

**An Examination of Adult Access in Higher Education in  
Ireland: Policy and Practice**

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**Submitted to the University of Limerick for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

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**Submitted to the University of Limerick, July 2013**

## Abstract

### **An Examination of Adult Access in Higher Education in Ireland: Policy and Practice**

The rationale for this study is to examine the under-researched relationship between national policy and higher education practice in relation to contemporary access initiatives for adult learners in Ireland. This study involves researching the theme of adult access provision in four diverse third-level providers in Ireland and will examine institutional responses, as well as student perspectives, on national access policies and aims to answer the following overarching research question, *given the nature of higher education, why and in what way do Irish higher education institutions provide access for adult learners and, to what extent, if any, has such access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education professionals?* The research findings in this study will make a contribution to the field of access to higher education for adults in an Irish context, where there is a dearth of literature.

The literature draws mainly from the area of the politics of education, evaluative studies on higher education and access. Key policy documents at national, supra-national and international levels were also reviewed. From this review, two divergent models of higher education organisations were identified: the traditional collegial model, which focuses on the endogenous environment, and the new public management (NPM) model, which is more exogenously driven. Access is one of the areas within higher education that is at the nexus of this theoretical debate. One overarching theoretical model which provides a way of conceptualising adult access initiatives within the complex endogenous and exogenous higher education landscape is Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS). This study draws on CAS as an analytical framework.

In terms of methodology, this study adopts a mainly qualitative approach in the constructivist and interpretivist epistemological tradition, using a mixed methods case study approach. As part of the study, fieldwork involving a sample of 77 participants was undertaken. Selected using purposive sampling, 37 semi-structured interviews with staff and institutional managers were conducted and 40 students participated in eight focus groups with an average of five participants across four diverse higher education institutions in Ireland. A number of additional qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were used, including institutional documentation review.

Key findings focus on the significant impact of government policies on access and show that there has been change in many areas of practice at meso level and also, as a consequence, at micro level. Specifically, all institutions have engaged in extensive environmental planning and have developed a wide range of organisational policies, processes and structures for the implementation of adult access. In addition, all institutions have responded to national policy recommendations by either adapting, or re-structuring, existing curricula and learning opportunities locally for greater adult access and a range of new partnerships have evolved. These findings suggest that adult access initiatives have resulted in a degree of change at the level of the institution, although there was also some evidence of continuity of existing practices.

## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any other awards at this or at any other academic establishment. Where use has been made of the work of other people, it has been fully acknowledged and referenced.

## **Acknowledgements**

Sincere thanks and gratitude to my supervisors, Drs. Anne O’Keeffe and Caroline Healy, for their advice, guidance and encouragement throughout the dissertation process.

Many thanks also to my colleagues, Dr. James Binchy, Dr. Brian Clancy, Dearbhala McCarthy, Brid Hennessy, Niamh Armstrong, Emma Barry, Aine Finucane and Dr. Helen Kelly-Holmes for all their assistance in so many ways.

To all the research participants: senior managers, academic and professional staffs and students across the four case sites, sincere thanks for participating so willingly and giving of your time so generously.

To the senior managers in MIC who supported me during this process, in particular, Professor Michael Breen, Professor Michael Healy and Professor Jim Deegan. Many thanks.

Last, but by no means least, I wish to express my gratitude to my parents, Pat and Pat Brosnan, my sister, Katie, my husband, Declan, and our children, Paddy and Maggie. Thank you for bearing with me!

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## List of Acronyms

Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD)  
Access made Accessible (AMA)  
Accredited Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)  
Central Applications Office (CAO)  
Central Statistics Office (CSO)  
Certificate in General Studies (CGS)  
Community Liaison Officer (CLO)  
Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS)  
Conference of Student Services of Ireland (CSSI)  
Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT)  
Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA)  
European Access Network (EAN)  
European Area of Higher Education (EHEA)  
European Social Fund (ESF)  
European Union (EU)  
Foras Áisteanna Saothair (FÁS)  
Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)  
Gross Domestic Product (GDP)  
Health Service Executive (HSE)  
Higher Education Institution (HEI)  
Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS)  
Higher Education Training Awards Council (HETAC)  
Higher Education Authority (HEA)  
Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS)  
Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT)  
Institutes of Technology (IoTs)  
International Monetary Fund (IMF)  
Institutes of Technology, Ireland (IoTI)  
Irish University Association (IUA)  
Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB)  
Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)  
Learning Development Centre (LDC)  
Lifelong Learning (LLL)  
Labour Market Activation (LMA)  
Management Information System (MIS)  
Mature Students Ireland (MSI)  
New Public Management (NPM)  
Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)  
Quality and Qualification, Ireland (QQI)  
Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development (RAPID)  
Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)  
School Completion Programme (SCP)

Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF)  
St. Vincent de Paul (SVP)  
South-Western Regional Access Alliance (SWRAA)  
Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI)  
United Kingdom (UK)  
United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)  
Vocational Education Committee (VEC)

## CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW OF THESIS

### 1.1 Purpose of Study

Access by under-represented groups to higher education in this thesis will be examined as a development which is the result of new exogenous public policy concerns and one which may be shifting those working in higher education away from traditional academic norms and working practices. It could be hypothesised, then, that access is one of the many forces that compel a whole institutional approach and therefore, contributes to advancing managerialism.

This thesis is primarily concerned with themes relating to access to higher education by adult learners over 23 years, especially recruitment and admission of these students, development of the curriculum and delivery styles and support services and pastoral care provided for them. The thesis will also focus on partnership formation in higher education around the theme of access.

### 1.2 Key Definitions

Wright (1989: 99) makes a useful distinction between access and accessibility as follows:

*Access:* The first approach tends to dwell on mechanisms for access - in doing so, this approach concerns itself first and foremost with such issues as the provisions of special access courses, the encouragement of more flexible admissions procedures and the recognition of prior learning, whether certified or not.

*Accessibility:* The second type of approach, while also concerned with making easier the entry into higher education of potential students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds, aims above all else, at increasing the general accessibility of the higher education system as a whole, at identifying and overcoming the multifarious factors which make it remote, or unattractive, to the majority of the English population.

This study draws on Wright's (1989) definitions of both *access* and *accessibility*.

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

This research has the following objectives:

- To provide a comprehensive account of access initiatives in four diverse higher education institutions in Ireland;
- To document institutional managers, academic and student perspectives on access initiatives that have emerged in response to public policy concerns;
- To record developments in a higher education context that might impact on working practices and curricula during the period 1997-2013;
- To draw conclusions and make recommendations for developments in policy and practice in the area of access at the level of the higher education institution, and more particularly, inform on-going developments in national policy in this area;
- To provide direction and insights that will inform further research in the area of access.

### **1.4 Research Problem**

The current status and interest in access to Irish higher education by mature learners lead to the following research problem statement, *given the nature of higher education, why and in what way do Irish higher education institutions provide access for adult learners, and to what extent, if any, has such access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education professionals?* Based on a review of the relevant literature in the field and guided by the overarching research problem, the following more specific secondary research questions have been developed to guide the analysis of this study. These research questions are divided into four distinct yet interconnected layers:

### *International/Comparative Level*

- How do Irish adult access higher education initiatives compare internationally in terms of statistics and policies?

### *National Level*

- In what ways are adult access initiatives in higher education institutions congruent with existing national policy concerns?

### *Institutional Level*

- How do institutional managers and academics perceive adult access initiatives in their institutions and to what extent, if any, has this caused a shift in working practices?

### *Individual Student Level*

- How do adult students experience institutional access initiatives and to what extent, do they perceive, if any, changes in curriculum content, curriculum delivery modes and provision of support services for them?

## **1.5 Background/Context of Study**

As stated in the opening of this chapter, achieving equity of access to higher education has been a salient policy issue for the Irish government for some time. Attempts to widen and increase participation in university-level education have dominated higher education policy for the best part of the last two decades (that is, 1990s and 2000s). In 1998, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the statutory body with responsibility for developing the sector, made funding available to all of their funded institutions at that time<sup>1</sup>, especially dedicated to increasing participation among a range of groups. These groups are defined as mature students, socio-economically disadvantaged school leavers, minorities and students with a disability, all traditionally under-represented in third-level education in Ireland (HEA, 2004).

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<sup>1</sup>The Institutes of Technology came under the aegis of the Higher Education Authority in 2006 and therefore were not able to access this funding.

All HEA third-level institutions have been granted flexibility about the use of this dedicated strand of funding for access by mature students (among others), originally called Targeted Initiative Fund and renamed Strategic Initiative Fund in 2003. In 2006, access was, in effect, mainstreamed when a percentage of the HEA core budget allocation was ring-fenced to support access activities in each institution. This mainstreaming represented significant progress in higher education policy with equity of access assuming a more long-term mainstream strategic position among the other concerns of higher education such as funding and governance. In addition, in 2006 a new tranche of funding was released, the Strategic Innovation Fund which emphasised innovation, inter- and intra-institution collaboration as well as cross-sectoral multi-agency linkages.

Many higher education institutions have used some of this earlier funding to develop access programmes of study, aimed at increasing representation of the target groups. Adult access programmes are designed specifically for mature learners who are interested in resuming and/or furthering their education and emerged across the Irish Higher Education landscape from 1997 onwards. These programmes of study are seen as a way of providing ‘bridging or up-skilling courses’ for learners who have either been out of the education system for a number of years or for those whose initial education may have been curtailed for whatever reason. Although access to higher education remains a prominent policy issue, there is limited research on the impact of such policy initiatives within an Irish context. This study aims to document the impact of policy on the area on adult access.

It is clear from the literature that there is a growing tension with traditional academic values, norms and working practices on one hand and externally generated policies on the other (Baldrige *et al*, 1978; Bolman and Deal, 1984; Gibbons *et al*, 1994; Lomas, 2006; Meyer, 2007; Hornibrook, 2012). Access is one of the areas within higher education that is at the nexus of this theoretical deliberation. To higher education institutions and managers access has gained in appeal because they believe it increases income, student numbers and responds to ‘knowledge economy’ and social justice rhetoric. The academics interviewed tend to be more sceptical because good students would be admitted without any access initiatives and would still make a significant contribution to their courses.

Many academics like to respond to their discipline and not be caught up with the latest policy initiative. Therefore, access may bring out tensions for academics and managers, especially if not enough support services are provided with greater numbers of mature students and other traditionally under-represented groups participating in higher education.

While one can acknowledge that there is increased recognition of, and interest in, access, one cannot state that there is agreement about why it is important because the imperatives for access are many and diverse. Economic competitiveness, social justice and equality of opportunity and development of the Irish education system are three primary reasons why more emphasis needs to be placed on the access dimension of higher education. The access dimension to higher education is therefore emerging as a salient policy concern but it is viewed differently from many perspectives in higher education, including those of managers, academic staff, professional services staff and students.

### **1.6 Relevance of this Research and Contribution to the Field**

This study is necessary to determine the relationship between national policy and higher education practice in relation to access provision for adult learners in Ireland which is an under-researched area to-date and timely. Therefore, this study provides an opportunity to contribute to the debate with the existing access to higher education literature, with regard to policy and practice and especially the usefulness of working collaboratively, particularly in an access context. This research will also further develop our understanding of the implementation of access initiatives in an Irish context.

The aim of the study is to specifically examine adult access provision in four higher education institutions. It is anticipated that the data gathered from participants will:

- (i) make a contribution to the knowledge base on adult learning in higher education within an access context;
- (ii) benefit other institutions which may be interested in exploring their adult access provision;

(iii) provide recommendations for the future development of national policy in the area of adult access;

(iv) further, it is envisaged that this study will contribute to the growing body of studies in higher education research and knowledge in an Irish context (for example, Lynch, 2006; Bruce, 2007; Clancy, 2011; Lollich, 2011; Lynch, Grummell, and Devine, 2012).

## **1.7 Limitations**

Due to the limitations of time only four higher education institutions in Ireland were included in the study. This study could not survey approaches to access by adult students of all higher education institutions in Ireland. This thesis did not assess the quality of access policies and courses at any of the institutions in this study. This study was focused at the level of the institution. Academics, professional staff and students were interviewed. The views of other stakeholders including government and employers were not included.

## **1.8 Review of Literature (Chapter Two)**

Chapter Two reviews the literature drawn on in this research. This literature primarily focussed on four areas:

- the macro-level global trends in adult access to higher education. This section investigates supra-national policy developments and examines comparative literature on adult participation in higher education;
- the evolution of macro-level national Irish policy;
- institutional meso-level studies on adult access programme provision;
- micro studies on adult access programme provision.

The literature review confirmed that the study of access to higher education is, largely, in an early paradigmatic phase with some useful theorising taking place in Ireland (for example, Fleming, Loxley, Kenny and Flanagan, 2010; Murphy and Fleming, 2013). This may be influenced by the European Bologna Process in terms of mobility, course

recognition and the ‘social dimension’. Although there has been much research on access to higher education, few conceptual links have been made with broader research in the field of higher education policy.

The areas under examination, although crossing multiple disciplines, have considerable degrees of inter-relatedness. This study therefore has been informed by, and hopes to contribute to, the disciplines of Education and Politics primarily, and their sub-disciplines the Politics of Education, the Sociology of Education; Education Policy; Higher Education Policy and Evaluative Studies on higher education and access to it. It may also contribute to Public Policy and Social Policy more generally.

### **1.9 Conceptual Framework Utilised**

The preferred conceptual framework for this thesis will be the models of higher education organisation, which consider institutions as social organisations. These contrast the traditional model of the autonomous higher education institution and academic profession with more dependent institutions and professionals who respond to exogenous policies and values. One overarching theoretical model which provides a way of conceptualising adult access initiatives within the complex endogenous and exogenous higher education landscape is Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) or complexity theory. This study draws on CAS or complexity theory as a useful analytical framework.

### **1.10 Contribution to Research in the Field**

While research has been completed at the national policy level in this area, much less has been completed at the institutional level. A number of gaps exist across the body of the literature, which were identified as part of this research (see Chapter Two, Literature Review). These include limited literature on mature student access to higher education in an Irish context, and a tendency for research to focus on the ‘barriers’ model to the broadening of access. Working collaboratively, and in partnership, is a relatively recent

occurrence in Irish higher education. As a result, there is a dearth of evidence with regard to the adoption of this type of approach which largely remains undocumented. This research aims to provide a starting point for further work to capture profiles of a few partnerships in the area of access to higher education. These descriptions will provide information on the process of involving different partners and the challenges and opportunities such ways of working provide at the level of higher education, especially in an Irish context.

### **1.11 Structure of Thesis**

The structure of the remainder of the thesis is as follows:

#### **Chapter Three-Methodology**

In terms of methodology, this study adopts a mainly qualitative approach in the constructivist and interpretivist epistemological tradition using the case study method. This chapter outlines the rationale for, and synopsis of, the range of mixed methodologies employed to answer the research questions. Fieldwork which involved a total of 77 participants across staff, institutional managers and students in four diverse higher education institutions in Ireland was undertaken. In addition, this fieldwork was complemented (Green, Camilli and Elmore, 2006) by a review of institutional documentation. The following data collection methods are used: focus groups, interviews and institutional documentation review including Mission Statements, Strategic Plans, Access Policies, Access Plans, Equity Policies, student records and student programme evaluations, where available.

## **Chapter Four-Findings**

**Theme One** in this study examines the impact of policies on access at a macro level. Sub-themes addressed include: international, supra-national and national policies which impact on higher education adult access provision.

**Chapters Five, Six, Seven and Eight** explore adult access from a meso level, that is, at institutional level. Findings are presented under four broad thematic headings which are later analysed using a complexity theory framework:

**Theme Two:** Adult access and general organisational environmental planning;

**Theme Three:** Adult access and specific access-related organisational policies, processes and structures;

**Theme Four:** Adult access course provision;

**Theme Five:** Partnerships to promote adult access.

**Chapter Five** explores the thematic area of access and the general organisational planning environment across the four case sites. A number of sub-themes are identified: mission statements and access; institutional culture; strategic plans and access; institutional support from senior managers; major actors leading the process, support from academic and professional staff, organisational facilities used for access; quality assurance issues and institutional environmental challenges.

**Chapter Six** investigates the theme of adult access and specific organisational policies, processes and structures across each case site. Sub-themes identified are: access policies; access via dedicated programmes; access and governance and dedicated organisational support structures and roles.

**Chapter Seven** outlines the findings from the theme of adult access course provision and describes the findings under the following sub-themes: history of alternative programmes of entry; profiles of students; participation trends; course structure; curricula; assessment;

programme evaluation and review; progression data; programme accreditation and certification.

**Chapter Eight** reviews the findings regarding the thematic area of partnerships to promote access. Sub-themes include: inter- and intra-institutional access-related partnerships; external collaborations to promote access (government, institutions, sectors, agencies, charities); and regional, national and international collaboration.

### **Chapter Nine–Discussion and Conclusions**

Chapter Nine draws this study to a close and presents the final key conclusions drawn from the research findings and suggests recommendations for both future research and policy makers in an Irish context. Each research question is discussed in relation to the relevant findings and the evidence reveals that there has been change in many areas of practice at meso level in response to macro-level policies. Specifically, all institutions have engaged in extensive environmental planning and have developed a wide range of organisational policies, processes and structures for the implementation of adult access. In addition, all institutions have responded to national policy recommendations by developing new curricula and learning opportunities for greater adult access and a range of new partnerships have evolved. These findings suggest that adult access initiatives have resulted in a degree of change at the level of the institution, although there was also some evidence of continuity of existing practices.

Chapter Two which follows provides an overview of policy trends and relevant literature.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.0 Chapter Introduction

A review of the literature on higher education foregrounds systems undergoing profound transformation and reform (Schuetze and Slowey, 2000; Skilbeck, 2001; Schonburg and Teichler, 2006; Tapper and Palfreyman, 2010; Filappakou, Salter and Tapper, 2012). Trends towards globalisation, marketisation, technological advances, massification and diversification of the student body, as well as greater accountability to a wide range of stakeholders, are identified as drivers of this reform (Kogan and Hanney, 2000; Clark, 2004; Tapper and Palfreyman, 2010; De Zilma, 2010). Increased mature student participation through access is one manifestation of this change. The rationales for increasing adult participation in tertiary-level education have been well-documented (Skilbeck, 2000; Skilbeck, 2001; OECD, 2003; HEA, 2004a). There are two distinct yet interconnected reasons for increasing adult enrolments in tertiary-level education: economic development and social cohesion. This chapter seeks to provide an overview of policy and literature as it pertains to the widening of access for adult learners to higher education and is divided into four levels of analysis:

- international and supra-national higher education trends and policy advances;
- national Irish higher education trends, statistics and policy development;
- meso studies on mature students;
- micro research on adult access programme provision.

These different levels of analysis help address the overarching research problem of this study, which is, *given the nature of higher education, why and in what way do higher education institutions in Ireland provide for access for adult learners, and to what extent, if any, has access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education professionals?* In addition, these levels of analysis are also used to develop the analytical framework employed in this study and referred to in more detail at the end of this chapter.

In the next section, subsection 2.1, the subject of adult access is placed in context by examining the higher education trends at an international level. This study draws widely on the work of international organisations which have contributed to the development of policy in the area, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the European Union (EU). In line with the research problem outlined in Chapter One, the aim of this section is to compare transnational and supra-national trends, statistics and policies, in the field of adult access to higher education, with national Irish performance in the area.

## **2.1 Transnational and Supra-National Higher Education Adult Access Trends, Policies and Statistics**

Specific adult access-related policy has remained on the periphery of international and supra-national higher education policy development until 2001 and is associated, in the main, with both the OECD and the EU. Transnational and supra-national policy documentation tends to categorise adult access to higher education under three distinct, yet interconnected policy strands which are often used concurrently: adult education; part-time/flexible programme provision and lifelong learning. As this study situates access within the realm of studies on higher education policy and practice, a review of the trends, policies and statistics in these areas offers a comparative lens through which to consider Ireland's performance in the broad area of adult access to higher education.

This next section provides an overview of literature on the topic and begins with the caveat that for several reasons, it is difficult to compare adult access figures across countries. Firstly, the definition of an adult learner varies from country to country (McGivney, 1996; Eurydice Network, 2011). In addition, McGivney (1996) and the Eurydice Network (2011) emphasise the difficulties in defining programmes of study and types of institutions. Further, adult students are difficult to track and monitor (Gorard, 2005; Adnett and Slack, 2007). Therefore, the figures cited in this section are put forward more to demonstrate a trend.

### **2.1.1 Cross-Country Policy Measures and Instruments aimed at Increasing Adult Access**

Transnationally, the role of the OECD is pivotal in the development of policies on education (Clancy, 2011), and a brief review of such literature is useful in the context of this study as it provides an overarching global context for the development of adult access policies. Similarly, policies, laws, regulations and treaties made by the EU have had a direct impact on Ireland since it became a member in 1973 (Clancy, 2011). One of the significant earlier pieces of work undertaken by the OECD (2003) was the identification of access target groups, namely students with disabilities, students with an ethnic minority background, students from a background of socio-economic disadvantage and adult learners. These classifications have been adopted also by the EU and Irish national higher education policymakers, including the Higher Education Authority (HEA).

