background before the crisis. Lack of preparation, isolation and a 'thin' network of supports are the best predictor of non-completion. Young men in particular seen to be more at risk and a disproportionate number of young men to whom we spoke entered college with low levels of support and with unrealistic expectations about the nature of the course.

Overall, non-completion was experienced in some sense as a *personal* failure even when leaving was seen as the best thing to do or even the only realistic option available to students. There were

notable exceptions to this such as the case of a middle class student who entered college with other, arguably better, employment and training options available to him through the family business which he then chose to avail of and a woman who became pregnant during her studies and believed she would go back when the time is right. However, most non-completers accounts stressed their personal responsibility or their individual circumstances rather than institutional practices and structures. The impact of leaving college in several cases only served to heighten a sense of social isolation and several students discussed feeling trapped and frustrated. This sense of personal failure is compounded by the fact that grants cannot be held by students if they have to repeat a year making 'drop out' something irrevocable for many working class students. However, paradoxically most of the students interviewed who had not completed their degree still valued HE and many were considering returning to college in the future.

This is part of a broader pattern. The higher education system is viewed as very rigid both in terms of the manner in which a degree can be acquired (in terms of time commitments and the structure of courses etc) and in terms of the possibility of movement between institutions. The grant system does not support part-time students and this means many students, particularly mature students, have to take on full-time courses even though other commitments in terms of paid work and care make it very difficult to participate properly in these degrees. Many students did not know how to transfer between courses or institutions and greater flexibility and clarity about this is required both in terms of best educational practice and in terms of retention. There are such institutional rigidities.

Despite some clear flaws and rigidities in Irish HE, and occasionally, bad and insensitive teaching the institutional dimension of dropout was downplayed by most students. This appears to be rooted in two things. Firstly, students see HE as pregiven and largely unalterable system to which *they* have to adapt and secondly access offices and the majority of staff were praised generously by the interviewees for the efforts taken to avoid them leaving or to encourage them to return in the future.

The only interview in which the failure of the system was fore grounded in terms of retention was with a migrant without full citizenship rights who due to immigration law was forced to drop out because of cost of fees. Fees for non EU students are very high (which reflects the fact that historically 'non-nationals' studying in Ireland were mainly wealthy foreign students). However, the application of these rules to migrants who are living long term in Ireland from HE means that they are excluded from HE and life is 'put on hold.'

Limits to the Construction of Learner Identities that Enable or Inhibit Completion
The longitudinal nature of the research offered rich insights into the development of learner identity. Most of the non-traditional students began college with an uncertain and tentative learner identity in the sense that they felt unsure of their ability to cope with the intellectual demands of a degree course. Over the three years of the study one of most striking findings is how successful most of the students have been in constructing a more positive learner identity.

This initial lack of confidence was often the legacy of negative experiences in compulsory education which led students at the very least to think of themselves as not the 'type' of person

who should be in Higher Education or even in some cases to consider themselves 'stupid'. Often this is where the social class dimensions of the participants' learner identity was most clearly evident. Repeatedly working class interviewees linked the low expectations and disrespect they encountered in school to the fact they did not come from a privileged social background. This combined with economic pressure and a lack of detailed knowledge about how educational systems functioned in their family led many of them to finish studying prematurely (this is from the students' perspective now rather than a normative judgement). The legacy of such experiences in terms of learner identity cannot be underestimated. As such, class inequality can affect people long after school even if they have experienced upward occupational mobility (primarily through expectations and learner identity). However, in the right circumstances this sense of being previously excluded can be a resource for student resilience in which students attempt to prove to themselves and others their capability.

It should be noted that younger students saw third level education as more 'normal' in a way that mature students did not. With few exceptions, they also view social background as less important in determining their life chances than older students and were also more likely to describe their time in schools in positive terms. However, this is a complicated phenomenon as the number of young working class students, particularly those who came from less financially secure families, felt there was a discernible gap between them and 'traditional' students in terms of resources and expectations.

For some of the female interviewees gender expectations in their birth family meant that they were discouraged from pursuing their studies. This is true of students from all socio-economic backgrounds and includes middle class families where Higher Education was the norm for the male members. In a minority of cases women also had partners or close family members who were very unsympathetic or actively discouraged their studies. Again this tendency was more pronounced in the mature student cohort.