Walker (2009) shows that across the OECD policy of lifelong learning, the following themes emerge: co-operation and interaction across systems (OECD, 2003 and 2005), inclusive interpretation of adult learning (OECD, 2001; 2002; 2003 and 2005) and accommodation of needs of adult learners (OECD, 1996; 2001; 2002; 2003 and 2005). Papadopoulos (2011) argues that the OECD's approach to education, traditionally, has been linked with economic development. Istance (2011: 94) also maintains that the links between lifelong learning, economic development and employability 'have characterised latter analyses of adult learning at the OECD'. Similarly, writing in an Irish context, Clancy (2011: 2) observes this 'economistic view of education and knowledge promoted by the OECD'. Nonetheless, whatever the policy rhetoric or rationale, the role of the OECD continues to play a central global role in the development of adult access policies.

In contrast, UNESCO (1998) highlights that in order to accommodate more diverse student populations and broaden access, there needs to be structural reform in higher education:

It is now clear that to fulfil its mission, higher education must change radically, by becoming organically flexible, and at the same time more diverse in its institutions, its structures, its curricula, and the nature and forms of its programmes and delivery systems (Mayor, 1998, Foreword, UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education, in Thomas, 2001: 365).

Across countries, a range of common measures aimed at increasing adult learner participation in higher education are in existence (see, for example, Lewis, 2002). Research shows that governments use five main tools (OECD, 2003):

- selection/admissions process (move to greater range of entry routes);
- diversity (increase of range of choice across courses and institutions);
- financial support;
- ‘legal vehicles such as legislation, regulation and perspective policy’ (OECD, 2003: 11);
- public information campaigns.

However, Huisman, Kaiser and Vossensteyn (2000: 235) are somewhat critical of such higher education policies arguing that most of these assumptions have not been subject to rigorous empirical research, concluding that public policy is often based on simplistic assumptions and that the makers of policy ‘should be aware of the more complex interrelations and interactions between the concepts and set aside straightforward linear reasoning’ (*ibid*, p. 236). Other critiques of current international policy trends, suggest that it is important for a country:

to develop higher education and innovation “in harmony” with the global context but also crucial to implement policies “in harmony” with its national context that is, in coherence with other policies and institutions (Lavoie’s emphasis, 2009: 5).

Comparative literature indicates that countries with high levels of mature student enrolments have been innovative in both policy and practice. A summary of such practice is outlined below in Table 2.1: Cross-Country Summary of Adult Participation, Policy and Practice.

**Table 2.1: Cross-Country Summary of Adult Participation, Policy and Practice**

| <b>Country</b>   | <b>Participation percentage</b>                      | <b>Policy/Practice details</b>   |
|--|--|--|
| <b>Norway</b>  | <b>70%</b>   | National focus on universal equitable education system including Higher Education<br>Early years education, minority oriented initiatives  |
| <b>Sweden</b><br><b>Finland</b>                                    | <b>36%</b><br><b>24%</b>                             | Practice of stop-out between school and university or college/special entry schemes access and bridging courses, recognition of work experience<br>Sweden's policy-concept of '25:4' means places are reserved for 25+ year olds who have four years work experience<br>Favourable financial conditions including no tuition fees and availability of grants |
| <b>Denmark</b>   | <b>28%</b>   | Short cycle courses/performance funding related to retention figures   |
| <b>Australia</b>   | <b>32%</b>   | Well-established tradition of evening and distance education courses/<br>Well-developed admissions schemes   |
| <b>U.K.</b><br><b>U.S.A</b><br><b>Canada</b><br><b>Netherlands</b> | <b>21%</b><br><b>10%</b><br><b>28%</b><br><b>16%</b> | Well-developed admissions schemes<br>Well-established open or distance education/<br>'second chance' course providers<br>Funding allocations related to Access Performance at institution level  |
| <b>Ireland</b>   | <b>12%</b>   | National policy, alternative entry routes, establishment of National Office for Equity of Access, institutional funding  |
| <b>Germany</b><br><b>New Zealand</b>                               | <b>7%</b><br><b>44%</b>                              | Open university programmes<br>In the case of New Zealand, there are also comprehensive admissions routes   |

(Source: Skilbeck, 2000: 38-39; Lewis, 2002: 218; OECD, 2004; National Office for Equity of Access, HEA: 2008 and 2010; HEA, 2012).

### **2.1.2 Global Trends, Policies and Statistics in Part-Time/Flexible Programme Provision Targeted at Adult Access**

Internationally, one emerging trend is the growth of part-time and flexible higher education programme provision. It is welcomed by policy makers as it offers a cost effective way of increasing adult access (Tight, 1994; Scheutze and Slowey, 2000; Bennion, Scesa and Williams, 2011) and is seen as a mechanism which will ultimately lead to greater employment opportunities (Jackson and Jamieson, 2009). Since 1999, the implementation of the Bologna Process in the European Union has advocated for greater flexibility of provision across EU countries. EU and OECD data show that part-time forms of study and student numbers have increased (HEA, 2008; Eurydice Network, 2011 and 2012). Part-time students are mainly adult and, therefore, diverse (HEA, 2012) and it is argued by Scheutze and Slowey (2000) and Bennion, Scesa and Williams (2011) that it can be difficult for higher education institutions to meet the needs of this particular demographic.

Although it is difficult to compare participation rates across countries because of the range of programme provision across providers, difficulties of definition (EC, 2011; HEA, 2012) and incomplete data (OECD, 2011), nonetheless, cross-country comparison yields some interesting trends. With reference to part-time/flexible enrolments in undergraduate degree programmes, Ireland's performance is quite poor at 12% of the student population and is below the OECD average of 21% (HEA, 2012). High performing countries include Sweden, at 52%, Finland, at 44%, and New Zealand, at 40% (HEA, 2012). In contrast, at certificate and diploma level Ireland, at 32%, is slightly above the OECD average of 29% and the EU average of 25% (HEA, 2012). However, other countries have particularly high rates of participation at these levels, with the UK, at 76%, Switzerland, 72%, the Netherlands, 65%, and New Zealand, 61% (HEA, 2012).

Statistics provided by the Central Statistics Office (CSO)<sup>1</sup> (2011) indicate that there are almost 2.5 million adults aged 25-64 living in Ireland and it is estimated that over 1.5 million of those do not hold a third-level qualification (HEA, 2012). Policy documents advocate that an increase in the delivery of flexible programmes is required in order to accommodate the needs of this particular cohort (DES, 2011; HEA 2012). Morgan and Slowey (2009) suggest this is one of the areas within the entire education system that warrants dedicated attention. In summary, the literature demonstrates that countries, including Ireland, have responded to this policy initiative with varying degrees of success. The next section surveys literature on *lifelong learning* as it features as one of the dominant trends across the literature on adult access to higher education.

### **2.1.3 Lifelong Learning**

Following the *Single European Act* of 1986, according to McKenzie and Venables (1991) and Conway (2009), lifelong learning emerged as a dominant construct. Since the 1990s, much of the earlier policy attempts to increase adult access to higher education were, and continue to be, located under the umbrella term of lifelong learning, which is one of the more significant paradigms that features throughout the literature on access, acting as an overarching theoretical construct. Lifelong learning is a broad term which covers all types of learning: formal, informal and non-formal (European Commission, 2000; Eurydice Network, 2011). Since the 1990s, this movement towards lifelong learning is strongly encouraged by the international education organisations and the OECD adopted lifelong learning as a policy framework in 1996 and continue to make a contribution to this policy area (for example, OECD, 1996; 2001; 2002; 2003; 2005; 2007; 2012a; 2012b; 2013). Section 12 of the *Universities Act* (1997) enshrined lifelong learning in the Irish higher education landscape by providing a legislative context to encourage universities to facilitate its introduction. A brief review of lifelong learning trends and statistics is of relevance to this study as mature student access to higher education construes a type of

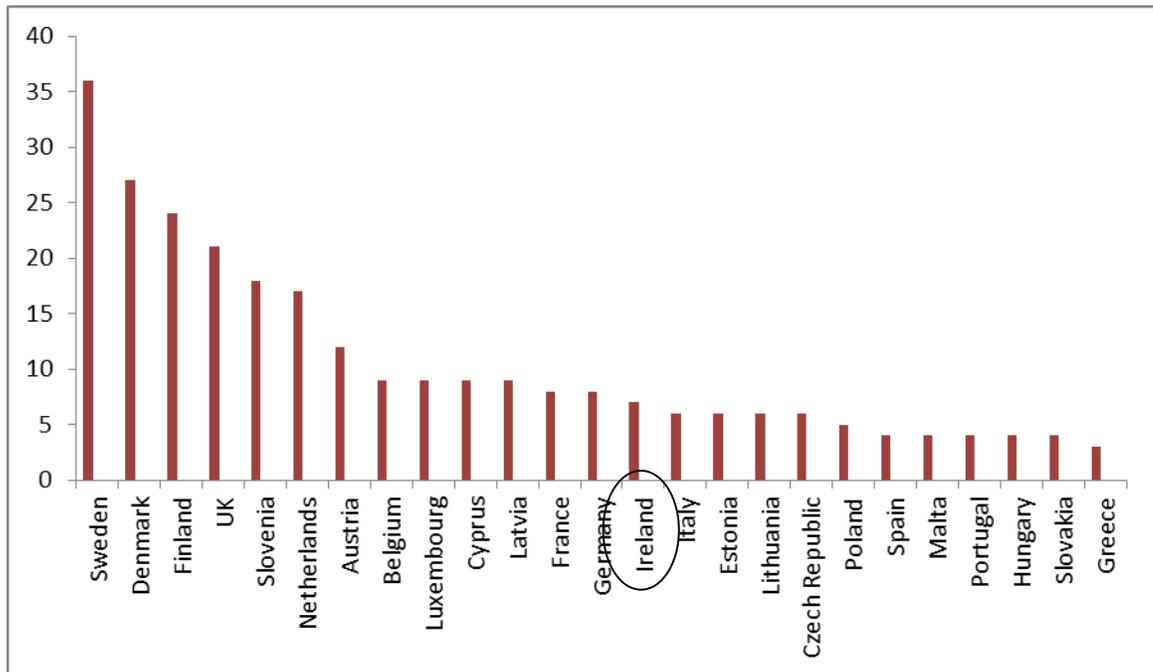
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<sup>1</sup>The Central Statistics Office was established in 1949 as Ireland's national statistical office. The mandate of the CSO, as set out in *Statistics Act* 1993, is 'the collection, compilation, extraction and dissemination for statistical purposes of information relating to economic, social and general activities and conditions in the State'. (<http://www.cso.ie/en/aboutus/>, accessed 13 October, 2012).

formal learning and adult access is often discussed under this umbrella term. In addition, this literature provides statistics against which to compare Ireland's performance in the area of adult access.

In the European Union countries in 2004, on average 10% of adults were participating in some form of lifelong learning with some countries more successful than others at attracting enrolments of adult learners (HEA, 2008: 21; OECD, 2012a). Figure 2.1 below provides a cross-country comparison of participation in lifelong learning across European countries. It is estimated that the current participation rate for adults in Ireland aged 25-64 is at 7%, which is below the EU average of 10% and is much lower in comparison to the Scandinavian countries, where participation rates for this cohort are between 25% and 36% (National Office for Equity of Access, HEA, 2008: 21). According to the HEA (2008), increasing participation to tertiary education for adult learners remains challenging and it has been suggested by some, such as Maunsell, Downes and McLoughlin (2009), that some of the difficulties that Ireland has in this area are linked to the fact that a number of recommended measures such as the establishment of an inter-agency working group on the recognition of qualifications for adult education practitioners, paid educational leave, flexible delivery mechanisms and finally, a national survey of adult literacy to be undertaken on a tri-annual cyclical basis to support the lifelong learning agenda have not yet been introduced (Maunsell, Downes and McLoughlin, 2009: 8).

**Figure 2.1: Cross-Country Comparison of Participation Rates (%) in Lifelong Learning among EU countries**



(Source: National Office for Equity of Access, HEA, 2008: 21).

There has been criticism of some aspects connected with lifelong learning, and its associated policies of access for adult learners. Critics, such as Stauber and Walther (1998); Blaxter and Hughes (2000); Field, (2000 and 2006) and Morgan-Klein and Osborne (2007), suggest that the movement has become more preoccupied with the development of human rather than social capital and with a focus on the servicing the knowledge economy reinforces, rather than addresses, social inequality. Despite the ambition and rhetoric of policy makers, research highlights that, at institutional level, lifelong learning remains under-developed (Field, 2000; Kokosalakis, 2000; Henkel, 2001) and that ‘as a concept it can be vague’ (OECD, 2003: 3). A review of policy documentation at supra-national level suggests that work in advancing the area is ongoing and remains challenging (EC, 2010 and 2011). This finding is echoed by EUA Charter on Lifelong Learning (2008) which maintains that although the policy rhetoric is well-developed, practice still remains challenging. In summary, Ireland’s performance remains under-developed and there appears to be consensus, both internationally and nationally, that lifelong learning is still work in progress.

#### **2.1.4 Impact of the European Area of Higher Education (EHEA) on Adult Access**

From the formation of the EU up to the mid-1970s, adult access to higher education received little policy attention with consideration limited to the recognition of qualifications (*Article 57, Treaty of Rome, 1957: 55-56*) and the promotion of co-operation between member states in vocational training (*Article 118, Treaty of Rome, 1957: 99*; Davies, 2003; Conway, 2009; Clancy, 2011). However, over the past fifteen years, European Commission higher education policy has advanced considerably, commencing with the *Bologna Declaration*, signed by the Ministers for Education of 29 European countries on 19 June, 1999, with the overarching goal of creating ‘a European space for higher education in order to enhance the employability and mobility of citizens and to increase the international competitiveness of European higher education’ (CRE, 2000: 3). In March 2010, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was launched during the Bologna Process’ tenth anniversary with 49 countries signatories. One of the policy aims of the EHEA of relevance to this study is to encourage a greater diversification of the student population and consequently, the social dimension of Bologna was established in 2001. This initiative has invigorated the area of access to higher education (Eurydice Network, 2011) and a brief review of this policy follows.

##### ***Bologna (Social Dimension)***

The social dimension entered EU *communiqués* in 2001 and, in terms of this study, facilitates cross-country comparison of national access developments. Since 2001, the social dimension has gained more policy attention and is defined as ‘equitable access to and successful completion of higher education by the diversity of populations’ (Eurydice Network, 2012: 8). General and specific commitments to make higher education accessible to all have been reiterated a number of times. The Bergen *Communiqué* (2005: 4) stated that:

The social dimension of the Bologna Process is a constituent part of the EHEA and a necessary condition of the attractiveness & competitiveness of the EHEA. We renew our commitment to making quality higher education equally accessible to all, and stress the need for appropriate conditions for students so that they can complete their studies without obstacle relating to their social & economic background.

The London *Communiqué*, May (2007: 5) built on this, reaffirming the centrality of access to Bologna and brought greater clarity than previous *communiqués*, by providing a definition of the social dimension:

We share the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations. We affirm the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles relating to their social and economic background...continue our efforts to provide adequate student services, create more flexible learning pathways into & within higher education, & to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunities.

In Leuven/Louvain-La-Neuve, it was agreed that in order to advance the social dimension, targets would be set for categories of under-represented students (Leuven/Louvain-La-Neuve *Communiqué*, 2009). Additionally, the need to develop EHEA reporting was raised at a Bergen ministerial meeting (2005) and an initial date of 2009 was set for countries to report on their national social dimension strategies and policies, including action plans and measures to evaluate their effectiveness with a goal to achieve them by 2020 (Eurydice, 2012: 53). In tandem, other EU policy initiatives, including the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET2020) (2009) strategy statement, indicate that adult learning will continue to receive significant attention (EC, 2006; EC, 2007 and EC, 2011; EUA, 2011). A Working Group on the Social Dimension (2010-2012) was established to monitor progress on the social dimension in higher education and collect examples of good practice in this area (Eurydice Network, 2012). The findings from this working group are helpful in the context of this study as they offer an opportunity for ‘good practice’ cross-country comparison in the general area of access to higher education.

Cross-country comparison reveals that there is significant variation in the broad area of access to higher education. This can be attributed to the unique national context of each country (Teichler, 2005; Clancy, 2009). Six ‘good practice’ trends across countries have been identified (Eurydice, 2011; Eurydice Network, 2012: 79-90). These include the development of specific and general access policy approaches; advancement of national student monitoring systems; the establishment of alternative entry routes; provision of

student services and improvements in financial incentives. Although cross-country quantitative data is not available, findings from a number of reports indicate that Ireland performs strongly across each of the six elements (Eurydice Network, 2011 and 2012). One of these elements, the development of alternative routes of access to third-level systems, is of pertinence to this study and shows how national systems and their higher education institutions have responded to transnational and supra-national policy recommendations. Progress in this regard across the EHEA is summarised in Table 2.2: Development of Alternative Routes of Access to Third-Level Education across EHEA below.

**Table 2.2: Development of Alternative Routes of Access to Third-Level Education across EHEA**

| <b>25% enter via alternative admissions route</b> | <b>2-15% enter via alternative admissions route</b>   | <b>No alternative entry route available</b>   | <b>Data not available</b>         |
|---|---|---|-----------------------------------|
| Ireland, Finland, UK<br>Sweden                    | Estonia, France, Germany,<br>Denmark, Switzerland,<br>Austria, Norway, Malta<br>Spain, Portugal | Turkey, Slovakia,<br>Romania, Poland<br>the Netherlands,<br>Latvia, Italy,<br>Croatia | All other<br>countries<br>in EHEA |

Source: (Eurydice Network, 2012: 84).

This table shows a clear divide between western and eastern countries in the EHEA, among 22 (out of 47 countries) for whom data is available. Alternative provision may include preparatory programmes of study (most common in both the UK and Ireland, and to a lesser extent, in France), Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) mechanisms, as well as progression from other sectors in the education system, for example, through vocational courses. These findings indicate that there is variety among national systems, and their higher education institutions, with regard to the mediation of adult access to higher education. Further, the evidence also suggests that adult access policy in Ireland is well-formulated and in comparison with other EHEA countries, is reasonably well-developed.

The literature suggests that the establishment of the EHEA has introduced a new macro-level dimension to the area of European higher education policy which may be, at times,

controversial. For example, Kehm (2010: 529) observes that the Bologna reform agenda is a ‘moving target’ and explains the wide reforms that are on-going as follows:

...[there has been a] shift from structural changes to substantive curricular reforms, quality assessment and assurance mechanisms and qualifications frameworks, and an increasing number of stakeholders participating in policy development and reform...growing complexity of management and governance structures of the process at both European and national levels.

Courtney (2013: 41) argues that this reform of higher education is a global phenomenon and ‘governments...are seeking to re-define both higher education and the idea of the university’. Others such as Henkel (2005), Bosetti and Walker (2010) and Long (2010) suggest that there is intrusion on the part of government into higher education matters which is characterised by the growth of managerialism or New Public Management (NPM) in the sector. Henkel (2000) argues that NPM is associated with planning, accountability and performance appraisal. It is in direct contrast to the traditional ‘collegial’ model of higher education, which has concepts of collegiality, professionalism, academic integrity and autonomy at its core (Lynch, Gummell and Devine, 2012). These are the traditional values, practices and structures associated with the higher education sector (Lynch, Gummell and Devine, 2012). This literature hints at a dissonance between the NPM and collegial models of higher education and is widely reflected in the international literature (Pollitt, 1994; Henkel 2000; Manning, 2001; Hood, 2001; Deem 2001; Kogan, 2004; Tapper and Palfreyman, 2010). This dissonance will be examined later in this chapter.

Keeling (2006: 216) writes that the European Commission is playing an ‘expanding role in higher education discourse...acting as a gatekeeper and interpreter of higher education discourse’. She notes that this discourse has also played ‘a significant part in opening up the discussion of the challenges facing higher education at European level’, adding ‘a dynamic new layer to an on-going debate’ (Keeling, 2006: 216). Similarly, in an Irish context, Clancy (2011: 1) notes that:

a transnational educational space has emerged with the rise of supra-national policy actors. There has been a growing questioning of the capacity of nation states to control and govern their own policy destinies and set their own agendas resulting in a process of denationalisation.

Clancy (2011) argues that both the OECD and EU assert considerable influence particularly on the national higher education policies of smaller countries, citing Ireland and Finland as examples. Other commentators on Bologna note the growing neo-liberal discourse across a number of themes such as connection between education and economic development (Kleibrink, 2011), the development of national qualification frameworks (NQFs) (Karseth and Solbrekke, 2010), the ‘overcredentialism of higher education’ (Van der Velden and Smyth, 2011: 135) and the challenges of the higher education policy driven reform agenda (Gornitzka, 2010; Karseth and Solbrekke, 2010; Kehm, 2010; Lazetic, 2010).

In conclusion, this review of literature reveals that earlier policy efforts in the area of adult access were directed more at training than at access and until the late 1990s, rhetoric around adult access to third-level education fell mainly under the umbrella of lifelong learning policy where Ireland’s performance remains poor. Similarly, in an Irish context, literature shows that with regard to the area of increased higher education part-time/flexible provision, more targeted attention is needed. However, until the introduction of the social dimension to Bologna in 2001, there was little targeted specific policy focus on the area of adult access to higher education at supra-national level and, although, there are many differences across EHEA countries, the social dimension of Bologna highlights six elements of good access practice and policy across countries. Overall, Ireland performs favourably in all six elements of access policy and practice (Eurydice Network, 2012). This suggests that, unlike some other EHEA countries, access forms a central tenet of Irish higher education policy. This review of transnational and supra-national policies, trends and statistics suggests that although bodies such as the OECD and the EU are independent entities, they are also interconnected and have an impact on national systems (Clancy, 2011). This complexity will be further examined in the conceptual framework section at the end of chapter. In the context of this study, transnational and supra-national adult access policy can be conceptualised as providing guidance for the development of national policy and national contexts are considered to be of particular importance in higher education studies (Teichler, 2005; Clancy, 2009). The next section focuses on the trends of national Irish higher education adult policy.

## **2.2 National Higher Education Adult Access Policy, Trends and Statistics**

In order to answer the overarching research problem of, *‘given the nature of higher education, why and in what way, do Irish higher education institutions provide for access for adult learners, and to what extent, if any, has such access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education professionals’?*, this section reviews the adult access policy environment in Ireland with the aim of identifying national adult access trends, policies and statistics. Ireland has a unique educational history. From the 1960s until the mid-1980s, expansion, rather than social inequality, was the main thread running through education policy (Smyth and Hannan, 2000; O’Connell, McCoy and Clancy, 2006).

Much of this expansion was generated from the school leaving demographic and has emerged, in the main, as in most European countries, from the middle classes (Clancy, 2001; Morgan and Slowey, 2009; Shattock, 2010). In the mid-1990s the focus of policy changed and themes of the need to address social inequality through education began to emerge in policy discourse with the Irish Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) (Morgan, Hickey and Kellaghan, 1997), which was part of a transnational survey, providing a shocking context. The results for Ireland revealed that one in four working age adults have problems with even the simplest of literacy tasks. The survey also showed that a further 30% of Irish adult population was at level two, meaning they could only cope with very simple material (Morgan, Hickey and Kellaghan, 1997). This next subsection provides a brief overview of the evolution of national Irish higher education adult access policy.

### **2.2.1 Historical Context: Irish Government Policy (1995-2002)**

The 1990s witnessed the publication of a vast array of policy and strategy documents which displayed a concerted effort to increase participation from mature students. Successive government reports recommended that the number of mature students in the Irish third-level sector needs to continue to increase and a thematic summary of these

reports pertaining to this study is summarised in Table 2.3: Thematic Summary of Relevant Irish Government Higher Education Policy Documents (1995-2002).

**Table 2.3: Thematic Summary of Relevant Irish Government Higher Education Policy Documents (1995-2002)**

| <b>Specific recommendations vis-à-vis mature student access to third-level education</b>  | <b>Publication</b>   |
|---|--|
| Expansion of alternative entry routes for those seeking admission without the Leaving Certificate   | The Report of the Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education (1995);<br>Green Paper (1998);<br>Report of the Commission on the Points System (1999);<br>Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education (2000).  |
| Establishment of quotas or targets for mature student participation   | The Report of the Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education (1995);<br>Green Paper (1998);<br>Report of the Commission on the Points System (1999);<br>The Report of the Review Committee on Post-Secondary Education and Training Places (1999);<br>Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education (2000);<br>Action Group on Access to Third-Level Education (2001). |
| Development of mature student access programmes   | The Report of the Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education (1995);<br>Green Paper (1998);<br>The Report of the Review Committee on Post-Secondary Education and Training Places (1999).  |
| Build-in mature student supports  | Green Paper (1998).  |
| Changes in current funding models and mechanisms  | Access and Equity in Higher Education (Skilbeck and Connell, 2000);<br>Report of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning (2002).  |
| Expansion of provision and flexibility, increased provision of information and guidance, partnership and integration across educational levels. | Access and Equity in Higher Education (Skilbeck and Connell, 2000);<br>Report of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning (2002).  |

In summary, from 1995 to 2002, there was an unprecedented amount of policy and strategy documents produced which, combined, do much to advocate for and promote the inclusion of adults in higher education. These documents have many elements in common, namely the setting of targets, establishment of alternative routes of entry and development of foundation/bridging or access courses designed to increase adult representation in third-level studies. In order to achieve the objective of increasing adult representation in higher education, a number of policy instruments, such as legislation, financial schemes and a dedicated unit within the HEA, were introduced. The next section outlines this range of policy instruments developed and adopted by successive Irish governments and policy makers.

### **2.2.2 National Policy Instruments**

As noted in subsection 2.1.1, a range of policy instruments have been developed by governments in the transnational context in order to progress the adult access to higher education agenda. This section outlines these mechanisms in the Irish context.

#### ***Legislation***

Since the mid-1990s, a wide range of legislation on equality, education and disability emerged. *The Universities Act* (1997) presents both equality of opportunity and equity of access in Higher Education as statutory requirements. The *Equal Status Act* (2000) focuses on anti-discrimination legislation and includes age among the listed categories. It is clear from this legislation that universities have a legal requirement to not only provide access for mature students but to promote and support equity of access for the identified target groups currently under-represented in tertiary-level education including adult learners (see Table 2.3: Thematic Summary of Relevant Irish Government Higher Education Policy Documents, 1995-2002). Of particular importance to this study is *The Qualifications Act* (1999), which established the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). This body has been important in the challenging task of creating access, transfer

and progression between all parts of an education system, for the benefit of students. In November 2012, Quality and Qualifications, Ireland (QQI) was established under the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012*<sup>2</sup> and at the time of writing, a national consultation with key stakeholders was underway. Access, transfer and progression across the entire education system feature among the draft Green Papers. Overall, compared to standards across Europe, the emergence over the last few decades of this equality legislation is considered ‘progressive’ (HEA, 2004a: 18).

### ***Higher Education Access Financial Schemes***

Following recommendations for the investment of public funds in adult education from the publication of the wide range of policy documents, much progress has been made in recent years with a number of student and higher education institutional financial schemes being introduced. These are summarised in Table 2.4 as follows:

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<sup>2</sup>Quality and Qualifications Ireland was established on 6 November 2012 under the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012*. The new authority is being created by an amalgamation of four bodies that have both awarding and quality assurance responsibilities: the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB). The new authority will assume all the functions of the four legacy bodies while also having responsibility for new or newly-statutory responsibilities in particular areas (<http://www.qqi.ie/About/Pages/default.aspx>, accessed on 28 May, 2012).

**Table 2.4 Summary of Access Funding Schemes and Supports**

| Name of scheme   | Year Introduced | Detail of scheme  |
|--|-----------------|---|
| The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA)   | 1990- on-going  | Introduced to enable the long-term unemployed in receipt of social welfare benefits to participate in higher education, managed by the Department of Social Protection.   |
| Student Assistantship Fund   | 1994-on-going   | Allocated to higher education institutions based on their enrolments and enables institutions to aid students experiencing particular, and sometimes unexpected, financial hardship.  |
| Higher Education Grants Scheme/Vocational Education Committees' Scholarship Scheme/ Third-Level Maintenance Grants Scheme for Trainees | 1995-on-going   | Extended to full-time mature students who obtain a place, without necessarily having required levels of attainment in the Leaving Certificate and who meet the requirements of a means test.  |
| The Free Fees Initiative   | 1996-on-going   | All students, regardless of income, pay a registration fee, and can attend third- level education.  |
| The Strategic Initiatives Scheme, formerly called the 'Targeted Initiatives Scheme'  | 1996-2005       | Universities and other HEA-funded institutions submitted proposals annually for funding under a number of headings, one of which promotes access to higher education.   |
| Special rate of Maintenance or 'Top-up' Grant  | 2000-on-going   | Assists grant applicants from households who are in receipt of certain long-term social welfare payments.   |
| Millennium Partnership Fund  | 2000-on-going   | Supports area partnerships and community groups to support students from their own communities to access higher education.  |
| Fund for Students with Disabilities  | 2004-on-going   | Allocated to students with a disability who require additional supports and services in further or higher education.  |
| Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF)  | 2006-2011       | Projects approved under SIF were aimed at enhancing collaboration between higher education institutions, improving teaching and learning, supporting institutional reform, promoting access and lifelong learning and supporting the development of fourth-level education. |
| Labour Market Activation Fund, renamed Springboard   | 2010-on-going   | Established to provide training and education places for specific priority groups with emphasis on up-skilling and re-skilling the long-term unemployed and those under the age of 35.  |

(Source: Progressing the Access Plan: Funding to achieve Equity of Access to Higher Education, HEA, 2005).

Despite the significant advancements in financial investment, lack of funding is still a significant barrier for mature students. The actual impact of the Free Fees Initiative has been the source ‘of considerable debate’ (Trant, 2002: 8). Clancy (2005) argues that the wealthier in society benefited more from this particular initiative and that it did not make any significant impact on the more marginalised. It is further argued that given the complexity of adult life, mature students have particular financial problems and that care issues (childcare and care of the elderly) are all still proving to be challenging (Clancy, 1995; HEA, 1995; Lynch, 1997; Fleming and Murphy, 1998; HEA, 2005). In addition, policy documentation suggests that a number of key issues remain, such as the lack of financial support for part-time students and the difficulty ‘navigating the maze’ of the range of funding options (HEA, 2005: 10). Finance is a recurring theme across policy documents and this is echoed also in the literature. Shattock (2010) observes that the tertiary-level sector is to be overly dependent on public finance, especially in the context of restricted government spending and comments that this may ‘impact adversely on state support for institutional access initiatives and on a student’s financial ability to participate’ (p. 25). Overall, the literature makes a strong case for taking cognisance of the particular financial needs of mature students. This will be discussed further later in this chapter.

### ***Development of a National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education***

In 2003, in line with recommendations from Osborne and Leith, (2000), Skilbeck, (2000) and the Action Group on Access to Third Level (2001), a National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, with all issues relating to access as its remit, was established under the aegis of the HEA. The creation of the National Office for Equity of Access placed the broader issue of adult access at the nexus of higher education policy in Ireland. The office has been prolific and has produced two evaluations of institutional access programmes: *Towards a National Strategy: Initial Review of HEA Targeted Initiatives to Widen Access to Higher Education* (HEA, 2004c) and *Towards the Best Education of All: an evaluation of access programmes in H.E. Ireland* (2006). In addition, the office has produced two national access action plans: *Achieving Equity of Access to Higher*

Education in Ireland: Action Plan 2005-2007 (HEA, 2004b) and the National Plan for Achieving Equity of Access 2008-2013 (HEA, 2008). The National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education has four principal functions which are to:

- facilitate access to higher education;
- advise on policy development;
- allocate funds;
- monitor the implementation of the national programme at all levels through the centralised collection of performance indicator data (HEA, 2004b: 47).

The most recent articulation of national policy on widening participation in higher education can be found in the National Plan for Achieving Equity of Access 2008-2013<sup>3</sup>. This plan was developed consultatively with a wide range of stakeholders such as access practitioners, the National Access Office of the Higher Education Authority, the wider HEA, the Department of Education and Science and an advisory group representative of a broad range of education and social partners (National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, HEA, 2008) and runs concurrently with the National Development Plan 2008-2013 (Government of Ireland, 2007). Mainstreaming, cross-sectoral collaboration, data gathering, monitoring of outcomes and the need for institutions to develop a college-wide access strategy form a central tenet of this plan, together with a new means of allocating funding for institutions (HEA, 2008: 7). This model has resulted in access-related budgetary reductions for many institutions. As detailed in Table 2.5, a number of national targets have been identified by the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, (HEA, 2008: 12). This prescriptive policy involves a deepening of institutional commitment to the broad area of access.

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<sup>3</sup>At the time of writing, a consultation process had commenced with stakeholders in order to review progress made over the time of the plan with a view to informing the next national access plan (2014 on).

**Table 2.5: Targets, as related to adult learners, set by the National Plan for Achieving Equity of Access (2008-2013)**

- The evidence base and relevant data collection systems will be enhanced.
- Institutions will develop and implement access plans and processes for evaluation.
- Mature students will comprise at least 20% of total full-time entrants by 2013 (13% in 2006).
- Mature students will comprise 27% of all (full-time and part-time) entrants by 2013 (18% in 2006).
- Flexible/part-time provision will increase to 17% by 2013 (7% in 2006).
- Non-standard entry routes to higher education will be developed so that they account for 30% of all entrants by 2013 (estimated at 24% in 2006).
- Ireland will reach EU average levels for lifelong learning by 2010 and will move towards the top quartile of EU countries by 2030.

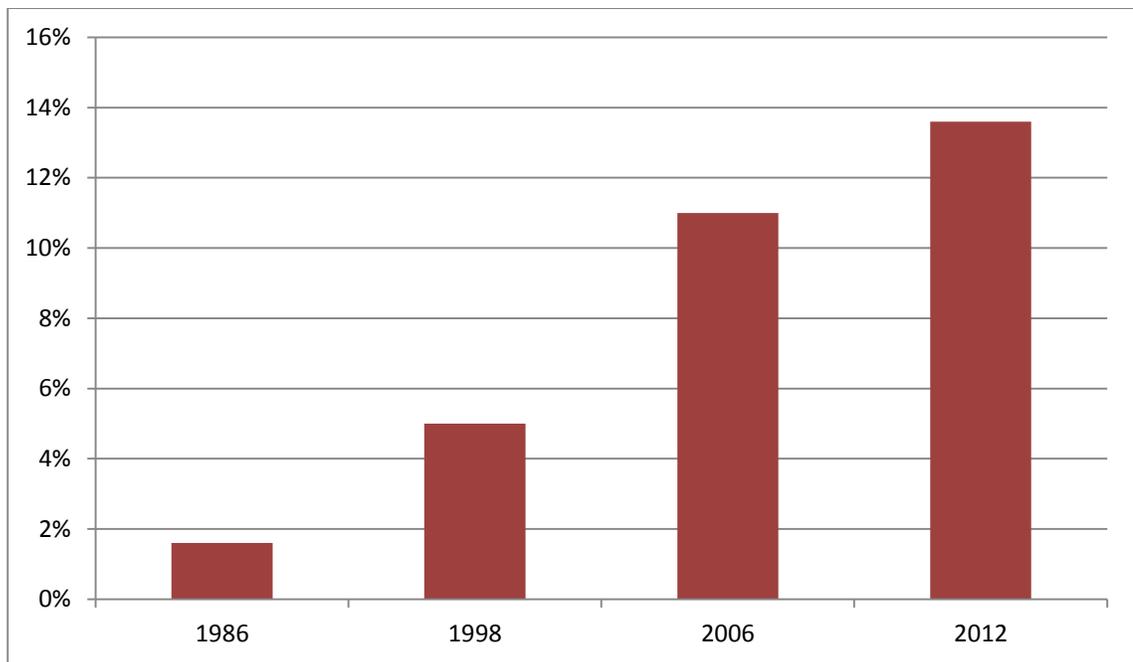
(Source: National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, HEA, 2008: 12).

### *National Adult Access Statistics*

Certainly over the time frame of the publication of the above mentioned documents (2004-2013), there has been a slow, but steady, growth in mature student participation in Ireland. Figure 2.2: Growth in Mature Entrants (aged 23 and over) as a percentage of New Entrants to Full-Time Higher Education in Ireland (1986 to 2012) documents this trend. Combined full-time and part-time adult participation in higher education has increased from 2% in 1986 to 18.2% in 2012 (National Office for Equity of Access, HEA, 2008 and 2010; HEA, 2012). Nonetheless, compared to international figures described in Section 2.2.1, participation among this cohort continues to be below average. Similarly, a mid-term review (HEA, 2010b) carried out by the National Office for Equity of Access on the progress of the 2008-2013 National Access Plan shows that the targets for adult access have not been reached. In terms of full-time mature student enrolments, the office has set a target of 17% participation by 2010. However, a rate of 13.6% is recorded. Similarly,

mature student part-time participation targets were not achieved, 12.5% rather than 14.1% target by 2010. The combined mature student full- and part-time participation rates stand at 18.9% rather than the total target of 23% (HEAb, 2010: 3). This may be attributed to the high cost of participation for adults in tertiary-level studies and also to the lack of paid leave available to those at work. The statistics also indicate that in general, mature students are more represented in the institute of technology sector (20%) than in the universities (11%) (HEA, 2011). This review of policy development suggests that adult access to third-level education in Ireland continues to pose ‘a particular challenge to policy makers...policy initiatives to ensure improved participation in higher education by adult learners are necessary to meet Ireland’s skills needs’ (HEA, 2008: 27).

**Figure 2.2: Growth in Mature Entrants (aged 23 and over) as a Percentage of New Entrants to Full-Time Higher Education in Ireland (1986 to 2012)**



(Source: National Office for Equity of Access, HEA, 2008 and 2010; HEA, 2012).

The establishment of a National Office for Equity of Access in Ireland ensures that adult access continues to be a salient policy issue and the evidence shows that since its foundation, there has been a gradual increase in the participation rates among this demographic.

### 2.2.3 Adult Access and the Broader National Irish Policy Context (2004-to date)

Apart from the publications by National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, a large amount of higher education policy documentation has emerged since 2004. These seminal publications place adult access in the broader context of the modernisation of the higher education system in Ireland<sup>4</sup>. Table 2.5 summarises the themes relating to adult access to higher education.

**Table 2.5 Thematic Summary of Relevant Irish Government Higher Education Policy Documents (2004 - present)**

| <b>Themes relating to Adult Access to Higher Education</b>  | <b>Policy documentation</b>  |
|---|--|
| Need to continue to promote equity of access and improve participation rates among adult learners   | Strategy Statement 2004-2007 (HEA, 2004a); Review of Higher Education in Ireland (OECD, 2004).   |
| Need for up-skilling of the population.<br><br>Important role higher education plays in a modern knowledge-based economy  | Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy (2007);<br>Building Ireland's Smart Economy (2008);<br>Innovation Ireland: Report of the Innovation Taskforce (2010);<br>The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) (2011). |
| Challenges of massification, graduate quality and funding of the Irish higher education sector with the option of capping higher education enrolments mentioned, indicating the considerable challenges the sector is encountering. | The Sustainability Study Aligning Participation, Quality and Funding in Irish Higher Education (HEA, 2011).  |

(Source: HEA, 2004; OECD, 2004; Government of Ireland, 2008, 2010 and 2011; HEA, 2011).

The long awaited National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (DES, 2011), known as The Hunt Report, was published in January 2011 and some reference to access is made in this strategy document (DES, 2011). Specifically, quality, accessibility and lifelong

<sup>4</sup>At the time of writing a review of the entire Irish higher education sector was underway for the purpose of re-structuring (See <http://www.heai.ie/files/TowardsaFutureHigherEducationLandscape.pdf> for detail, accessed on 28 May, 2013).

learning are identified as one of the high-level objectives listed within the strategy: ‘Ireland will have an excellent higher education system that...will be fully accessible throughout their lives and changing circumstances’ (DES, 2011: 27). Recommendation four in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (DES, 2011) document states that ‘the Irish higher education system must continue to develop clear routes of progression and transfer, as well as non-traditional entry routes’ (DES, 2011: 17) and acknowledges that although progress in the access agenda has been made, ‘inequality continues to persist’ (DES, 2011: 34). These findings suggest that the OECD model of increasing and broadening participation for both economic development and social cohesion (Skilbeck, 2000) are echoed in The Hunt Report (DES, 2011). Noting that this strategy document is not evidence-based, Clancy (2011: 2) suggests that The Hunt Report (DES, 2011) is heavily influenced by the ‘economistic’ model of the OECD and concludes that equity of access receives little dedicated attention.

With reference to the above publications, there has been some critical reaction from the academic community. Bruce (2007) observes a growing discourse of marketisation emerging in policy documentation in Ireland and warns of the consequences of subscribing totally to it. Lolic (2011), too, is critical of what she sees as a radical change in policy discourse in both the HEA’s Strategic Plan 2008-2010 and the Building Ireland’s Smart Economy (2008). She argues that:

the emphasis at a macro level is on economic success; HE institutions need to produce the type of subjectivities that are better suited to economic development. At a meso level, these changes are seen in the type of knowledge and assessment favoured in HE. At a micro level, we see students only as independent entrepreneurial and innovative subjects who need to be continuously engaged in the enterprise of the self (p. 282).

Other commentators have noted growing neo-liberalist trends in Irish higher education policy discourse (Lynch, 2006; Morgan and Slowey, 2009; Fleming, 2012; Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012). Lynch, Baker and Lyons (2009: 16-17) argue that the higher education system is preparing graduates for a ‘political, economic and cultural life in the public sphere’ but is not producing caring human beings. Morgan and Slowey (2009) theorise that access is constructed in neo-liberal terms, rather than in a ‘holistic’ system-wide approach (p.216). These findings suggest that although adult access is

alluded to in a wide range of policy documentation, it is conceptualised within a discourse of developing a knowledge-based market-oriented economy, rather than in issues relating to equity and social cohesion.

The most recent iteration of national policy comes from the HEA Landscape document (2013) which refers to access as follows:

The objective of increased participation, equality of access, and lifelong learning recognises both the continuing demand for higher education from students, and the essential role that higher education skills play in building a strong economy and an inclusive society. This objective will be informed by economic forecasts (including both volume and levels of skills required); and specific policy objectives and targets as set in the HEA's National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education. As well as quantitative targets, goals will also be set for continued development of clear routes of access and progression pathways that are flexible and coherent within regions and nationally and recognition of prior learning (p.36).