Changing learner identity
Most people with whom we spoke nurtured a vague desire to return to education after school and in most cases a concrete plan to return to formal learning usually happened once it became 1) financially viable (usually through grants and access schemes); 2) they had a positive learning experience in which their sense of being a capable learner was validated (usually in informal peer learning groups, night courses, community education etc); 3) peers and/or a significant others offered encouragement and advice. This suggests that a positive learner identity was created gradually through an engagement with formal educational institutions that offer recognition and encouragement. Entering into Higher Education is often the culmination of this process and thus university was regularly described by mature students as offering opportunities that were systematically denied to them in schools.

The burden of recognition in pedagogy
On the other hand when lecturers or staff were offhand or treated students experience as irrelevant this caused students to deeply question their capacity and suitability for the course. The impact of careless words and deeds is always out of proportion to their intention. In a number of cases some students experienced very thoughtless and even condescending treatment from staff. Nearly all the students who had such experiences considered leaving college.

Students' learning biographies and the forces that shape them, such as class and gender need to be acknowledged, understood and properly contextualised in Higher Education. In practical terms this requires pedagogy and curricula that speaks directly to the social and life experiences and needs of non-traditional students. It also requires time and space for learning relationships based on dialogue to develop. The schedules of both staff and students and the dependence on large scale teaching methods (i.e., large lectures) make such interactions quite unlikely. Learner identity is profoundly relational and contextual. This is part of the reason why recognition by peers and university staff in the early stages of a degree is so crucial. Many non-traditional students are looking for signs that they do or do not fit in at this point. Clear and comprehensive feedback as early as possible about the nature and form of academic knowledge is recommended. Approachable teaching staff are clearly an important support.

Fostering positive learner identity and retention
The first year and in particular the initial two months in the first year of study are crucial in terms of fostering a positive learner identity and encouraging retention. This depends on (1) the right subject choice (2) early and comprehensive feedback and support from the institution about the requirements, skills and assessment criteria in academic work. As students progress this helps foster a positive learner identity (3) academic preparedness (4) healthy social dynamics and the formation of peer support networks (5) understanding of recognition needs by staff and expressed in pedagogy, curricula and approach. Fostering peer support networks and social fora is an important part of ensuring student success. Designing social and pedagogical spaces which support the development of such networks is a neglected aspect of access and retention policies.

Policy, Cultural and Institutional Process that Assist or Hinder Completion
Access policies have had a large impact on tertiary education and designated access groups have undoubtedly benefitted. Nonetheless, recent research does alert us to the necessity of continually revisiting the way we define designated categories for access. For instance both policymakers (HEA,2008) and academic researchers (Fleming, Loxley, Kenny & Finnegan, 2010). have highlighted the declining numbers of students from non-manual socio-economic groups. Understanding of access on and retention requires up to date data (particularly data which looks at the relationship between these two things) which has historically been very piecemeal. The HEA (Mooney, Patterson, O'Connor & Chantler, 2010) report marks a significant improvement on this and further disaggregated data alongside in-depth qualitative research will be fundamental to informed policy in the future.

Retention has become a 'system' measure of success in Irish Higher Education and as a consequence there is an institutional sensitivity to this issue. This has resulted in a number of initiatives in the past decade including the establishment of inter university network. Initiatives like this and the practice of conducting exit interviews by colleges are to be welcomed. However, while institutions are rhetorically and organisationally orientated towards retaining students this is not always reflected in systems of evaluation, flexible progress routes or most significantly in pedagogy. These deserve consideration and require seminars and training for college staff.

On an institutional and cultural level as indicated already students highly value approachable staff, clear feedback and inclusive pedagogy. A sense of ownership is also fostered by a high level of visibility and the numbers of non-traditional students within an institution. It also helped

if the institution designs its 'bureaucratic' and teaching spaces to be open, friendly and on as small scale as possible.

Given the findings on the importance of peer support, subject choice and developing a positive learner identity a more general modular semester along the lines of a 'taster menu' might be worth considering. This would emphasise a range of liberal arts and sciences along with collaborative and cooperative learning activities aimed at fostering peer networks.

The Benefits for Self and Society of Participating in HE

Overall, a large majority of the students interviewed believe that they have benefitted from their time in college. College was almost unanimously seen as a positive transitional space for self-improvement and change. Most commonly it is seen as giving people greater levels of confidence and self-esteem. This confidence is in themselves as a person, as a learner and as a citizen and offers 'proof' of their social worth.

The experience of going to college undoubtedly strengthens students' sense of being competent and capable learners who are enthused by studying and learning. In other words getting through college, especially for mature students, encourages a learner identity orientated to lifelong learning.