This document, which aims to restructure the entire Irish higher education sector, only makes minimal reference to equity and social cohesion, and it aligns access more with economic skills requirements, targets and goals setting. In addition, two reports were published on the area of teacher education in 2012<sup>5</sup> and one of these reports, Sahlberg, Munn and Furlong (2012) advocated that two of the teacher education colleges be closed and that 'teacher education be reconfigured into six centres across the country as a means of achieving critical mass' (Clarke, 2013: 8). Further, it seems that in an effort to make the higher education sector more financially viable, a new tripartite funding mechanism (core funding, strategic/earmarked funding and performance-related funding) is being developed at the time of writing (HEA, 2012c). It is proposed that 'performance-related funding would be linked to satisfactory performance in relation to agreed targets' with each institution (Clarke, 2013: 5). In addition, an Employment Control Framework (ECF)<sup>6</sup> was introduced by government in 2011 with the aim of reducing numbers employed in

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<sup>5</sup>A review of the structure of initial teacher education provision in Ireland: Background paper for the international review team (Hyland, 2012) and Report of the International Review Panel on the Structure of Initial Teacher Education Provision in Ireland: Review Conducted on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills (Sahlberg, Munn and Furlong, 2012).

<sup>6</sup>Public Service Reform Plan published on 17 November 2011 by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, <http://www.budget.gov.ie/budgets/2012/Documents/CER%20-%20Estimates%20Final.pdf> [accessed on 25 June, 2013].

the public services. Clarke (2013) cautions that these financial measures may impact adversely on access stating that:

It is important that we retain an expansive view of the university as an engine for social change and economic self-direction. Central to this is equity of access and opportunity and these values are at risk in current budgetary arrangements (p. 14).

This quotation highlights the possible impact of the budgetary constraints on the access agenda and also shows where the access agenda is located in the wider public policy agenda and the higher education policy area.

Of relevance to this study, and probably linked to the adverse economic situation, in general, there appears to be a ‘renewed focus on access to third level’ (McCoy and Byrne, 2011: 141). Although this is useful literature, McCoy and Byrne’s research is focused on the transition between post-primary and third-level education, rather than specifically on adult learners. The only national study available on access courses, which includes adult learners, is the Higher Education Access/Foundation Courses: A Research Report by Dr. Phyllis Murphy which was launched in October, 2009. This report was commissioned by a group representing higher education institutions that deliver access courses, the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Institutes of Technology Ireland (IoTI), the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Department of Education and Science. Murphy (2009: 7) writes that in terms of access programme provision in Ireland, three diverse models of programme delivery can be identified<sup>7</sup>. Details on these courses are provided in Appendix A: Overview of Access Courses delivered by the Third-Level Sector in Ireland. Generally, outcomes from these courses are positive (Murphy, 2009). Overall, though, there has been very little written on the area of adult access to higher education in an Irish context and this study, in some small way, attempts to address this paucity.

In summary, policy documents produced by the government, and in particular by the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, demonstrate successive

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<sup>7</sup>1) Courses delivered by individual Higher Education institutions; 2) Courses delivered by a consortium of Higher Education institutions; 3) Courses delivered by Higher Education institutions in partnership with one or more further education providers.

governments' commitment to improving access provision to higher education for adult learners. These documents advocate for greater mature student participation in higher education and highlight the need for a greater range of admissions routes, including targeted access courses and suggest that access to higher education remains a priority with Irish higher education policy. Current re-structuring of the HE sector suggests the system is aiming to become more coherent overall, not just in access progression pathways. This review of the Irish adult access policy development is helpful to this study as it provides a macro-level national context for the findings in this study and addresses the overarching research problem of, *given the nature of higher education, why and in what way do Irish higher education institutions provide for adult access, and to what extent, if any, has access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education professionals?* In summary, findings show that there has been considerable development of policy and instruments, such as targeted funding for individual students and higher education institutions, a dedicated unit located within the HEA and progressive legislation. Combined, these measures highlight the salience of adult access in Irish higher education policy since the mid-1990s.

The next section examines the literature from the perspective of one of these stakeholders, the institution.

### **2.3 Institutional Studies on Adult Access (Meso-Level Studies)**

As the overarching research problem in this study is concerned with, *given the nature of higher education, why and in what way do Irish higher education institutions provide access for adult learners and, to what extent, if any, has such access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education professionals?*, it is necessary to explore the literature on adult access at the level of the institution. Institutional studies on adult access explore the influence of a number of diametrically opposing 'push and pull' factors (Woodrow, 1998). On one hand, the 'push' factors discourage adult access and, on the other hand 'pull' or encourage adult access. This section reviews this body of literature thematically under the following headings: institutional ethos and culture as a barrier and institutional structural 'push and pull' factors.

### **2.3.1 Institutional Ethos and Culture as a Barrier**

Some obstacles to adult access to tertiary-level education are perceived to be caused by the higher education system itself. Termed ‘institutional barriers’ (Cross, 1981; McGivney, 1996 and 1999), these have been well-researched. As McGivney (1996) argues, higher education is associated with being middle class and Clancy (2001) theorises that universities have traditionally catered for the more privileged in society and despite movements towards the creation of a culture of lifelong learning throughout the OECD countries, higher education courses are still considered to be elite. Overall, researchers are in agreement that non-traditional students, such as adult access students, believe that study at this level belongs to those in the higher socio-economic groups (McGivney, 1996; O’Driscoll, 2002). McGivney (1996) explains that from the perspective of the adult access student, higher education institutions may be formidable places, especially if their initial education experience was negative. In addition, there is a belief from both the perspective of some university staff and some adult students that higher education is for school leavers and adults do not belong in this environment (WRC, 1999; Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003). Adults may be wary of higher education infrastructure and formal enrolments procedures and other difficulties such as lack of childcare, the need for continuity of attendance and the structure of the academic year are institutional barriers that are frequently identified (WRC, 1999).

Evidence from the literature points out that a cultural paradigmatic shift needs to take place within higher education institutions in order to cope with the access agenda (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998; Marks, 2000; Bowl, 2001; Layer, Srivastava and Yorke, 2002; Burke, 2006a). Foskett (2002) suggests that a fundamental change in institutional culture is needed as broadening access poses challenging questions about the role and function of higher education. Other research points to resistance to change among some institutions highlighting that some universities would prefer to continue with traditional selective and elitist practices and that there is a dichotomy between practice at the level of the institution and higher educational policy (Longden, 2000; Marks, 2000; Thomas, 2001; Thompson, 2007). Reviewing this international literature is useful in the context of this study; it allows for a mapping of findings, from the perspective of the institution, as some of these

themes emerge in the context of adult access to higher education in Ireland across case sites in this study (see Chapters Six and Seven).

Access literature also highlights the role that institutional culture and staff play in supporting or not supporting access students in particular (Thomas, 2002; Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003; Parker, Naylor and Warmington, 2005). Research by Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003) points out that students from non-traditional backgrounds are often perceived as different or disadvantaged in some way. These students tend to be further disadvantaged by an institutional culture that places them as other or different. Other studies consider that many mature students feel that their life experience is insufficiently acknowledged or valued (Johnson and Locke, 1990; Bowl, 2001). Cullity (2006, cited in Tones, Fraswe, Elder, White and Smith, 2009: 507) states that, ‘the diverse learning identities and experiences of mature-aged students create a challenge for universities, in that lecturers and mature-aged students might lack mutual understanding of academic expectations’. In a review of the literature on access to higher education, Gorard, May, Thomas, Adnett and Slack (2006) found that few studies explore the area of access and staff development suggesting that higher education institutions may not take this aspect of work seriously. In addition, within Irish university structures, there is also little support for many employees by way of staff development opportunities (Clarke, 2013).

Other literature points to the changing work practices and roles, which have emerged in response to the modernisation agenda within higher education (Whitchurch, 2008; Macfarlane, 2011 and 2013). Burke (2001), Thompson (2007) and Whitchurch (2012a) suggest that champions at the level of the institution play a significant role in advancing access. In her research, Whitchurch (2006: 380) describes the access area of work as being ‘quasi-academic’ and theorises that this new cohort of staff need to be able to work within fuzzy boundaries. Macfarlane (2011) also discusses the concept of change in academic work practices and presents the term ‘para-academic’ as a new category of staff. Lynch, Gummell and Devine (2012) and Courtney (2013) highlight that there is a growing causalisation of labour and in 2013, the Irish Federation of Universities Teachers (IFUT) commissioned an expert group to examine the changing employment terms and conditions among third-level staff (Clarke, 2013). IFUT, as one of the stakeholders in higher

education, have observed that there is a growing trend towards contractual work and lack of security of tenure among early career workers in the sector (Clarke, 2013).

Others suggest that it is not only institutional transformation that is required, but that wider systemic societal change is also needed, that is, student, family and community should also adapt to the needs of mature students (Bamber, Tett, Hosie and Ducklin, 1997; Atherton and Webster, 2003). Many of these studies focus on the barriers to higher education from the perspective of the student, rather than from staff. This body of literature is pertinent to this study as it offers evidence against which to compare or contrast staff perceptions of adult access in the Irish context and answer the research problem in this study.

Acculturation to third-level education is another theme that is prominent in the research (Tinto, 1975; Lynch and O’Riordan, 1998; Mannan, 2007). Feeling part of the institution is important to both the traditional school leaver student as well as the non-traditional mature student and can prevent attrition. Tinto’s (1975) seminal theoretical model of the relationship between student non-completion and academic and social integration offers a framework for understanding successful course completion for all categories of students, including adult learners. Crosling and Heagney (2009) also argue that an interface exists between student engagement, the quality of student learning and the pedagogical context. Using Lave and Wenger’s (1991) analytical framework based on the socio-cultural ‘Community of Practice’ theory, O’Donnell and Tobbell (2007: 28) suggest that the idea of becoming part of an education community reflects this idea of acculturation to the norms, processes and structures of third-level.

Access courses and initiatives provide a tacit knowledge of how the university system operates. Writing in an Irish context, Fleming and Murphy (1997: 74) term this tacit knowledge as ‘College Knowledge’. Their findings support the broader concept of acculturation or integration which will be reviewed in the next section under sub-heading 2.4.2 and the key role this acculturation or knowledge plays in mediating success within the system. This theme of the role access courses can play in supporting students in the transition to third-level studies is echoed by Murphy (2009). In her national study on access programme development in Ireland, respondents from higher education make a

strong case for the location of access/foundation courses within the higher education sector arguing that students have access to specialist curriculum knowledge (Murphy, 2009). This type of delivery allows for acculturation to the physical infrastructure and facilitates breaking down the barriers associated with accessing tertiary-level education (Murphy, 2009: 8). Students also become accustomed to the new styles of teaching and learning as well as different modes of assessment (Murphy, 2009: 8). According to Murphy (*ibid*), student feedback suggests that progression rates are higher when courses are delivered by the same institution, a finding which is consistent with Fleming and Murphy (1997). This study will support these findings and confirms that access courses and initiatives create opportunities for acculturation (see Chapter Eight, Adult Access Course Provision). Others, such as Burke (2001) and Jones and Thomas (2005), argue that it is not the student who needs to adapt, rather the higher education system needs to become more transformative in its approach to accommodate the increasing diversity of learners.

### **2.3.2 Structural Institutional ‘Push and Pull’ Factors**

There is also a body of literature which examines how structural barriers have been responded to at the level of the institution (Cross, 1981; McGivney, 1996 and 1999). A number of institutional responses to these structural barriers have emerged with this literature exploring how the use of alternative modes of programme delivery, such as distance learning (Brown, Keppell, Hughes, Hard, Shilington and Smith, 2012), blended learning (Osborne, 2003) and part-time study options (Woodrow, Yorke, Lee, McGrane, Osbourne, Pudner and Trotman, 2002), can support adult learning. These studies advocate that innovative approaches to programme delivery may facilitate greater adult access to higher education. Equally, the literature also suggests that alternative modes of programme delivery will not solely broaden adult access; for example, Darmody and Fleming’s (2009) research notes that although part-time provision is attractive for adult learners, this mode of study can be particularly difficult because many of these students have family responsibilities, and continue to work while studying, which has the net effect

of creating a complex ‘balancing act’ (p.15). In addition, timetabling issues also feature in the literature. Dodgson and Bolam’s (2002) research suggests that adult students would like to have timetables well in advance to make the necessary domestic and employment arrangements. However, it seems the research is not conclusive. In a Norwegian context, Hovdhauen (2011) found that change to course structures has no effect on dropout and only a modest effect on student transfer across to other courses of study. Using a multi-site case approach, this study explores policy and practice at a meso level with a view to assessing how Irish higher education institutions provide for adult access.

Some literature in the field has explored the idea of admissions policies as a barrier to participation (for example, Woodrow, 1998). Adnett, McCraig, Slack and Bowers-Brown (2011: 15) suggest that in order to increase participation, admissions policies and procedures need to be ‘fair and transparent’. The concept of developing processes of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has also emerged as a response mechanism to facilitate adult entry to third-level. In a Canadian case study, which had RPL as an element in one higher education institution, Dunlop and Burch (2003) observe that admissions policies constitute one segment of the multiple barriers adult learners encounter. Other structural barriers, such as finance and childcare and rigid modes of programme delivery play a role in mediating access (*ibid.*). In addition, Gorard *et al.* (2006) identify a number of institutional strategies that can support non-traditional entrants. One such strategy is the adoption of an institutional strategic approach which demonstrates HEI commitment to the area and has the effect of bringing access into the core work of a HEI (Dodgson and Bolam, 2002; Layer *et al.*, 2002; Duke, 2003).

However, in a summary of the literature on the structural barriers to participation for non-traditional students, Gorard *et al.* (2006) are quick to point out that few of the above studies have been externally evaluated and many of these studies are small in scale and confined to one higher education institution. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that, at a minimum, publications are subject to peer-review. Others have criticised the lack of monitoring and tracking data that is available (Woodrow, 1998; Woodrow *et al.*, 2002), a point that is also noted in Irish literature (Lynch, 1997; HEA, 2008). In effect, this means that neither higher education institutions nor the state are in a position to evaluate

the outcomes of their access interventions (Gorard *et al.*, 2006). Overall, there appears to be consensus that there is rigidity across institutions (Bamber and Tett, 1998; Dodgson and Bolam, 2002; Quinn and Thomas, 2005). Giancola, Grawitch and Borchert (2009: 226) conclude that more research is needed so that higher education institutions can better understand the ‘adult student and address the academic, structural and environmental barriers that currently exist and where possible facilitate them’.

In conclusion, this research on adult access to higher education, at meso level, demonstrates that there is evidence of both change and continuity in institutional culture and ethos and in institutional structures in order to facilitate increasing numbers of adult access students. This review of the findings on institutional studies on adult access is helpful to this study. Such studies allow for a mapping of the findings in this study onto the existing body of literature in the area and will facilitate with the conceptualisation of the analysis in relation to the overarching research problem of, *given the nature of higher education, why and in what way do Irish higher education institutions provide for adult access learners and to what extent, if any, has such access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education professionals?* The final section in this review focuses on the salient literature at the micro level, that of the adult access student.

## **2.4 Micro Studies on Adult Access**

Adult learning is a complex field (Davies and Williams, 2001; Burke, 2002; Ross *et al.*, 2002) which encompasses a large body of scholarship. Broadly, this research can be classified under a number of sub-headings, with each contributing to the knowledge base about adult learning (after O’Brien and O’Fathaigh, 2007):

- Motivational theory (for example, Houle, 1961; Percy, 1988; Beder and Valentine, 1990; Cantor, 1992; Courtney, 1992; Jarvis, 1995; McVey, Patten and Starr, 1996; Sargent, 2000; McGivney, 2001; Osbourne, Marks and Turner, 2004; Bye, Pushkar, and Conway, 2007; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010);
- Destination and experience of adult students post-graduation (for example, Blundell, Dearden and Meghir, 1996; Dale and Egerton, 1997; Woodley and Simpson, 2001;

Egerton and Parry, 2001; Adnett and Slack, 2007; Fleming, Loxley, Kenny and Finnegan, 2010); Woodfield, 2010);

- Socio-cultural theory (for example, Courtney, 1992);
- Community of practice and power relations theory (for example, Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998);
- Curriculum studies (Courtney, 1992; McGivney, 2001);
- Individual epistemological theories (for example, Brookfield, 1987 and 1993);
- Critical self-reflection (Mezirow, 1978, 1990, 1994 and 1995);
- Transformative learning theory (Friere, 1994 and 1996; Boyd, 1989 and 1991; Tennant and Poison, 1995; Burke, 2009);
- Learning Styles (Kolb, 1976 and 1981);
- Learning Cultural theory (Walters, 2000; Foucault, 1976; Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Literature on adult access to higher education at micro level, that is, from the perspective of the adult learner, tends to cluster predominantly around a number of themes such as socio-cultural, personal, dispositional, and financial barriers, access courses as a model of academic preparedness and adult learners' experience of higher education. This next section reviews the literature in the field of adult access to higher education structured around the aforementioned themes, with a focus on Irish studies, where possible. As one of the secondary research questions in this study is to appraise adult students' experience of institutional access initiatives, a review of this literature provides a context for the findings in this study.

#### **2.4.1 Socio-Cultural Barriers Model**

The influence of the socio-cultural barriers model features strongly in the literature on adult access (Cross, 1981; McGivney, 1990, 1996, 1999, 2000 and 2001). Across the body of literature, a range of personal and dispositional barriers to adult access have been

identified (Cross, 1981; McGivney, 1996, 1998, 2000 and 2001; Skilbeck, 2000; O'Driscoll, 2002). These barriers include variables such as gender (Woodley, Wagner, Slowey, Hamilton and Fulton, 1987; Lewis, 1988; Beck, 1992; Redding and Dowling, 1992; Edwards, Sieminskil and Zelden, 1993; Pascall and Cox, 1993; Belanger and Valdivieslo, 1997; Fleming and Murphy, 1997; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; McGivney, 1999 and 2001; Aontas, 2002; Staunton, 2009), age (Aontas, 2002; Morgan et al., 2000; McGivney, 1999; Belanger and Valdivieslo, 1997; Taylor, 1999; Tones et al., 2009), educational background and socio-economical status (West 1996; OECD, 1979; Belanger and Valdivieslo, 1997; Morgan et al., 2000; McGivney, 1999; Taylor, 1999; Lynch, 1997; DES, 1997; National Office for Equity of Access, HEA, 2008 and 2010). This research shows how each of these influential variables plays a role in mediating adult access to third-level education.

### ***Gender as a Barrier***

There are many studies which explore the difficulties of coping with domestic responsibilities and study for female adult higher education students (Yorke, 1999; Lewis, 1988; Beck, 1992; Redding and Dowling, 1992; Edwards, 1993; Pascall and Cox, 1993; Tett, 2004). The limited Irish literature reflects these findings (Fleming and Murphy, 1997; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998). Research also proves that participation in third-level education for women is not all negative. For example, Malik and Courtney (2010) found that participation in higher education had a positive impact on the lives of women in Pakistan. Participants in their study reported feeling more economically independent and also felt their status within the family improved. Wainwright and Marandet (2010: 449) found that a positive impact on one's family was a significant motivator for adult students and that 'institutions need to balance the rhetoric of access with genuine accessibility particularly for those with caring responsibilities'.

With specific reference to gender and adult access to higher education, Burke's (2006b) research based on a sample of 38 working class males participating in access courses across three further education and one university in the UK, shows that while men

appreciate the educational opportunities afforded by participating in access courses and engage in the many supports available to them, male students continually struggle to ‘reposition themselves as deserving students and respectable men’ (Burke, 2006b: 730). Burke (2006b: 719) concludes that access policy and practice is based on ‘simplistic notions of raising aspirations...leaving hidden intricate operations of power, privilege and inequity’.

### ***Socio-Economic Class as a Barrier***

Bowl’s (2003) study explores the reality of access to higher education from the perspective of 32 adults from working class and ethnic minority backgrounds involved with the ‘Birmingham Reach-Out Project’, a central government community-based initiative aimed at increasing mature, working class and ethnic entry to higher education. This research suggests that the experience of non-traditional students remains undervalued by higher education institutions. Bowl concludes that the widening participation agenda takes second place in a university’s attempt to gain and maintain a prestigious research reputation. This tension is also reflected in research conducted by Reay, Ball and David, (2002). Although the sample is small ( $n=23$ ), the researchers concluded that there is a gap between policy rhetoric and practice in the field of widening participation with adult students ‘reporting feelings of struggling in the system’ (p. 5). These findings are supported elsewhere in the literature (Ball and David, 2002; Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003).

### ***Finance as a Barrier***

Finance is a frequent theme in the barriers literature on mature student access (and much noted in macro-level government reports and evaluations as well) (Cross, 1981; Ozga & Sukhnanden, 1997; Thomas, 2001 and 2002). Cross (1981) identified financial matters in earlier work on participation in third-level education. Ozga and Sukhnanden’s (1997) research found a relationship between attrition and finance. Thomas (2001 and 2002) confirms that it continues to be an impediment for all categories of access students, including adult learners. Crosling, Thomas and Heagney (2008) found that a high

proportion of mature students were involved in paid work at the same time as studying. This, in turn, impacted upon the time and energy they had available for study, in particular wider reading, and their time for and level of academic and social integration in higher education (EC, 2010). Financial concerns pose a particular obstacle for the less financially secure older mature learner (Tones *et al.*, 2009: 528). Although the economic cost of participation in higher education is considered to be a notable deterrent, the research shows that ‘non-participants who cite expense as an obstacle have little idea of the actual cost of learning activities’ (McGivney, 1996: 18). McGivney (*ibid*) concludes that ‘cost, like lack of time, may serve as a socially acceptable or face-saving reason for non-participating, camouflaging more complex and possibly unrecognized reasons’. That said, research is broadly in agreement that finance constitutes a significant barrier (Woodley *et al.*, 1987; Fleming and Murphy, 1997; Lynch, 1997; Inglis and Murphy, 1999; Thomas, 2001).

As a model, the barriers approach to adult access has both advantages and disadvantages. Gorard *et al.* (2006: 9-13) summarise the attractiveness of this approach, and in addition, note its limitations:

...[the barriers model] apparently explains differences in patterns of participation between socio-economic groups, and also contains its own solution—removal of the barriers. However removing the apparent barriers to participation is not as easy as it sounds (Selwyn *et al.*, 2005), and this casts doubt on the value of the concept of barriers as an explanation of non-participation. It leads us instead to a fuller consideration of the personal, social and economic determinants of participation and non-participation in education (Gorard *et al.*, 2006: 13).

Kettley (2007: 333-345) is critical of the barriers model to adult participation in higher education and asserts that this approach does not fully ‘explore the relationship between students’ social characteristics, learning experience and university career...little effort to provide integrated theoretical explanation of the processes that produce and occasionally transform patterns of considering students aggregate lifestyles’. Kettley (2010) proposes that this body of research is situated mainly within the positivist tradition and the underlying philosophy is one of deficit or compensation. Nonetheless, across the literature, the barriers theme continues to persist and one can conclude that many

multifaceted factors influence adult access. As this study will show, in the Irish context, finance continues to be a major obstacle to adult access.

#### **2.4.2 Adult Access Initiatives and Academic Preparedness**

A number of micro- level studies have evaluated the effectiveness of access entry routes for mature students. These studies report varying degrees of success of adult access initiatives. In a Scottish study, on adults from an ethnic minority background participating in access courses delivered in the further education sector, Connelly and Chakrabarti's (1999) findings suggest that there is little evidence of programme effectiveness despite significant institutional commitment. Similarly, in a partnership adult access programme between the further and higher education sector in the UK, Reddy (2004), referred to by Gorard *et al.* (2006), found poor rates of transfer onto higher education studies, although the adult learners in question reported having a positive experience of the course. These findings suggest that the barriers to higher education for adults continue to be complex.

Nonetheless, there is a small body of evidence that suggests that access courses prepare adult students for the rigours of third-level study. An Australian study found when adult learners attended a preparatory course, their academic attainment and attrition rates were the same as the traditional school leaver (Levy and Murray, 2005). Similarly, a study of adult participants of a summer school preparatory course in the University of Dundee showed high rates of transfer to full-time study and lower rates of attrition (4%) compared to the traditional school leaver population (9%) (Blicharski, 2000).

In summary, with regard to adult access courses and academic preparedness, the research is conflicting. Some studies report poor rates of progression to higher education whereas others make a strong case for the continued delivery of adult access courses offering higher progression and course completion rates as evidence.

### **2.4.3 Adult Access Initiatives and Partnership**

There is a small body of evidence that suggests that some access courses may be delivered in partnership and that, in general, such access courses provide adult learners with an opportunity to become academically prepared for undergraduate studies. Cross-agency collaboration is considered to be a useful approach to the broadening of access; however, research suggests that this can be challenging (Pugh and De’Ath, 1989; Higgins, 2009). Nonetheless, the literature concurs that there are numerous strategic merits to the partnership model of access such as the development of collaboration structures to avoid duplication, the benefits of shared learning and the opportunity to draw on specialist expertise by linking with relevant experts (Higgins, 2009). Features of partnerships which support positive ways of working include good communication and shared responsibility (Higgins, 2009). Courtney (2013: 48) argues that the partnership model offers potential as it is a ‘powerful tool for dealing with a complex and constantly changing professional environment’. Increasingly, in Ireland, government higher education funding schemes, such as the Strategic Innovation Fund (2006-2011) and the Higher Education Sectoral Development Scheme (2013) also place an emphasis on institutional collaboration.

In the United Kingdom, many adult access courses are delivered in a collaborative partnership model. Some studies suggest that cross-sectoral partnership is an effective mechanism to facilitate access as it ‘removes competition’ (Thomas, 2011: 231). In addition, Knox’s (2005) study, in a Scottish context, on the outcomes of a transition programme between the further and higher education sectors, found that delivery of an 150 hour ‘Next Steps’ transition programme for 103 adult participants encouraged progression, retention and academic performance. With a small sample of 18 participants, Bingham and O’Hara (2007) report on the impact of a partnership programme between Sheffield Hallam University and local further education colleges in the United Kingdom. The project involved the articulating of new admissions routes from further education to higher education in order to encourage student transfers. Findings suggest that subsequent academic attainment and retention rates equalled those of the traditional school entrant.

Bingham and O'Hara (2007) argue that having more diverse entry routes does not necessarily lead to a diminution in academic standards.

Thomas (2011: 232) argues that the Aimhigher access initiative in the UK which comprised of 43 local partnerships, involving wide range of stakeholders, including a local university, has potential to be an effective model of increasing access to university. Thomas (2011: 246) has produced a six-point framework with a list of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to facilitate evaluation of institutional access provision. Many of the KPIs in her framework, such as information, advice, guidance, subject choice, academic skill development and institutional expectation, will be considered in this study.

Findings from Murphy (2009) suggest that, in the Irish context, there is a need for a 'menu' or 'suite' of access options working at the interface of further and higher education, available to categories of under-represented group including adult learners (Murphy, 2009: 10). The rationale is quite simple: experience shows that learners from marginalised communities are often hesitant to leave their own communities in order to avail of education opportunities (Murphy, 2009: 10). Murphy (2009: 10) believes that the further education sector (VEC), which places an emphasis on adult literacy and flexible learning, are more often than not located within such communities and a partnership model between further and higher education would allow each to bring their own unique strengths together to work in the best interests of students.

#### **2.4.4 Adult Access Learners' Experience of Higher Education**

Literature on adult learners' experiences of higher education suggests that despite the difficulties and challenges encountered by many, students value their experience (see for example, Tones *et al.*, 2009). With specific reference to Ireland, in their study of the post-graduation destination of disadvantaged mature students in three tertiary-level institutions, Fleming, Loxley, Kenny and Finnegan (2010: 11) found that although mature disadvantaged students received modest financial returns, all participants involved in the

research considered their experience of third-level education positive and valuable. This research discovered that graduates viewed their post-graduation destination not only from an economic and career perspectives but that also they identified other outcomes such as increased sense of self, positive impact on family and quality of life (*ibid*: 17). Similarly, in two longitudinal studies on the outcomes of the Trinity Access Programme (TAP) which recruits both school leavers and mature age learners to its programme, there were significant non-pecuniary benefits to pursuing studies, such as increased self-confidence, knowledge of labour market and opportunities to develop professional and social networks (TCD, 2010: 36; Share and O'Carroll, 2013).

There is also a body of literature that confirms that the complexity of adult life places extra demands on mature students (Lynch, 1997; Fleming and Murphy, 1997; Inglis and Murphy, 1999). Many adult learners report feelings of stress throughout their university life (Inglis and Murphy, 1999; Tones *et al.*, 2009). Tones *et al.* (2009: 506) research shows that study barriers are:

likely to be intensified for mature-aged students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, who are unlikely to have progressed directly from high school to further education/have been out of the education system for some time and who did not pursue education after finishing school.

However, the research in this area is not conclusive. In Carney-Crompton and Tan's (2002) work, no difference between anxiety levels among younger female and older female students was recorded. In their research, Giancola *et al.* (2009) show that the family-study-work triangle is a source of significant stress for the adult student. Challenges associated with studying at third-level education also feature in the research on mature students. These challenges, if not addressed, can lead to attrition. In a study on attrition and adult access students, Reay *et al.* (2002) explore the experiences of a number of mature students who failed to make the transition to higher education after an access course. Their research identifies a 'shortage of money, lack of time and childcare problems as the most common reasons for leaving courses prematurely' (p. 15).

Literature reveals that there is an enormous body of research on adult learning; however, the literature on adult access to higher education continues to be dominated by the barriers model to access, which operates from a deficit or compensatory philosophical premise,

often located at the level of the adult learner. Barriers identified include personal or dispositional variables (age, gender, socio-economic background, previous education history) as well as financial obstacles. Other micro-level studies show that despite the additional challenges adult learners may encounter, students report positively about their experiences of participating in third-level studies citing many non-pecuniary advantages.

## **2.5 Conclusion of Literature Review**

This chapter, to-date, has provided an overview of policy and literature as it pertains to the widening of access for adult learners to higher education and was divided into four main themes, which help address the overarching research problem of this study, which is to examine, *given the nature of higher education, why and in what way do higher education institutions in Ireland provide for access for adult learners and to what extent, if any, has such access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education professionals?* In addition, these themes are also used to inform the analytical framework employed in this study outlined in sub-heading 2.6 next. These themes were:

- international and supra-national higher education trends and policy advances;
- national Irish higher education trends, policy development;
- meso studies on mature students;
- micro research on adult access programme provision.

Earlier research indicates that there has been significant policy development with regard to adult access students, in particular at transnational, supra-national and national levels (UNESCO, 1998; EU, 2000; OECD, 1996; 2001; 2002; 2003 and 2005; DES, 1995; 1998; 1999 and 2000). Specifically at supra-national level, the development of the European Higher Education Area and the social dimension of the Bologna Declaration appear to be contributing towards a renewed focus of access to third-level education. Among EU countries, Ireland's performance in both lifelong learning and part-time/flexible provision

is relatively poor. However, Irish national adult access policy is quite developed, with the National Office for Equity of Access making a significant contribution to advancing this agenda. Higher education finance schemes are also having an impact. Compared to other countries within the EHEA, Ireland appears to have a range of robust policies and structures in place aimed at attracting and supporting adult students in the higher education system.

This review of the literature on adult access to higher education shows that there is evidence of both change and continuity in institutional culture and structures. Nonetheless, it seems that higher education institutions are slow to adapt to the new demographic of adult access students where the research is indeed limited. However, it is equally encouraging to note that some creative responses to overcoming the ‘push’ factors are emerging, which in turn encourage or ‘pull’ greater numbers of adult access students to study in higher education.

At a micro level, studies show that although there are many challenges in pursuing higher education studies adult learners benefit in many ways from their experiences. Research in the area reinforces the need for access programmes to ensure that adult learners can ‘up-skill’ and prepare for the rigours of tertiary-level studies.

Resulting from this review of literature in the field, a number of gaps are evident. There is:

- limited literature on mature students and adult access to higher education in an Irish context;
- a lack of studies within higher education research which explore the impact of supra-national and national policy on institutional provision of adult access from an Irish perspective;
- a predominance of focus in the literature on the ‘barriers’ model to broadening access;
- a tendency for research to focus on only one perspective, that is, from either the adult student or government.

## **2.6 Conceptual Framework**

The aim of this section is to place this research within a useful theoretical and analytical framework. Much of the theoretical work that exists in the area of access draws on cognate disciplines, including sociology, economics, education, and higher education policy. To answer the research problem, what is required in terms of an analytical framework is one which takes cognisance of the following:

- 1) Levels of analysis, that is, a number of levels of analysis, such as the micro level (student experience), perspectives from the meso level (perspectives from institutional managers, academic and professional staff, as well as institutional ethos and mission) and macro level (regional, national and supranational policy and influences from a wide range of stakeholders);
- 2) Socio-cultural, political, historical-and environmental influences;
- 3) A number of other concepts such as change, continuity and adaptation.

The purpose of the next section is to provide an overview of the theoretical underpinnings of the area and, in turn, establish an analytical framework for this study.

## **2.7 Higher Education Institutions as Social Organisations**

Higher education institutions can be viewed as social organisations with a wide range of actors involved, such as students and their families, academics, professional staff, government, social partners and sometimes industry (Ballantine, 2001; Skilbeck, 2002). Skilbeck (2002: 11) places emphasis on the immense array of relationships involved with the higher education system in the twentieth first century stating that ‘the university is at the centre of a vast network of intellectual, social, economic, cultural relationships increasingly global in their reach’. Ballantine (2001: 261) suggests that universities are ‘essentially communities with an overall academic program, centralised physical settings, a form of governance and a range of services’. This concept of higher education

institutions as social organisations has support elsewhere. Birnbaum (2000: 227) discusses the idea of the higher education system in terms of its virtues and roles in advancing civic participation, democracy and social cohesion and theorises that the university is indeed a social institution.

It is important to acknowledge that higher education is undergoing profound change. Perkins (1973) observes that there is a growing discourse about the role and purpose of higher education. Gibbons (1998: 1) further echoes this saying that a ‘new paradigm of higher education in society has gradually emerged’. Higher education, in the twentieth first century, is a complex, versatile organization with an ever intensifying role, charged with multiple wider responsibilities such as supporting economic development and social inclusion (Gibbons, 1998; Skilbeck, 2002; Shattock, 2008). Tapper and Palfreyman (2010: 41) highlight that higher education institutions are pressured to change and to adapt to a wide range of environmental (social, financial and political) influences. De Zilma (2010: 3) also argues that the ‘complex, turbulent exogenous environments’, caused by globalisation, marketisation, declining exchequer funding, technological advances, massification and increased external accountability, are having a profound impact on the Australian higher education system. It appears that this change is a global phenomenon.

These changes all point to a system undergoing reform and give rise to intensive theoretical debate about the role and purpose of higher education. From a review of the literature, two distinct, prevailing and opposing higher education cultural paradigms emerge: the traditional collegial model of higher education and the new public management (NPM) model of higher education. As access poses fundamental questions about the role and purpose of higher education, it is therefore at the nexus of this theoretical debate. It is within this context that this study is situated theoretically. The next section explores each of these models in turn.

## 2.8 Internalist Approaches to Higher Education Institutional Analysis

Traditionally, the collegial model of higher education has been the dominant culture globally. Historically, the model originates from the European tradition of higher education: the German style Humboldtian research university and British Oxbridge universities and Edinburgh University in Scotland (Bergquist, 2007: 1; Tapper and Palfreyman, 2010: 135). Higher education collegial culture can be defined as:

a culture that finds meaning primarily in the disciplines represented by the faculty in the institution; that values faculty research and scholarship and the quasi-political governance processes of faculty, that holds assumption about the dominance of nationality in the institution, and that conceives of the institution's enterprise as the generation, interpretation and dissemination of knowledge and as the development of specific values and qualities of young men and women who are future leaders of our society (Bergquist, 2007: 15).

An understanding of the concepts underpinning the collegial model of higher education is useful to this study for a number of reasons. First, the collegial model facilitates our understanding of the traditional structures and processes of higher education (Becher and Kogan, 1992), and, therefore, we can explore how Irish higher education institutions are responding to the drive for greater adult participation. Second, this model focuses on the important role individuals, either in academic departments or in terms of wider institutional governance structures, can play in facilitating and encouraging adult access to higher education. Therefore, this model demonstrates the significance of structure and agency as a mechanism for change. Third, it helps us understand how the widening participation agenda is impacting on the traditional *modus operandi* of universities. The more diverse student population has led to the development of new policies and procedures as well as a growing interest into the broader teaching and learning environment (Lomas, 2006). Finally, this model is useful for this study because it focuses on the internal environment of higher education institution and helps us consider how traditional institutional structure/agency are changing in an Irish context in order to widen access by adult learners.

A number of key concepts characterise the collegiate model. These concepts are useful for the analysis of this study as they provide a framework for conceptualising how the

endogenous higher education institutional environment can provide for adult access. The purpose of higher education within the collegial model is based on a broad holistic philosophical model (Rulolph 1962; Duke, 1996). The focus of academic activity is on quality (Bergquist, 2007: 17). This idea of quality is reinforced by the tradition of small group teaching or the tutorial system (Tapper and Palfreyman, 2010). In the collegial model of higher education, emphasis is placed primarily on research and scholarship and secondly, on teaching and the concept of service to the wider community (Clark, 1983; Kogan and Becher, 1992; Kogan and Hanney, 2000; Bergquist, 2007; Bergquist and Pawlak, 2008; Lynch, 2010). Furthermore, another of the fundamental characteristics of the *collegium* is the focus on the subject discipline. This is evident through the development of a discipline-specific orientation for students and in organisational structures such as the creation of subject-specific academic departments (Kogan and Becher, 1992; Kogan and Hanney, 2000; Bergquist, 2007). The academic department is considered to be the foundation stone for all further endeavours (Becher and Trowler, 2001). This results in the creation of strong disciplinary sense of identity (Kuhn, 1970; Rice, 1986; Cohen, 1998) and in what Tapper and Palfreyman (2010: 17), drawing from Halsey (1992), call ‘donnish dominion’.

Governance in the collegial model of higher education operates mainly at committee level organised around academic disciplines and departments (Clark, 1983; Kogan and Becher, 1992; Kogan and Hanney, 2000) within a horizontal organisational structure. Building on the work of Millet (1962), Bergquist (2007: 41), describes this form of governance as ‘quasi-political, committee-based, faculty controlled governance’. In addition, the collegial model tends to have strong leadership at senior level in the form of a president whose power tends to be enigmatic in nature (Bergquist, 2007: 21, referencing Weber, 1947).

Another primary characteristic of the *collegium* is the concept of autonomy. Academic autonomy and freedom are considered essential norms of the collegial model (Clark, 1983; Clancy, 1989; Kogan and Becher, 1992; Kogan and Hanney, 2000; Lynch, 2006 and 2010; Hughes, 2010). From the perspective of the collegial model, such autonomy is essential. It protects academic freedom which is considered one of its ‘delineating norms’

(Bergquist, 2007: 32) within the *collegium* (Kogan and Becher, 1992; Kogan and Hanney, 2000; Lynch, 2010) and creates the idea of the university as means of protecting society by encouraging freedom of intellectual thought (Bergquist, 2007: 32).

In summary, an endogenous approach to higher education analysis with its key concepts of horizontal governance, subject specific disciplinary orientation, academic autonomy and collegial norms is helpful for this study. Enabling access for adult students to higher education institutions could be situated within this internalist model. Therefore, this model can, in part, offer a useful analytical framework in terms of answering the overarching research problem of, *given the nature of higher education, why and in what way, do institutions provide for adult learner access*, especially in terms of service to the community.

## **2.9 Externalist Approaches to Higher Education Institutional Analysis**

In contrast, New Public Management (NPM) emerged as a model in the 1970s and 1980s in the United Kingdom and was brought about as a means for governments to achieve greater efficiencies within the public services (Pollitt, 1994; Manning, 2001; Hood, 2001). It is linked historically to the conservative Thatcher and Reagan administrations in England and the United States respectively in the 1980s. It has emerged as a response to the massification and universalism of the system that has occurred since the 1980s (Trow, 1974 and 2000) when higher education started becoming less selective and elitist. As a theoretical model it is in direct contrast to the traditional ‘collegial’ model, which has concepts of collegiality, professionalism, academic integrity and autonomy at its core, traditional values, practices and structures associated with the higher education sector since its formation. Henkel (2000) observes that higher education institutions have adapted to governmental attempts for enhanced accountability, economies and performance appraisal. Tapper and Palfreyman (2010: 135) build on this and describe NPM as a ‘revolution posing a powerful challenge everywhere to the collegial understanding of institutional governance and administration’. This is an important point as it highlights the on-going tension between the NPM and collegial models and the drive for reform of the higher education system by government.

Understanding the concepts associated with NPM is useful for this study as such concepts locate the change in higher education culture, structures and practices within a model. Conceptualising a higher education system or an institution's dominant culture provides a useful framework for considering different ways in which policies, practices and structures related to access for adults are developed and implemented (Dopson and McNay, 1996; Lomas, 2006). NPM provides a paradigm through which we can consider how the exogenous environment is responsible for driving change at an institution level with reference to greater access by adult learners to higher education. It also facilitates an understanding of the response to the external, wider socio-cultural political policy environment. NPM provides a framework which allows for the consideration of new work practices such as partnership, strategic planning, quality assurance and cross-sectoral collaboration. It also offers a lens through which we can explore change in institutional culture and in the 'locus of power' (Lomas, 2006) and understand developments happening at policy level, for example the publication of The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (DES, 2011), as noted in section 2.2.3 in Chapter Two, Literature Review.

Bergquist and Pawlak (2008: 43) define NPM as a:

culture that finds meaning primarily in the organisation, implementation and evaluation of work that is directed towards specified goals and purpose; that values fiscal responsibility and effective supervisory skills, that holds assumptions about the capacity of the institution to define and measure its goals and objectives clearly, and that conceives of the institution's enterprise as the inculcation of specific knowledge and skills and attitudes in students so that they might become successful and responsible citizens.

In order to understand NPM, it is important to differentiate between traditional managerial and governance practices which have always existed in the higher education system and the new managerialism model (Kogan, 2004). Deem (2001) describes the style of management as being powerful and more typical of what is considered corporate practice shifting the locus of power from academics and eroding some of their autonomy and freedom.

Like the collegial model, the new managerial model has a number of key characteristics and these are useful as an analytical framework for this study. Rather than having an internal focus, like the *collegium* model, the NPM model responds to exogenous values and policies, including access policies and access targets and funding among many others (Jarratt, 1985; Braun, 2000; McNay, 2000). From this externalistic approach, the purpose of the higher education system is to produce graduates who are competent in a number of specific skills and who have acquired certain knowledge and attitudes (Bergquist and Pawlak, 2008: 66). Teaching is modified accordingly with a ‘criterion-based approach to performance, specified educational outcomes which can be assessed quantitatively’ (Bergquist and Pawlak, 2008: 61).