Positive learner identity was described by some as an important part of developing a public self. The process of studying and exploring complex ideas has made them feel more capable in terms of critically understanding and contributing to public discourses. Often interviewees would discuss current events and issues and how some text or remark in class has made them view society differently. Over time this has fostered a sense of entitlement and capacity for intervention and participation in society. This was mainly discussed by mature students but a small number of students, all under 22 years of age, mentioned becoming student 'activists' and how this experience had given them tools for engaged citizenship.

For many, studying at college marked the end of educational exclusion that occurred earlier in life (usually classed and gendered exclusions) and typically overcoming this was seen as an integral part of overcoming the 'hidden injuries' of structural inequality.

It is commonly believed that going to college improves job prospects and employability and that having a degree is the *sine qua non* for rewarding work regardless of how one defines it (i.e., in term of status, monetary return or work which is itself seen as satisfying and interesting). In vocationally orientated courses studying is described as a process of formation and becoming a professional. In nearly every case people on vocational courses described one of the key benefits of studying as becoming a more socially valuable person.

For first generation college students one of the main benefits of attending college is that they see themselves as 'pathfinders'. The interviewees highly value the fact that by going to college they offer a credible example of achievement for other members of their family and friends. Most often this is described as changing the family story of education and that this means siblings or the students' own children are more likely to follow them to college. To a lesser extent people describe themselves as a positive example for their community. This is particularly the case when students come from the least wealthy and most disadvantaged sections of Irish society and

this is often seen as proof that people from similar background can achieve things, given the opportunity.

Studying at third level is simultaneously seen as an important act of personal agency, a contribution to their family's and community's cultural capital, the key to future social mobility and part of becoming a full and entitled citizen. As such the personal and social benefits are inextricably linked. This was clear even when interviewees, usually women who have been the primary caregivers in families, said that going to college was something they had decided to do 'for themselves' for personal developmental reasons. In further discussion it became clear that these 'personal' goals also involved complex social ambitions. What is striking about the way these various social and personal benefits are construed as recognition needs which are both deeply personal and profoundly intersubjective. Even the most instrumentally orientated students described study as a developmental process which could lead to a more developed self and increased social respect.

How and why third level education should occupy this function is open to speculation and the extent to which studying for a degree does ''objectively' bring all these benefits is moot. In this regard is worth noting that recent research has shown that several years after finishing a degree confidence and self-esteem are viewed as one of the main benefits of study by graduates even if the monetary returns on study have not been as high as they had anticipated (Fleming, Loxley, Kenny & Finnegan, 2010).

Structural, Cultural and Personal Dialectics of Learning and Agency of Students

The following section offers two detailed accounts from individual students of their learning lives. This mode of presentation is in keeping with one of the key aims of the research - to foreground student experiences and student voices in analyses of Higher Education.

Every single student interview has its own nuances and emphases and neither of these narratives is being offered as a 'typical' narrative. We certainly do not want to reduce any student to an 'ideal type'. However, we believe both of these stories illustrate some of the empirical and theoretical findings that have emerged most prominently in this research. More importantly we believe that such narrative account best illustrates the structural, cultural and personal dialectics of learning and agency in a way that carries a sense of the lived experience of the students who have been at the core of this research project

Learner's Story 1: Katy

Katy is in her 30s. She is a bright, reflective and forthcoming person and proved to be a very fluent and engaging interviewee, Each time we met with Katy it was clear that she had thought through many of the things we discussed in the interview in great detail and in real depth beforehand. From early on in the research process she was very candid about her life and her learning experiences. She also analysed the institutional and pedagogical organisation of the course in which she was enrolled in a very sophisticated way. As we shall see her insights into her experience of Higher Education reflects her broader biography especially her experience of schooling, her passion for learning and her experience at work before taking the degree.

Katy grew up in Dublin with her two parents and 5 siblings. The family lived in a cottage with a lot of green space nearby and Katy reminisces fondly about playing near the house. Her mother worked in administrative job until her marriage and her father worked in transport until he was made redundant in the Katy's late teens which left the family struggling financially. The family was a close but also '*hectic*' and at times even '*turbulent*'.

In the interviews with Katy it became clear just how important learning stories can be in personal biographies. She returned to the subject of schooling quite often in our discussions '*I always refer to myself as the person who fell through the cracks……in school*'. Despite finishing her leaving certificate she did not feel supported or encouraged in school by teachers or guidance counsellors. In school she slowly internalised the idea that she'*was stupid*'. Although, she may have suspected that this was not completely true it subsequently became an important part of her internal conversation about herself as a learner and a person. Although she does not speak angrily about this sense of being overlooked and misrecognised she does maintain a sense of it being unjust and linked to access to power and social class. Her story illustrates how institutions, the interventions of individual teachers and structural inequalities play out in learning stories. She says the school favoured the middle class students and remembers a teacher saying to her mother;

> *It doesn't matter if she doesn't pass the class she is just going to end up in a job anyway. She'll never get to college. So I felt then that was the perception of someone who was over me. He was a teacher and he was intelligent and powerful. He was telling my mum; 'don't worry if she doesn't get it she never will......She is never going to progress to something else'. [She began to think that] maybe that is who I am. I am not meant to be in college. So from that moment on I didn't apply myself.*

At home there was not much support either. Her father had left work young to go to work and although he had an '*amazing mechanical mind. He could fix anything*' he did not have the opportunity to develop his basic educational skills. Her mother had finished school and was very intellectually curious but according to Katy was '*held back*' by circumstances- the demands of rearing a family and the gendered expectations of her era. This includes both leaving work and ensuring that she behaved in a way that did not highlight the difference in educational attainment between her and her husband. As a consequence

> *My mum and dad didn't know how to fill out a CAO form [the Irish university application form] and I had no idea how to do it. I didn't even know what that meant.*

As a result of institutional misrecognition linked to class expectations, gendered family power dynamics and low levels of cultural know-how about the workings of the educational system Katy left school unsure of her options and sense of being an underachiever.

It appears from other things she says that this negative learner identity was not the whole story and her estimation of herself was more complex and multilayered than the judgements made by teachers. Katy suspected that she had capabilities that were not being tapped but nonetheless the dominant story remained that she was '*stupid*'.

After school she worked in shops and service work and then applied for a Further Education course '*But it wasn't really college*' to her mind. *S*he eventually got work in a transnational corporation. She worked her way up and became a capable and trusted member of staff. However, within a few years she had reached a point beyond which she could not have been promoted without a degree. Frustratingly she saw people with less experience than her and who had spent less time in the company get promoted ahead of her. She was '*respected*' at work but she was still concerned about her capability as a learner. She also maintained a sense that there was more to life and that she had not fully developed her capacities and that she wanted work that matched her deeper concerns and interests. She decided

> *I wanted to go back [to education] for my own self-esteem to try to see can I do this.*

Katy enrolled in part-time course and later an access courses. It is probably worth noting that at roughly the same time her mother and her partner started to consider enrolling in third level college. Three other things made her desire to return to learning a possibility. Firstly, Katy's company decided to relocate to Asia. *'I was made redundant'* she says and in slightly surreal twist in how the movements of global capital impacts on lives Katy found herself taking part in this process. As part of her final project in the company she was flown thousands of kilometres to the new site to help prepare and train the new workers for their jobs. Secondly, the financial cost of returning to college was eased.

> *I looked up back to education and just that year in the budget they made it possible for people who had been made redundant to go back immediately without having to be unemployed for 12 months.*

Along with the grant this meant it was possible to go to college albeit on a tight budget. Thirdly, her care responsibilities for other family members eased and some of the internal family dynamics that had held her educational ambitions in check changed.

In discussing her motivation for coming to college Katy is emphatic that her decision was not motivated by a desire for more money afterwards but greater choice in work and a job that was closer to her own interests and desires. Even more emphatically she links coming to college with self-esteem and proving her worth and undoing the impact of disrespect and low expectations. A sense of how she construes her choices can be gathered from the following exchange. Katy was discussing her future plans after her course and says

> *I would love the idea of helping and teaching.*

Asked why she responds;

> *Because I wasn't helped. No one recognized any potential in me. You see these inspirational movies. Like a basketball coach comes in and inspires the kids to become scholars. I always had aspirations to do well, but at the time my family life wasn't built in such a way that I was getting that from my home life. My mom and dad weren't able for various reasons to support me in that way. But I would have loved a teacher or someone to recognize potential in me. To say this person is not performing, but it is not because they are stupid. It is not because they can't do it. But no one recognized the potential ever. I have aspirations of helping in such a way of recognizing in others the reasons they*

are not achieving…. That I would be someone who would recognize and realize there is a different way.