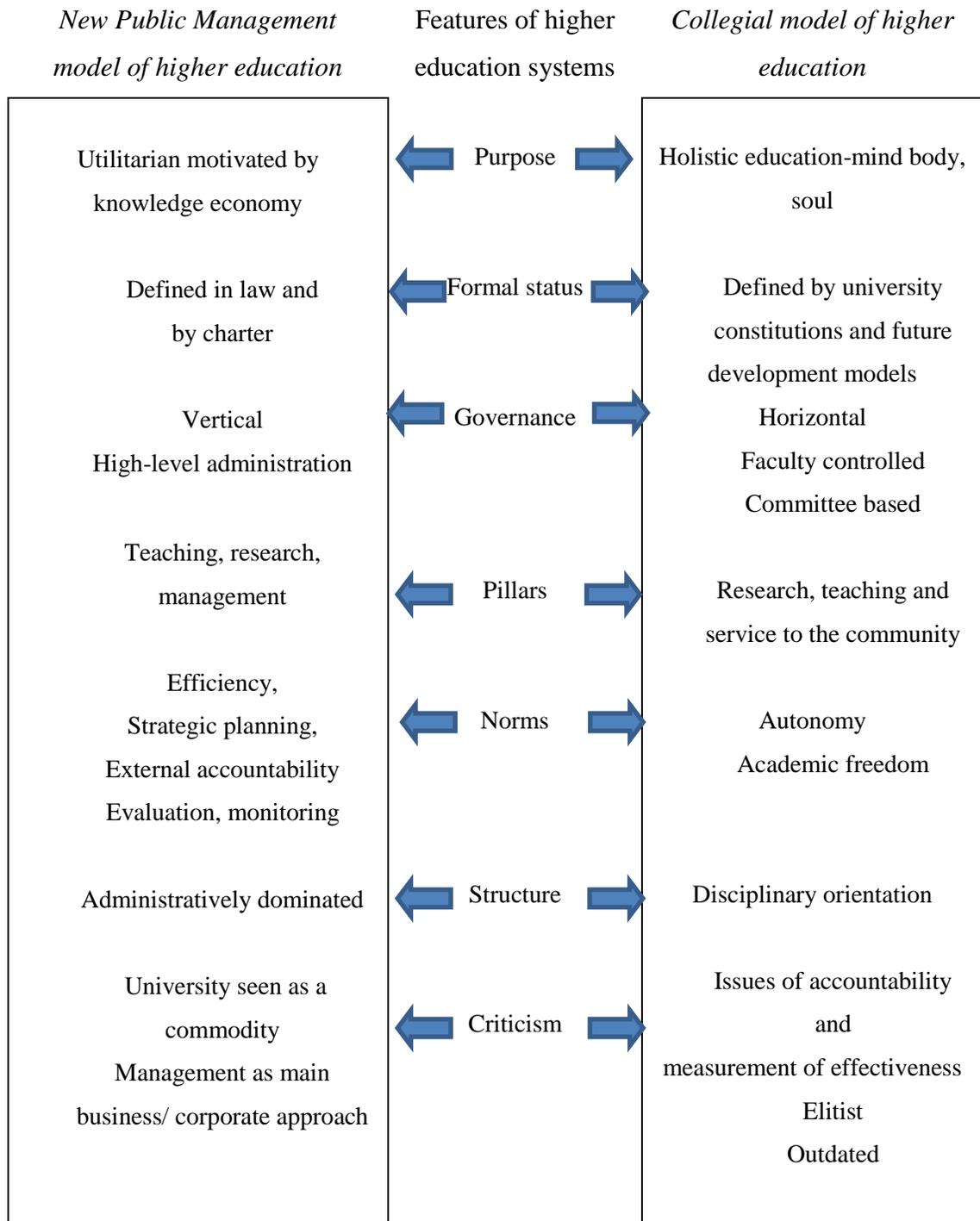
Governance in this model is different to the collegial model and is organised in a formal, vertical hierarchical structure, rather than the traditional horizontal flat structure associated with the *collegium* (Jarratt, 1985; Braun, 2000; McNay, 2000; Bergquist, 2007; Bergquist and Pawlak, 2008). There is an emphasis on teaching and course design rather than serving on faculty committees (Bergquist and Pawlak, 2008: 64). As a result, faculty tend not to engage with the traditional faculty governance processes ‘considering them to be inefficient and a waste of time’ (Bergquist and Pawlak, 2008: 45). Cohen (1998: 247) theorises that in this model, the role of the president or leader of the university has moved from the idea of an enigmatic leader to that of Chief Executive Officer. Bergquist and Pawlak, (2008: 58-70) show that this model is characterised by increased administration, management of information and complex budgets. In addition, this model of higher education is linked to concepts of efficiency, competence, accountability and outcomes (Gappa *et al.*, 2007). It is also synonymous with strategic planning, evaluation (Deem, 2001) and the generation of additional private income (Gappa *et al.*, 2007).

In summary, NPM is associated with institutional strategic planning, and environmental factors such as external funding pressure and greater accountability. NPM also places emphasis on efficiencies, target setting and vertical, hierarchal governance. This exogenous approach to higher education analysis is helpful for this study. The key concepts associated with this model offer a useful analytical framework against which we

can be consider why and in what way higher education institutions respond to the broadening access agenda for adult learners.

What is clear from both models of higher education is that there is growing tension with traditional academic values, norms and working practices as issues develop over non-traditional students, greater numbers of students, funding and possible changes in the higher education environment, policies, practices, the curricula, teaching delivery styles and approaches to learning (Baldrige *et al.*, 1978; Bolman and Deal, 1984; Trow, 1994; Lomas, 2006; Meyer, 2007; Hornibrook, 2012). Change within the higher education system can be situated theoretically within these dual parameters of the *collegium* and NPM model. This dissonance is summarised in Figure 2.3: Dissonance between the Collegial Model of Higher Education and NPM Model of Higher Education.

**Figure 2.3: Dissonance between the Collegial Model of Higher Education and NPM Model of Higher Education**



Sources: (Clark, 1983; Clancy, 1989; Kogan and Becher, 1992; Kogan and Hanney, 2000; Deem, 2001; Kogan, 2004; Lynch, 2006 and 2010; Bergquist, 2007; Gappa *et al.*, 2007; Bergquist and Pawlak, 2008; Hughes, 2010; Tapper and Palfreyman, 2010).

One theoretical model which provides a way of conceptualising an adult access initiative within the complex higher education landscape is Complex Adaptive Systems or complexity theory and this next section outlines its relevance to this study.

### **2.10 Complex Adaptive Systems Framework in a Higher Education Context**

Complex Adaptive Systems theory (CAS), which originated in the area of biology, specifically in the sub-field of ecology, suggests that systems are composed of many interacting parts that evolve and adapt over time. **Complex Adaptive Systems or complexity theory** can be defined as ‘a theory of survival, evolution, development and adaptation’ (Morrison, 2002: 6). It is, as Kuhn (2008: 177) states, ‘an umbrella term’ which covers the basic construct that while phenomena may seem chaotic, they do form part of a greater, more coherent system. Complexity allows us to work with, and conceptualise, complex systems that are characterised by a wide range of interacting agents (Kuhn, 2008; Mason, 2008). The CAS approach, applied to the theme of adult access to higher education, allows for the analysis of changes in culture, structures, processes and practices and has enough flexibility, especially within the analysis of elements of the sub-systems. As Colquhoun (2005: 43) suggests the attraction of complexity theory ‘is its recognition of the unpredictable, messy and complicated nature’ of people and their structures’. Law and Ury (2003:10, cited in Haggis, 2008: 161) also point out that CAS offers a way of dealing with ‘the fleeting, the distributed, the multiple and the complex’.

This model provides a useful way of capturing the dissonance between the Collegial and NPM models and offers us a way of conceptualising and analysing the complex forces influencing adult access in contemporary higher education in an Irish context. One of the advantages of using complexity as an analytical model for this study is that it can draw on other relevant theories in the field. One such theory is Clarke’s (1983) seminal ‘Triangle of Co-ordination’ which defines market forces, government forces and academic oligarchy as the three forces of influences on higher education systems.

### ***Complex and Dynamic***

A number of fundamental principles are involved in a complex adaptive system. First, complexity theory or CAS stresses that humans and their endeavours and their systems are both complex and dynamic (Kuhn, 2008: 182). Higher education institutions as social organisations are both. Kuhn (2008: 182) asserts that education in general is ‘multi-dimensional, non-linear, interconnected, far from equilibrium and unpredictable’. Following on from the literature review, it is noteworthy that the area of providing access for adult learners is complex and, therefore, what is needed is a complex theory rather than a reductionist approach. A CAS is never static, it continually evolves. It is therefore a suitable framework for studying a higher education system undergoing profound change, allowing for analysis of system-wide change (Lemke and Sabelli, 2008: 118). Further, with reference to the dissonance between collegial and NPM model, a CAS framework acknowledges that tension and paradox are integral characteristics of the system.

### ***Relationship between Agents and Elements***

Second, one of the key principles of complexity theory is the relationships among agents or elements (Mason, 2008: 37). Again within a higher education context, this is represented by the complex nature of the social relationships across all actors, that is, students, parents, families, academic staff, professional staff, government, statutory and non-statutory organisations and industry. This interaction among actors is what identifies one system from another (Mason, 2008: 39). Dillon (2000: 40) theorises that no agent acts in isolation, everything is relational. Of additional significance in CAS is the recognition of the number of agents or, in the case of a higher education system, the number of actors. Given this number, it is difficult to isolate variables and as Radford (2008:152) argues ‘there are too many variables to account fully for any event... CAS has “fuzzy” or open boundaries’. All the actors or ‘stakeholders’ (in this case, students, academics, professional staff and management) have different characteristics, objectives and their own realities, and this impacts on why and in what way higher education institutions provide for access for adult learners.

### *Nested Systems*

Third, the concept of nested systems (Davis, 2008) also features as one of the fundamental principles of a CAS. In the case of adult access to a higher education institution, this can be seen as the individual, whether staff or adult student, located within an academic department or professional services unit, within an institution, within a national higher education system feeding into an increasingly global higher education system. Nested systems learn from experience and are capable of evolving. This concept of system nested within systems is a particularly useful construct for this study as it means that both the influences of endogenous (collegial) and exogenous (NPM) models of higher education analysis can be accommodated within this theoretical framework. This idea of a nested system permits analysis across a range of levels such as the micro (student), meso (institutional actors and structures) and macro (wider social, political, historical, and cultural policy environment).

### *Critical Mass*

Fourth, the idea of critical mass is also important. To paraphrase Mason (2008), critical mass is reached once a certain degree of complexity is attained. This results in a 'phase transition which creates new behaviour and properties and a 'momentum' (*ibid*: 37). However, this does not happen in isolation. The phase transition is dependent on a range of specific contextual factors (*ibid*). Again examining the theme of access to higher education, diversification of the student population is taking place because of a number of policy initiatives such as prioritisation of widening access at national, supra-national and global levels; the availability of funding on a competitive basis to institutions; the commitment of institutions and a reservoir of students with potential. This leads to the concept of emergence. This, according to Mason (2008: 37), is where once a certain level of complexity is achieved within an environment, fresh and innovative behaviours may surface and, in the case of this study on access by adult learners, this is evidenced by the increased number of enrolments and changes in policies, processes, structures and practices.

### ***Importance of History for Understanding Current Contexts***

Fifth, Mason (2008) makes the point that complexity theory considers history in the context of understanding why change is important. Applied to a higher education context in Ireland, this theoretical framework allows for the consideration of Ireland's unique education history where participation in second level, not to mention third level, was not possible for many. Further, complexity theory provides an overarching structure for exploring the development of Ireland's higher education policy against a historical background of colonialism and independence.

### ***Blurred Boundaries***

Finally, another feature of complexity theory is that with this approach boundaries are blurred; actions can be based on internalised rules (Colquhoun, 2005). Applied to the higher education context, universities have well-developed protocols and procedures in place. Actors or agents within the system can change their behaviours to suit the context in which they find themselves (Colquhoun, 2005). This is obvious in the higher education system through the multiplicity of roles employees can play at any given time, for example, teacher, researcher, administrator or member of a range of both external and internal committees.

Drawing from complexity or CAS theory, Becher and Kogan's (1992) representation of higher education has much relevance for this study as it provides an overview of the complexity of higher education. Their model outlines not only the distinctive structures, but also the unique processes involved in this system and therefore it is particularly useful to draw on the key concepts associated with their model. Alluding to the concept of systems nested within other systems, Becher and Kogan (1992) identify four non-hierarchical levels within the higher education landscape: the central authority, the institution, the basic unit and the individual. This categorisation is helpful for this study as it offers a number of levels of analysis, individual student (micro), basis unit and institution (meso), central authority (macro) and the wider socio-cultural political environment (macro). The model is also two dimensional: one dimension captures the

norms and the other, operations. The normative mode relates to the ‘monitoring and maintenance of values, to what people in the system count as important’ (*ibid*: 10). The operational mode refers to the practicalities or ‘job responsibilities’ associated with each level in the system (*ibid*: 8). These dual dimensions are useful for this study, as improving adult enrolments in third-level education involves a blend of both modes.

Two diverse aspects also feature in Becher and Kogan’s model. Each mode has an internal and an external aspect. The internal aspect refers to features ‘which stem directly from the nature and purpose of the enterprise of higher education as a whole’ (Becher and Kogan, 1992: 10). Extrinsic aspects relate to exogenous environmental features. They suggest that their model has merit because it:

deconstructs the everyday existence of the academic world and shows how the workings of the system change and can adapt over time, while still being congruent to its core purpose, that of teaching, learning and research (Becher and Kogan, 1992: 8).

The identification of both aspects is useful for this study as this will help capture the tension between the internalistic models (collegial) and the externalistic model (NPM) of higher education analysis.

In summary, as noted above, Becher and Kogan’s metatheory of higher education has much relevance for this study as it adopts a complexity theoretical stance within a higher education context. Further, the model covers the uniqueness of the higher education system. Features such as governance, standards and quality assurance are included in their description of the processes and structures involved. The model facilitates inclusion of both the collegial and NPM models of higher education. Finally, the model acknowledges the interplay of wider macro-level societal influences on the institution and student. This interplay has an impact on adult participation in the higher education system.

The four levels, two modes, normative and operational, and two aspects, internal and external, are synthesised in diagrammatic format in Figure 2.4: Becher and Kogan (1992: 18) Model of the Process and Structure in Higher Education.

**Figure 2.4: Becher and Kogan (1992: 18) Model of the Process and Structure in Higher Education.**

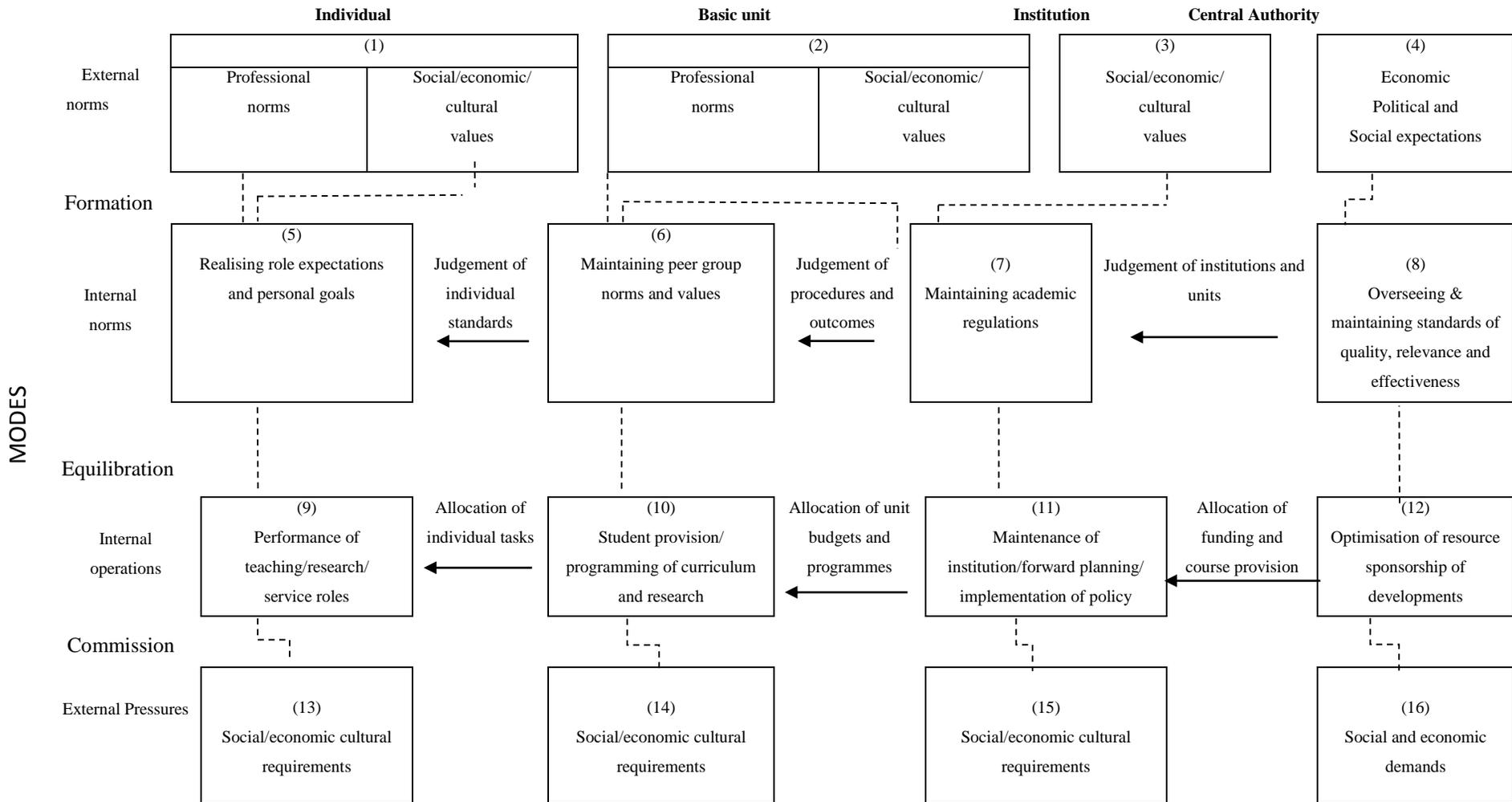
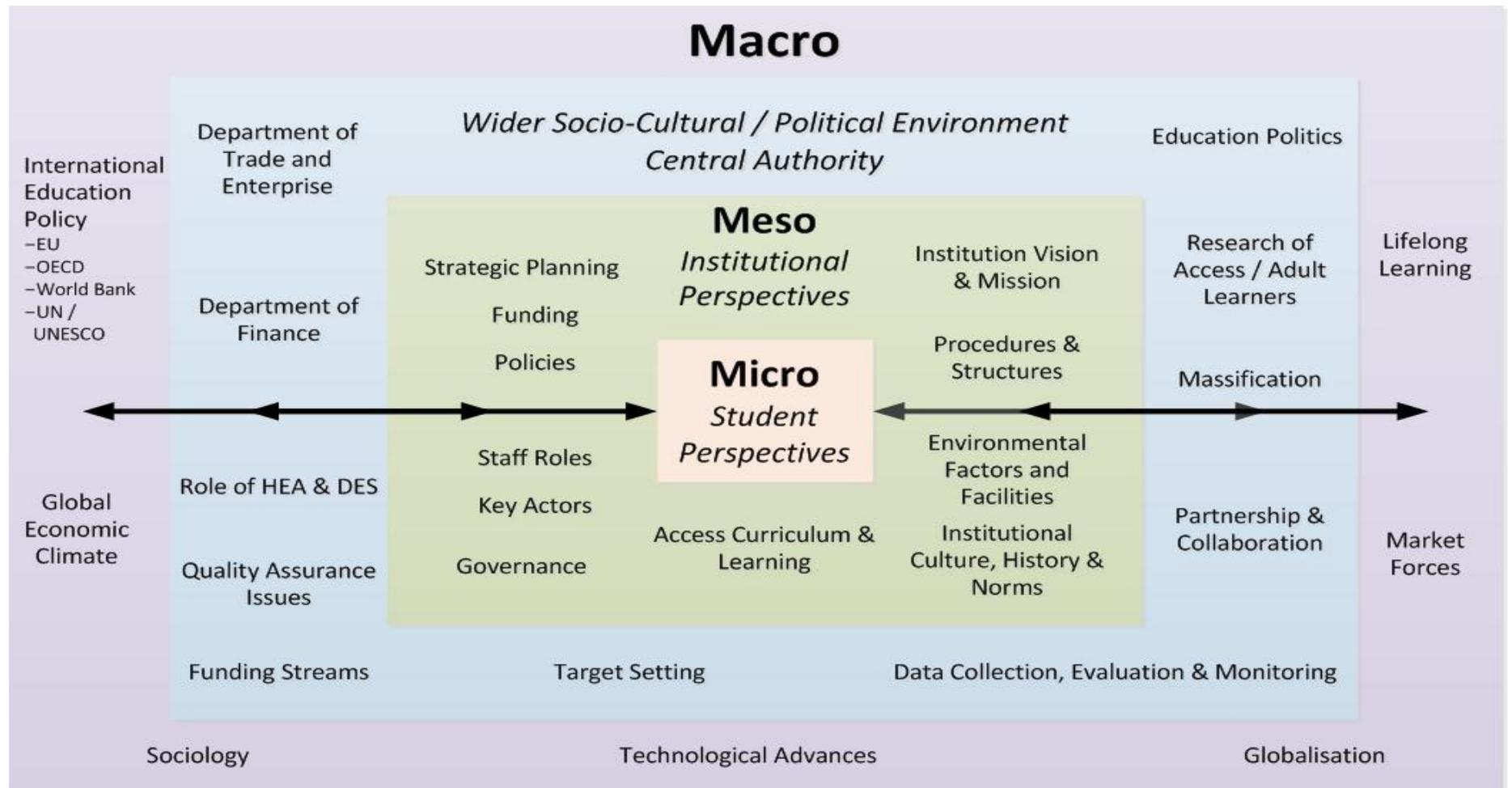


Figure 2.5 summarises the analytical framework for this study, which will be referred to later in this thesis when discussing and analysing the findings of this study.

**Figure 2.5: A Complexity Framework applied to the Theme of Adult Access to Higher Education in Ireland.**



In conclusion, complexity theory applied to the field of widening participation to higher education for adult learners is a useful analytical framework for this study. A number of theorists suggest that the education system shares many features of CAS (Colquhoun, 2005; Kuhn, 2008; Morrison, 2008). This study supports this thinking. CAS theory offers a useful lens through which to view access for adults within an evolving higher education context.

In terms of its merits, firstly, this model permits the linkage of more macro-level constructs, meso- and micro-level level operational frameworks as it acknowledges that systems are nested within systems. Secondly, this model allows complexity within and across the system to be displayed by showing how various structures interact and can change overtime. This model considers dynamic change to be integral, which implies the system almost never ‘settles down’, thus allowing for the on-going development and evolution within the sector, demonstrating the importance of process. Further, both tension and paradox are characteristics of CAS. Thirdly, it acknowledges the role of external agents or partnerships and values the contribution higher education makes to the wider community and society. A CAS framework also allows for the recognition of the wider theoretical influences on the field of access for adults, as documented in the literature review earlier in this chapter. This approach to analysis for this study means that seminal work in the field of higher education theory can be accommodated within the model, for example Clark’s (1983) ‘Triangle of Coordination’ (market, academic oligarchy and state), and allows us to consider the interplay between agency and structure. Further, this framework allows for the capture of the on-going tension between the traditional collegial and NPM models of higher education. Finally, most of all it acknowledges the critical role the individual, be it student and/or staff, can play. This is an important point as it raises the debate about who is driving the change agenda in relation to adult learners. This change can be brought about by the agents, (management, academic and professional staff and students), or, alternatively, by the structures of the higher education institution (decision making processes, committees, rules and procedures). This change can also be influenced by other environmental factors emerging from the wider socio-cultural, political environment, such as

globalisation, massification, technological advances, increased competition among third-level institutions and changes in exchequer financing. This study explores this tension and suggests that agent, structure and environment play an important role in advancing enhanced participation for adult learners.

## **2.11 Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter outlines the theoretical and analytical framework which guides this study. It argues that in order to answer the research problem of, *given the nature of higher education, why and in what way do Irish higher education institutions provide access for adult learners and, to what extent, if any, has such access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education professionals?*, within an evolving Irish higher education system, an overarching complexity theory framework presents a useful analytical framework for this study. The higher education system shares many of the features associated with CAS theory in so far as it is dynamic, capable of adaptation, characterised by tension and paradox, and contains a number of agents and structures involved within each element of the sub-systems.

A complexity framework offers a way of conceptualising how the endogenous and exogenous environments impact on why and in what way higher education institutions provide for access for adult students. The characteristics associated with each of these models are helpful for the analysis of this study of adult access provision within Irish higher education. In the case of the internalist approach concepts such as governance, institutional vision and mission, institutional culture, institutional policies and procedures, institutional environmental planning, resources, staff and student understanding, experiences and expectations, role of partnership, access curriculum, teaching and learning environment and issues of quality are useful analytical constructs for this study. The externalist model of analysis also provides for consideration of the exogenous forces of influences on adult access provision in higher education institutions in Ireland by offering concepts such as vertical governance, strategic planning,

competitive external funding, state policies, target setting and role of the central authority (in this case, the HEA).

A CAS approach with its concepts of nested systems allows for a number of levels of analysis in this study, such as the micro level (student experience), perspectives from the meso level (perspectives from institutional managers, academic and professional staff, as well as institutional ethos and mission) and macro level (regional, national and supranational policy and influences from a wide range of stakeholders). It offers a way of conceptualising the socio-cultural, political, historical, and environmental forces of influence on adult access to higher education in an Irish context as well as allowing the consideration of a number of other concepts such as change, continuity and adaptation. Finally, it allows us to consider the relationship between agency and structure. In conclusion, a CAS framework provides a useful overarching analytical framework for this study.

A methodology chapter follows which explains in detail how these different levels, perspectives and functions were gathered.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### 3.0 Introduction

This chapter provides a rationale for the research design, methods and epistemological stance adopted in this study. Ethical issues and research limitations will also be documented. In addition, data collection methods will be outlined. This thesis is based on case study methodology using a mixed methods approach. Therefore, a range of qualitative data sources including semi-structured interviews and focus groups, as well as a variety of institutional documentation, supplemented by institutional quantitative data, was gathered.

Case study methodology and mixed methods approaches to research design are becoming more used in the field of both education and the social sciences (Hanson *et al.*, 2005; Stake, 2005). Creswell, (2002, 2003); Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, (1989); Tashakkori & Teddlie, (1998, 2003) consider a mixed methods research framework a ‘legitimate stand-alone design’ (Hanson *et al.*, 2005: 224). Mixed methods research can be defined as ‘the collection or analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study in which the data are collected concurrently or sequentially, are given a priority, and involve the integration of the data at one or more stages in the process of research’ (Creswell, Plano, Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003: 212). It is argued that when both quantitative and qualitative data are included in a study, researchers may enrich their results in ways that one form of data does not allow (Hanson *et al.*, 2005: 224, referring to Brewer & Hunter, 1989; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

### 3.1 Rationale for considering a Case Study using a Mixed Methods Approach

This next section looks at the overarching theoretical considerations for using a mixed methods case study approach. Case study is seen as an approach that involves an in-depth exploration of a single case. McDuffie and Scruggs (2008), cited by Mertens (2010: 233-234) state that: ‘...a case study may be based on any number of units of analysis: an

individual, a group of individuals, a classroom, a school, or even an event'. In addition, case study methodology is not confined to the use of a particular methodology, rather by 'the object of study' (Mertens, 2010: 233-234). Stake (2011) states that the purpose of a case study is to:

generate a deeper understanding of the individual entity...with an emphasis on human experience...context influences the action of the case, therefore background factors and the wider context is important. Case studies permit studying a single entity from multiple realities which offer different representations of reality.

Based on a review of the literature on approaches to research design, this method was selected for a number of reasons. The purpose of this study matches Stake's (2011) explanation above. Further, in terms of an overall qualitative research design, case study approach facilitates 'a richness of detail in the sites and...the richness of the potential analysis' (Bastudo, 2007: 158). This study makes use of this approach for all of the above rationales.

Opponents of case study methodology argue that this approach can lead to a lack of thoroughness or rigour. One way to overcome this obstacle is to develop a set of protocols which must be followed (Yin, 2009; Stake, 2011). Yin (2009) recommends the following research design: development of the research question; population identification; specification of units of analysis; clarifying the link between data and population and, finally, findings interpretation criteria. A case study approach (and its associated research design) forms the basis of this study.

### **3.2 Case Study using a Mixed Methods Approach: Theoretical Context and Rationale**

Mixed methods approach to research can be traced back to over sixty years ago (Hanson, 2005: 225) with the belief that quantitative and qualitative data could be complementary (Hanson et al, 2005: 224; Stake, 2011). Each could, for example, 'uncover some unique variance which otherwise may have been neglected by a single method' (Jick, 1979: 603).

Those who engage in a mixed methods approach have developed the reasons for conducting a mixed methods inquiry (for example, Punch, 1998; Mertens, 2003; Newman, Ridenour, Newman, & DeMarco, 2003; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003; Creswell, 2007).

Specifically, and, of pertinence, to this study, access research has been criticised for ‘its overuse of quantitative methods which are thought to be more trustworthy and capable of replication, leading to a neglect of qualitative studies which attempt to unpack the black box behind the statistics in policy discourse’ (Bernard, 2006: 28). Therefore, applied to this study, a mixed method approach facilitates a more complete understanding of adult access provision across third-level institutions in Ireland (McCoy Byrne, O’Connell, Kelly and Doherty, 2010: 14; Day and Sammons, 2008). Qualitative data sources ensure that a range of perspectives are included in this study. In terms of a ‘bottom-up’ approach, students and academic/professional staff perceptions, opinions and feedback (micro level) on institutional adult access provision were gathered as were the observations of institutional managers (meso level) providing a ‘top-down’ approach. These combined perspectives are added to by other qualitative and quantitative institutional data which provides further evidence thereby increasing the validity of this research.

### **3.3 Aims, Objectives of Study and Development of Research Questions**

This study focuses on access provision for adult learners in third-level colleges in Ireland. Drawing from the existing tradition of the three classifications of the purpose of research, this study can be considered to fit in both ‘explanatory’ and ‘descriptive’ categories which, as Babbie (2010: 94) writes, seek to answer questions of why and how.

With reference to the development of the research questions in this study, Creswell (2007: 129) believes that, at the start of a research study, questions should be reduced to a single principal question and several sub-questions. In this study, the overarching research problem is, *given the nature of higher education, why and in what way do Irish higher education institutions provide access for adult learners and, to what extent, if any, has*

*such access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education professionals?* Based on a review of the relevant academic and policy literature in the field and guided by the overarching research problem, more specific secondary research questions have been developed to guide the analysis of this study. These research questions are divided into four distinct yet interconnected layers:

*International/Comparative Level*

- How do Irish adult access higher education initiatives compare with international statistics and policies in the field?

*National Level*

- In what ways are adult access initiatives in higher education institutions congruent with existing national policy concerns?

*Institutional Level*

- How do institutional managers and academics perceive adult access initiatives in their institutions and to what extent, if any, has this caused a shift in working practices?

*Individual Student Level*

- How do adult students experience institutional access initiatives and to what extent do they perceive, if any, changes in curriculum content, curriculum delivery modes and provision of support services for them?

Some general epistemological issues will be considered next which provide a justification for the particular stance taken in this study.

### **3.4 Epistemological Approaches to Research**

Ontological and epistemological positions impact on the way research is conducted and there are many different positions taken by proponents of various philosophical traditions. As a researcher, it is important to understand the different ontological, epistemological

and methodological stances so that the most suitable methods for answering specific research questions can be identified (Connolly, 2011). This study is situated within a constructivist paradigm. The basic beliefs associated with this paradigm are identified in Table 3.1: Basic Beliefs associated with Constructivism, proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1994) and, adapted by Mertens (2010).

**Table 3.1: Basic Beliefs associated with Constructivism**

| <b>Basic Beliefs</b> | <b>Ontology</b>                          | <b>Epistemology</b>   | <b>Methodology</b>   | <b>Associated labels</b>  |
|----------------------|--|---|--|---|
| Constructivism       | Multiple, socially constructed realities | Interactive link between researcher and participants;<br><br>Values made explicit | Qualitative;<br><br>Hermeneutical;<br><br>Contextual factors are described | Qualitative;<br><br>Naturalistic;<br><br>Hermeneutic;<br><br>Interpretivist |

Source: (adapted in part from Mertens, 2010: 11).

One of the fundamental principles of constructivism is that the researcher is also a fundamental part of the research process. Constructivism recognises that one's background 'shapes interpretation...in order to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their personal, cultural and historical experiences' (Creswell, 2003: 8-9). Both constructivism and interpretivism also recognises the importance of context (Smith, 1996: Creswell, 2003). The researcher uses an inductive approach where meaningful themes and theories emerge from analysis of data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Qualitative case study researchers do not seek generalisability. Their main objective is to record as accurately as possible the unique experiences of a person, people, event or situation (Stake, 2011). Credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are fundamental constructs associated with this tradition. The kinds of methods employed in higher education qualitative studies include documentary analysis; comparative studies; interviews; surveys; observation studies; case studies and conceptual analysis (Trowler, 2012). To truly answer the overarching research problem of, *given the nature of higher education, why and in what way do Irish higher education institutions provide access for*

*adult learners and, to what extent, if any, has such access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education professionals?*, in regard to the purpose of this study, perspectives from all actors need to be considered. In this study, data were collected from multiple sources, such as academic, professional and managerial staff involved in institutional adult access provision as well as students, who are the clients in this institutional provision. These data instruments are congruent with a constructivist paradigm. In addition, in order to answer the research questions in this study consideration must be given to the impact of the wider socio-economical, historical and cultural context.

### ***Interpretivism***

In epistemological methods terms, this study takes an interpretive stance. Each epistemological school of thought brings its own set of assumptions (Creswell, 2003: 8). Philosophically, interpretivism is fundamentally about understanding our world where its inhabitants develop their own meaning which are ‘varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for complexity of views from experience’ (Creswell, 2003: 8, drawing from Crotty, 1998; Lincoln and Guba, 2000; Schwandt, 2000; Newman, 2000). In this paradigm, the researcher seeks to capture different perspectives and see the multiple realities of participants in enquiry as being equally valid (Connolly, 2011). To capture different viewpoints and perceptions, research methods are primarily qualitative, incorporating hermeneutic and dialectic methodologies (Patton, 2002). As a result, research questions need to be broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation; a meaning typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons (Creswell, 2003: 8).

Bryman (2008: 17) writes about the ‘double interpretation’. This means that the researcher interprets the respondents’ interpretations which are, in turn, again interpreted by the researcher in the context of the theory and literature of the discipline and chosen analytical framework (Bryman, 2008). This study aims to achieve this idea of the ‘double interpretation’ (Bryman, 2008: 17) by situating itself within the literature and body of theory (meta-theory drawn from CAS), an overarching research philosophical stance (which is constructivist and interpretative) and methodology (mixed methods case study

research design). This study draws on complexity theory as a framework. Haggis (2008: 159) argues that a complexity theory analytical framework is congruent with a case study approach, because it allows for the elucidation of ‘complexity of meanings and interpretations’.

This study has identified research questions which aim to understand institutional adult access initiatives from a wide range of perspectives, (international and comparative, national, institutional and at individual level), within an Irish higher education context. Therefore, this study is primarily a qualitative study which uses case study methodology across four higher education sites: a university located in a capital city; a regional university; a constituent college and an Institute of Technology. This approach allows for a reasonably diverse sample reflective of the Irish higher education system and also provides for the inclusion of comparative data. For the purposes of the research objectives, case study is the most appropriate methodology in order to answer the research questions for this particular study. In conclusion, a constructivist paradigm incorporates the ontology, epistemology and methods best suited to the research stance and questions in this study namely, *given the nature of higher education, why and in what way do Irish higher education institutions provide access for adult learners and, to what extent, if any, has such access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education professionals?*

### **3.5 Situating the Researcher in the Context of the Research**

As noted earlier in this chapter, epistemologically, this study takes an interpretative stance. An integral feature of this particular stance is that the researcher needs to be situated within the research context and formally acknowledge that the research is influenced by the researcher’s background, experience and values and that it is not possible to isolate the researcher from the research. Prior to working in the third-level sector, I worked as a post-primary teacher, Guidance Counsellor and co-ordinated a number of youth work schemes in several high profile disadvantaged settings across Ireland and was acutely aware of the desire of many parents, whose initial education had been restricted, to attend third-level education. I have been working in the area of access,

progression and retention to tertiary education for adult learners since 1999. Since I moved to the third-level sector, I have become aware of the importance of engaging in action research with a view to sharing, informing and improving practice.

### **3.5.1 Context of Study**

Ireland has a unique education history. Many older students were educationally disadvantaged by reason and circumstance of their birth (O' Donnabháin and King, 1996). Free post-primary education was introduced in 1967 by the then Minister for Education, Mr. Donagh O'Malley, and in the 25 years which followed, there has been a fourfold increase in the numbers of candidates sitting the Leaving Certificate (HEA, 2008: 24-25). At the time of writing, Ireland is among the top five performing OECD countries in terms of the completion rate of upper secondary education/senior cycle (OECD, 2012) and, in tandem, there has been vast change in the higher education system since 1985 in Ireland (Shattock, 2010). Enrolments have grown from under 41,000 (20% participation among the school leaving demographic) in 1980 (Clancy, 2001) to almost 140,000 (53% of the same demographic) (O'Connell, McCoy and Clancy, 2006; HEA, 2010). There is consensus across successive governments, industry and the third-level sector that this expansion has been enormously beneficial both to Irish society and to the economy (OECD, 2004).

#### ***The Economic Context***

In 2006, the Irish economy, referred to colloquially as the 'Celtic Tiger', had the lowest level of unemployment in the European Union (EU); the second lowest national debt; the second highest minimum wage and the highest investment in the EU on infrastructure with annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth above 4% between 2000 and 2005 (Hyland, 2012). However, in 2008, with the onset of a global financial crisis and a sharp decelerate in both the indigenous property and construction markets, the Irish economy went into sharp decline with the result that economic growth, which was 4.7% in 2007, was negative at -7.1% in 2009 (Hyland, 2012). In November 2010, the Irish Government

published a National Recovery plan, which involved a budget adjustment of €15 billion (that is expenditure cuts and tax increases) over a four-year period, and during the same period, €85 billion of international finance was made available by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Commission (EU) and the European Central Bank (Hyland, 2012). At the time of writing, the unemployment rate remains high at 14.1% (CSO, 2013) and following a review of the entire higher education sector (DES, 2011), a major re-structuring process is underway.

### **3.6 Preliminary Stages of Pilot Study**

#### **3.6.1 Primary Data Sources**

An institutional document review was undertaken before the pilot study and subsequent field work across the four research sites. Sources consulted include relevant college documents, including institutional strategic plans; access policies; access plans; equality policies; disability policies; external institutional evaluations and reviews; adult access student end-of-year course evaluations; student records where available; institutional publications and evaluations relating to adult access.

#### **3.6.2 Secondary Data Sources**

Literature was reviewed at the beginning of the study and was on-going throughout. Relevant literature on general and specific mature student access to higher education, as well as key policy publications at national, supra-national and international levels was reviewed. In addition, journal articles across a number of related areas such as adult access, continuing education, adult education and studies in higher education were appraised. This consideration of the literature informed the conceptual framework, analysis and conclusions drawn in this study.

### 3.7 Definition of Case and Unit of Analysis

The higher education system in Ireland is a binary system, which is a two-tiered system, mainly consisting of universities and institutes of technology. There are seven universities, five colleges of education and 14 Institutes of Technology (IoTs), all of which are financed by the state. Four sites were chosen to reflect the diversity of the higher education system in Ireland. These include a ‘*Constituent College*’ (classified as a linked college) which is the pilot site; a ‘*Capital University*’ located in Dublin, the capital city of Ireland; a ‘*Regional University*’ and a ‘*Regional Institute of Technology*’ (IoT). These names will be used throughout this study in order to preserve institutional anonymity. This next section provides a brief overview of each case site in turn.

**The Constituent College** was founded in the 1890s and is a third-level Catholic College of Education and the Liberal Arts. It has two faculties; Liberal Arts and Education which offer four undergraduate programmes of study and a number of taught post-graduate programmes as well as a large number of postgraduate research opportunities. The student population of fewer than 5,000 comprises of 84.2% full-time undergraduates and 15.8% postgraduates (HEA, 2012). The institution has developed a suite of access courses aimed at the adult learner demographic: Pre-University Programmes (PUPs), a *Foundation Certificate for Mature Students* (NFQ Level Six, Special Purpose Award), a *Pilot Programme in Contemporary Living* for people with intellectual disabilities (developed in partnership with the National Institute for Intellectual Disability at Trinity College Dublin) and was a delivery partner for the *Foundation Certificate in General Studies* (offered through a higher education consortium). In terms of institutional infrastructure, the Constituent College prides itself on offering a wide range of supports for adult access students. 9% of the undergraduate population are classed as mature students (HEA, 2012).

**The Capital University** is long established and has expanded to become a modern university with between 15,000 and 20,000 students with three faculties: Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; Engineering, Mathematics and Science and Health Sciences (HEA, 2012). 32% of students are enrolled in post-graduate course of study. 87% of students are

enrolled in full-time courses either at undergraduate or post graduate level. The institution is strongly committed to ensuring an increase in the proportion of students from under-represented groups progressing to third-level education. This includes mature students. 12% of the student population are mature learners (HEA, 2012). Since 1993, the institution has delivered a number of access programmes and offers two preparatory courses designed for adult learners: a *Foundation Course for Higher Education - Mature Students*, a one year full-time preparatory course and three university access partnership courses in partnership with a local Vocation Educational Committee across three colleges of further education aimed at school leavers and mature students. In addition, the Capital University has a wide range of access support structures in place.

**The Regional University** was established in 1972 and was inaugurated as a university in 1989. The university accredits programmes and awards degrees to two other higher education institutions. The Regional University offers a number of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes to a student population of between 10,000 to 15,000 students. 80% of the student population are undergraduates with the remaining 20% studying at postgraduate levels. The institution has four faculties: Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; Education and Health Sciences; Science and Engineering and Business. The Regional University is considered to have excellent support services for students (IQUB, 2012). Both the mature student office and outreach centre offer access courses aimed at adult learners. 10% of the student population are classed as mature learners (HEA, 2012).