This is a key part of her motivation for attending college and for staying the course. As Katy has progressed through college she has become more critical of the course she is enrolled in for a number of reasons. Most significantly she experienced very thoughtless treatment from a small number of staff members. At one point she even considered leaving because of her treatment. She outlines a pattern of deeply inconsiderate and disrespectful actions by one staff member that left her feeling disenchanted and discouraged. Overcoming this has taken great personal resilience and the support of her mother and partner. It is noteworthy that he has also drawn strength from being supportive of other students at the same time. Although she does not say this explicitly it appears that offering peer support and helping others has helped her to retain a sense of what is important in life and study in the face of challenges.

Despite these drawbacks college has been a transitional space for Katy. She has excelled at her academic studies and she is considering a postgraduate degree and her course has bolstered her desire for a different and in her view more socially valuable form of work.

In discussing her learning story and her life story it is clear that Katy's decision to come to college was informed by a desire for recognition of her capability as human being and developing her abilities in a way that can contribute to the flourishing of others. It is significant that this was she carried a sense of an undeveloped capability linked to the experience of disrespect and misrecognition in school and work. It is apparent in Katy's story how the structural inequalities of gender and class in families, institutions and society play a significant part in the formation of learner identity. Renegotiating her learner identity in college has been a very meaningful process which is underpinned by the logic of intersubjective recognition as it relates to both her private and public self

Katy has thrived in college mainly through her own resilience and by offering and benefitting from peer support. Her story also indicates, we thin, just how significant acknowledging or ignoring recognition needs might be for pedagogy and institutional practices.

Leaner's Story 2: Laura

Consider Laura, a middle aged student in her final year of university. She told a story of significant disadvantage including periods of long-term institutionalization as an adult. Her childhood was a period of serious poverty. She volunteered that the concept of 'non-traditional' did not do justice to the life she had led nor did it capture the full colour, variety, range of events accidents, tragedies, successes, achievements, experiences with drugs, the medical profession, attempts to take her own life and abuse.

I always thought I was stupid…I could survive on the streets but I had no academic knowledge.

Her journey to university commenced in a workshop for adults. A supervisor encouraged her to return to education by recognising that she had '*something*.' The support though modest (a series

of gifts that recognised her interests and her desire to learn) were experienced as recognition of her intelligence:

> *They were seeing something...I think my reaction to the books they gave me...I thought they were the mad ones. They could see me starting college, they told me this since. That's what they said anyway. You come across people who, no matter how stupid or unaware you are of your ability, they can see something and they point it out.*

The phrase '*they can see something*' was repeated a number of times in her narrative and it gave her the experience that '*someone might take me seriously*.' Such stories tell of moments of recognition and these moments are profoundly developmental. But they are always, it seems, also unpredictable as one cannot tell in advance (or at the time) which moment or event of recognition will trigger the 'experience of being recognised' as Honneth expresses it.

In spite of thinking she was stupid she always *tried to fight the system* and when asked how she achieved her success so far she replied;

> *It was just my own will power you come across people who, no matter how stupid you are or how unaware you are of your ability and they find space for you...and it's people in education too...They were saying I had what it takes [to study at university].*

She goes on to take up a common theme for many students and talks about noticing the difference in social class between her and other students. These obvious and felt differences form a barrier between students from non-traditional and those from more middle-class backgrounds. One student spoke about not being able to make any connection with students from a different background and these are part of the not so hidden injuries of class.

Students can be strategic about how they navigate the complex world of university and Laura know (in her words);

> *If I hit a hurdle and I can't get over it, I'm going to fail.*

So the choice of programme, or subject or options within a subject choice are selected in order to enhance the chance of being successful and the probability of success is built into the choice of subjects;

> *Because it's what I want to do and not what someone else thinks I should do.*

It could be argued that this partly explains why so many non-traditional students study humanities and social sciences as there is the perception at least that, in contrast to professional programmes, there is latitude for choice, opinion and meaning making within the discipline. And this connection with one's own personal learning agenda is confirmed by Laura who in the programme was able to conclude that;

> *I found the words. I found language acceptable to me and those I'm mixing with....*

to express and articulate her experiences.

Conclusion
This is certainly not a simple or one-dimensional story of access, retention and non-completion. The narratives are complex, multi-layered and so too the policy and pedagogical responses need to similarly multi-factorial. However, too often system interventions (though many seem to have worked well and are well received by students) have had modest impact on the final figures of retention. It is not clear what the system would accept as an appropriate level of completion (if it is not 100 per cent). One solution has not been tried. It is a simple one. Ask the students, involve them in the planning and decision making. They already have the motivation to succeed, they may just know what will work for them.

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