**The Institute of Technology (IoT)** was originally designated a Regional Technology College in 1972 and was awarded Institute of Technology status in 1997. The institution has an enrolment of under 5,000 students with 97% of this population studying at undergraduate level (HEA, 2012). Programmes are offered at levels six to ten on the NQAI framework (HEA, 2012). The institution has three schools with a number of courses offered by each: School of Business and Humanities; School of Engineering and Construction Studies and School of Science and Computing. The institution values diversity and mature students are included as a target group among cohorts of traditionally under-represented students (HETAC, 2009). The IoT engages in a diverse range of access

initiatives, such as dedicated entry routes, recognition of prior experiential learning (HETAC, 2009) and joint delivery of a *Foundation Certificate in General Studies* (FETAC Level Five) in a consortium with three higher education partner institutions. As with the other institutions in this study, the IoT has a wide range of access supports (HETAC, 2009). 24% of the student population are classed as mature learners (HEA, 2012). Table 3.2 below provides a summary of each institution.

**Table 3.2: Summary of each Case Site**

| <b>Institution</b>                   | <b>Total enrolments</b>   | <b>Faculties/Schools/Colleges</b>  | <b>Mature Student Enrolments</b> |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| <b>Constituent College</b>           | Fewer than 5,000          | Faculty of Education;<br>Faculty of Liberal Arts.  | <b>9%</b>                        |
| <b>Capital University</b>            | Between 15,000 and 20,000 | College of Business;<br>College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences;<br>College of Education;<br>College of Health Sciences;<br>College of Engineering;<br>College of Science. | <b>12%</b>                       |
| <b>Regional University</b>           | Between 10,000 and 15,000 | Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences;<br>Faculty of Engineering;<br>Mathematics and Science;<br>Faculty of Health Sciences.   | <b>10%</b>                       |
| <b>Institute of Technology (IoT)</b> | Fewer than 5,000          | School of Business and Humanities;<br>School of Engineering and Construction Studies;<br>School of Science and Computing.  | <b>24%</b>                       |

Source: Irish Higher Education Institutional Profiles 2010/11 (HEA: 2012)

### **3.8 Sampling**

Research quality, as well as being determined by the appropriateness of the methodology and instrumentation, also relies on the suitability of the sampling strategy (Bryman, 2008, Babbie, 2010; Mertens, 2010). In this study, multi-level purposive sampling is used. Mertens (2010: 326) defines ‘multi-level’ sampling as ... ‘different people from different populations are chosen for the different approaches of the study’. The researcher also engaged in purposive sampling which is defined by Descombe (2008: 182) as ‘participants are selected on the basis of some personal attribute that is relevant to the purposes of the research’. At each case site, care was taken to ensure that the adult learners who participated in the focus group were diverse and reflective of the adult population within each institution. This means that the groups were gender balanced, reflective of the age profile within each institution and included representation from students with a disability as well as those from an ethnic minority background, where possible. Therefore, the total sample in this study consists of 77 participants: 37 members of staff (one-to-one interviews) and 40 adult students (eight focus groups of five students).

The methodology employed in this study comprises of a review of the pertinent literature, policy documentation, institutional strategy and policy statements as well as qualitative semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Quantitative and additional qualitative data sources are also included, when provided by the case sites. Table 3.3: Detail of Data Collection below provides a summary of the methods of data collection across the four case sites.

### **3.9 Data Collection Methods**

Several data collection methods were used in this study, including semi-structured interviews (with institutional staff) and focus groups (with adult students).

**Table 3.3: Detail of Data Collection<sup>1</sup>**

| <b>Institution</b>                   | <b>Primary Data Sources</b>  | <b>Secondary Data Sources</b><br><i>Institutional documentation</i>   |
|--------------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Constituent College</b>           | <i>10 interviews and two focus groups</i><br>3 Professional staff<br>4 Academic staff<br>3 Senior managers<br>10 Adult students (focus groups -5 students in each) | 227 end-of-year student access course evaluations; Mission Statement; Strategic Plan (2012-2016); Access Policy; Student Records; Staff Handbook; Prospectus; Website and one Conference paper. |
| <b>Capital University</b>            | <i>9 interviews and two focus groups</i><br>5 Professional staff<br>3 Academic staff<br>1 Senior manager<br>10 Adult students (focus groups -5 students in each)   | Strategic Plan (2009-2014); Access Policy; Equality Policy; Student Records; one Access Strategy document; two Access Evaluation Reports; Prospectus, Website.                                  |
| <b>Regional University</b>           | <i>10 interviews and two focus groups</i><br>4 Professional staff<br>4 Academic staff<br>2 Senior managers<br>10 Adult students (focus groups -5 students in each) | 25 end-of-year student access course evaluations; Strategic Plan (2011-2015); Access Policy; Student Records; Staff Handbook, Prospectus and Website.   |
| <b>Institute of Technology (IoT)</b> | <i>8 interviews and two focus groups</i><br>4 Professional staff<br>3 Academic staff<br>1 Senior manager<br>10 Adult students (focus groups -5 students in each)   | Strategic Plan (2008-2013); Access Policy; Student Records; Staff Handbook, Prospectus, and Website.  |
| <b>Total sample</b>                  | <b>77 (37 staff interviews and eight focus groups)</b>   |   |

<sup>1</sup>Further detail regarding the sample, including codes assigned for interview respondents and focus group participants, is provided in Appendix B: Details of Sample Population.

The purpose of this approach is to provide a balanced perspective between the ‘bottom-up’ (micro-level) and ‘top-down’ (macro-level) approach.

### **3.9.1 Interview as a Research Methodology**

One of the secondary research questions in this study is to examine how higher education institutional staff perceive their adult access initiatives and to see if these initiatives are congruent with existing institutional mission and strategic approaches. Therefore, it was necessary to gather opinions and perspectives from a wide range of staff associated with access course delivery from a ‘bottom-up’ (micro-level) and ‘top-down’ (macro-level) perspective. Following a review of methodology literature (see for example, Bryman, 2008; Babbie, 2010; Mertens, 2010), it was decided that semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate instrument. As a research instrument, interviews have a number of advantages. First, interviewing offers an opportunity to access a wide breadth and depth of information and second, a relationship with the interviewee is created by the very process of interviewing and, therefore, a degree of flexibility can be allowed as part of this method (Mertens, 2010: 352). As with all instruments of research, there are some disadvantages associated with this method. Interviews can, for example, be time-consuming, can be expensive, if for example, travel is required, analysis can be difficult and the process of interviewing can bias the respondent’s response (Mertens, 2010: 352). Taking these factors into account, it was decided that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages and that interviewer bias could be minimised by using a semi-structured format with a four-point interview schedule (McCracken, 1988, 24-25). Figure 3.1: Questions for Semi-structured Interviews following details the questions for the semi-structured interviews in this study.

**Figure 3.1: Questions for Semi-structured Interviews**

1. What international/national/regional policies are you aware of, that in your view, have promoted access, progression and course completion?
2. What institutional policies are you aware of, that have, in your view promoted access, progression and course completion at institutional level?
3. In your opinion, and from your perspective, what are the merits of access programmes for Adult Learners and the weaknesses, if any?
4. Is there anything else that we have not covered that you think is important to mention?

***Instruments used, and Procedures followed, for Interview***

Instruments used to conduct the 37 semi-structured interviews included an information letter, a copy of which is included in Appendix C: Staff/Student Information Sheet, a consent form (see Appendix D: Staff Consent Form) and a questionnaire (see Figure. 3.1). The purpose of these in-depth interviews was to first critically examine how institutional managers and academics perceive the adult access programmes of study across the four sites, and, second, to observe how such programmes fit in to existing missions and strategic approaches at meso and macro levels. A potential list of the sample was drawn up and respondents were contacted electronically and invited to participate. In the first instance, two pilot interviews were conducted (Light *et al.*, 1990). Face-to-face interviews were conducted mainly in the respondents' places of work, which were located across the four higher education sites throughout Ireland. To facilitate accurate transcription, interviews were recorded. One interviewee declined to be recorded; therefore, detailed notes were made afterwards and submitted to be interviewee to clarify for truth and accuracy. Scheduling difficulties meant that three participants submitted their responses electronically in response to written prompts. A further three interviews were conducted over the telephone, were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Although conducting 37

interviews across four higher education sites was, at times, challenging in terms of making contact with participants, and scheduling and transcription proved time-consuming, nonetheless interviewing proved worthwhile as rich data emerged. Sincere gratitude is particularly expressed to the institutions that provided me with access and facilitated me with compiling lists of people who would be most relevant to interview, as without their co-operation my research would not have been possible.

### **3.9.2 Focus Group as a Research Methodology**

The primary aim of the present study is to explore, *given the nature of higher education, why and in what way do Irish higher education institutions provide access for adult learners and, to what extent, if any, has such access made an impact on the working practice and values of higher education staff?* Conducting focus group research examines the issue of adult access from the perspectives of the mature learner and helps answer one of the research questions in the study, namely, to appraise adult students' experiences of institutional access programme provision. This approach, congruent with a constructivist research approach, allows for the inclusion of another perspective in this study, that of the adult access student. In addition, adding these focus groups to the data collection methods in this study provides also for analysis at a micro level.

Krueger (1994) considers focus groups appropriate, particularly for exploratory studies. By stimulating discussion, the interaction process within the focus group can serve to enhance the data by allowing greater breadth and depth in the exploration of a topic (Millward, 2008). Millward (2008) outlines caveats around their use, including limitations in their ability to gather individual experiences and the fact that the reality they access is a feature of the collaborative sense-making of the group. In one way, focus group research also reflects the dynamic of the group (Connolly, 2011). All of the above advantages and disadvantages were considered and it was decided that, given the

affordances and constraints of this study, focus groups were a useful way for gathering student perspectives across the four case sites.

### ***Instruments used, and Procedures followed, for Focus Group Research***

Instruments used for focus group included an information sheet (a copy is included in Appendix C: Staff/Student Information Sheet) and a consent form (see Appendix E: Focus Groups Consent Form). To facilitate accurate transcription a mini-disc recorder was also used to record the eight focus groups. Figure 3.2 lists the questions asked of focus group participants.

#### **Figure 3.2: Focus Group Questions**

1. In what way, if any, have government policies impacted on your student experience?
2. In what way, if any, have institutional policies and practices impacted in your student experience?
3. What are your personal experiences of returning to learning as an adult?
4. Is there anything else that we have not covered that you would particularly like to mention?

In line with recommendations from Light *et al.*, (1990), an initial focus group took place first on the pilot site. Groups were kept to five participants simply because of scheduling difficulties and also to encourage less confident members to feel comfortable as it was considered that a larger group may inhibit some participants (Descombe, 2008). Group members were advised, at the start of each session, of the issues around anonymity, confidentiality and trust within each group (Descombe, 2008). Each group meeting lasted from a minimum of forty five minutes to a maximum of one and a half hours. Key staff in each institution identified a list of potential adult students and they were contacted electronically by the researcher and invited to participate. Given the cohort, many were busy with family commitments and those that did agree to participate were self-selecting,

but were also those available. Across institutions, students were eager to participate and finding this sample was not a difficult task.

In summary, two kinds of primary data were therefore collated, together with a range of secondary data.

### **3.10 Ethical Considerations**

Higher education research has the potential to be ethically problematic (Trowler, 2012). It is difficult to ensure institutional anonymity and, therefore, Trowler (2012) suggests adopting a number of ethical measures, such as not guaranteeing institutional anonymity, and assuring respondents that neither they nor the exact job title will be traceable as well as taking measures to ensure that institutional reputation will not be adversely affected (Trowler, 2012). An information sheet stating the status of the researcher as well as the aim and nature of the study was attached to each request for interview (see Appendix C: Staff/Student Information Sheet). A similar procedure was followed for the focus group research. Participants received an information sheet explaining the purposes of this study and a consent form which has been signed by all participants (see Appendix C: Staff/Student Information Sheet).

### **3.11 Anonymising Data**

Care has been taken to protect the identity of all who participated in this study. As the higher education sector in Ireland is relatively small by international standards with seven universities, seven colleges of education, and 14 institutes of technology, great care was taken to ensure that participating institutions are not identified. Therefore, all respondents are assigned a code which corresponds with their broad positions with generic titles in the (details in Appendix B: Details of Sample Population), rather than by exact title or subject area, for example *Access Project Worker, Regional University, 04*. Similar care was also

taken with focus group participants. All data are secured in a safe place. Hard copies of transcripts are kept in a secure locked cabinet and electronic data are password protected and stored on one personal computer.

### **3.12 Reliability and Validity**

Kvale & Brinkman (2009: 245) state that ‘reliability pertains to the consistency and trustworthiness of research findings’. They discuss a number of reliability issues, such as (i) interviewer reliability, where the interview technique, such as using leading questions, might influence the responses; (ii) where the categorisation of answers might be biased to support the interviewer’s views and (iii) where reliability is undermined when answers are transcribed by different people. Care was taken to avoid leading questions, to be open-minded when categorising answers, checking and rechecking for evidence of themes and presenting alternative opinions from the data (Hughes, 2010). In addition, interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. In line with recommendations from the body of research, three pilot interviews and one pilot focus group were conducted (Light *et al*, 1990; Kvale and Brinkman, 2009) and some minor revisions to the wording of questionnaires were made subsequently made (Mertens, 2010). Furthermore, the review of additional qualitative information in the form of institutional documentation and quantitative data in this study provides support to increase the reliability of this study.

Kvale & Brinkman (2009: 246) define validity as ‘the truth, the correctness and the strength of a statement’ arguing that a valid argument should be well grounded, justifiable, strong and convincing. Validity can be difficult to ensure in the context of small-scale, opinion-based research. Kirk & Miller (1985) claim that in order to establish validity great care must be taken in order to ensure the questions asked of respondents are appropriate. Care was taken to avoid these errors with both qualitative methods, that is, focus groups and interviews. The questions in the interview and focus group schedules were designed following an appraisal of the literature and perspectives from respondents have been mapped to emergent themes in the literature and analytical framework

(Hughes, 2010). Thematic coding was conducted using N-Vivo (See Section 3.14). Validity is further enhanced by adopting a mixed methods case study research design where the strategy of complementarity is employed; quantitative data is used to complement and augment the research findings from the qualitative phases of research in this study.

### **3.13 Representativeness of Study**

The data in this study represent a distinct type of adult access students and views from academic/professional staff, senior managers and adult students in four diverse third-level institutions. It is also important to note that facilitating access to higher education is not confined to the third-level sector. The type of adult access under study belongs to a specific genre of access programme delivery located within the third-level sector. Other types of access courses are also in existence, some are based in a community setting and others are delivered using a cross-sectional partnership model by other education providers. Therefore, although one cannot say that these findings are generalisable, it is hoped, however, that they provide insight into issues that are of wider concern and therefore may be of relevance and useful to other institutions who may be interested in considering their own adult access provision. As Stake (2011) states, case study is about ‘particularisation’ rather than ‘generalisation’.

### **3.14 Coding of Data**

**Data Analysis of interviews and focus groups:** Interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed verbatim and data were coded (see below). The following procedure was developed:

- 1) each interview was transcribed verbatim;
- 2) each interview was read and re-read a number of times;

- 3) observations were noted;
- 4) an initial coding list was compiled manually (see Appendix F: Sample Coded Index and Interview);
- 5) comments were coded using the N-Vivo 7 and 9 software packages (see Appendix G: Coding Index);
- 6) comments were then clustered into specific themes.

The second stage of the analysis used the Braun and Clarke (2006: 16- 23) six-phase approach, summarised in Table 3.4: Summary of Braun and Clark’s Six-Phase Thematic Analysis (2006). This typology summarised next allows for a phased approach to thematic analysis.

**Table 3.4: Summary of Braun and Clark’s Six-Phase Thematic Analysis (2006)**

|   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. Familiarising yourself with your data: | Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.  |
| 2. Generating initial codes:              | Coding of the data in a systematic manner across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.  |
| 3. Searching for themes:                  | Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.  |
| 4. Reviewing themes:                      | Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.  |
| 5. Defining and naming themes:            | On-going analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.  |
| 6. Producing the report                   | Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis. |

Five major themes, informed by a complexity theory framework have emerged from following the coding sequence identified above. These are:

**Theme One:** Impact of international, supra-national and national government policies on adult access;

**Theme Two:** Adult access and general organisational environmental planning within institutions;

**Theme Three:** Specific access-related organisational policies, processes and structures for the implementation of access;

**Theme Four:** Adult access course provision;

**Theme Five:** Partnerships to promote adult access.

### **3.15 Analysis of Data using Case Study Approach and Link to Conceptual Framework**

The present study focuses on examining adult access provision in higher education institutions in Ireland, the research questions in this study lend themselves to a case study mixed methods approach, with emphasis on a qualitative methodology, as this facilitates an in-depth exploration. In addition, drawing from the literature review, this study is mindful of methodological and epistemological challenges associated with higher education access research (for example, Gorard *et al.*, 2006; Kettley, 2010; Trowler, 2012). It has been argued by Haggis (2008) that complexity theory provides a useful overarching analytical framework as this paradigm offers a lens which can accommodate individual (students/staff/institutional managers) perspectives (micro/meso levels) as well as the forces of influence coming from the broader socio- economic political environment (macro level) (see Table 3.5: Overview of the Thematic Areas in this Study and Link to Analytical Framework for thematic overview).

**Table 3.5: Overview of the Thematic Areas in this Study and Link to Analytical Framework**

| <b>Thematic area</b>   | <b>Complexity framework features</b>  | <b>Level of analysis</b> | <b>Impact</b>                   |
|--|---|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <b>Theme 1:</b> Impact of government policies on adult access - Chapter Four                                     | Impact of the wider socio-cultural political environment; concept of systems nested within systems; tensions and paradox.   | macro/meso               | At macro, meso and micro levels |
| <b>Theme 2:</b> Adult access and general organisational environmental planning - Chapter Five                    | Systems nested within systems; feedback processes; system characteristics emerging from interaction; self-organisation of agents; co-evolution; structures and processes; unique starting point | meso/micro               | At macro, meso and micro levels |
| <b>Theme 3:</b> Organisational policies, processes and structures for the implementation of access - Chapter Six | On-going tensions within sub-elements of the system, the capacity of institutions to adapt endogenously and the concept of feedback   | meso/micro               | At macro, meso and micro levels |
| <b>Theme 4:</b> Adult access course provision - Chapter Seven  | Self-organisation, co-evolution, adaptive agents; feedback processes; systems nested within systems; structures and processes   | meso/micro               | At macro, meso and micro levels |
| <b>Theme 5:</b> Partnerships to promote access - Chapter Eight   | Blurring of boundaries; self-organisation, co-evolution, adaptive agents; feedback processes; non-linearity; tension; structures and processes  | meso/micro               | At macro, meso and micro levels |

By gathering data from a range of sources, this study explores the challenges, tensions and merits of institutional approaches to access programme provision for adult learners in Ireland from multiple perspectives. This primary qualitative work is supplemented by secondary qualitative and quantitative institutional data across four higher education sites and provides for comparative analysis. This ensures that the sample reflects the diversity of the Irish higher education system.

Therefore, this overarching mixed methods case study methodological approach is congruent with a complexity analytical framework (Haggis, 2008), and allows for a much fuller understanding of why and in what way higher education institutions provide access for adult learners and, as a result, provides answers to the research questions in this study.

### **3.16 Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has detailed the methodology used in this study and the rationale which underpins it and the methodological choices that were made. Firstly, this study is situated within a constructivist, interpretive epistemological stance. The overall research design, in the case study tradition, and range of methodologies (mixed methods with a qualitative focus) are explained and justified. In addition, data collection methods are outlined. Ethical issues, situating the researcher in the context of this study and research limitations are also considered.

In order to address the research problem in this study, *given the nature of higher education, why and in what way do Irish higher education institutions provide access for adult learners and, to what extent, if any, has such access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education professionals*, 37 semi-structured in-depth interviews and eight student focus groups were conducted across four higher education case sites, bringing the total sample size to 77. This primary data was augmented by secondary data sources across each of the four case sites. This methodological approach is consistent with a complexity theory analytical framework and an interpretive epistemological stance.

The next part of this study outlines the findings across the four case sites. This section is divided into five chapters, each representing a theme emerging from the data analysis, as outlined in Table 3.5: Overview of the Thematic Areas in this Study and Link to Analytical Framework.

Chapters Four to Eight now report on the findings from these interviews and focus groups and each chapter is followed by a discussion section where findings are synthesised.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS FROM THEMATIC AREA ONE - IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL, SUPRA-NATIONAL AND NATIONAL GOVERNMENT POLICIES ON ADULT ACCESS**

### **4.0 Chapter Introduction**

This chapter begins to present the second part of this study which contains the research findings, analysis and conclusion. As noted at the end of Chapter Three, Methodology, this section is organised into five thematic areas, each represented by a chapter. These five themes are:

**Theme One:** Impact of international, supra-national and national government policies on adult access (Chapter Four);

**Theme Two:** Adult access and general organisational environmental planning (Chapter Five);

**Theme Three:** Specific access-related organisational policies, processes and structures for the Implementation of Access (Chapter Six);

**Theme Four:** Adult access course provision (Chapter Seven);

**Theme Five:** Partnerships to promote adult access (Chapter Eight).

In Chapter Two, key international, supra-national and national policy developments are reviewed. This present chapter explores the findings from the first theme: impact of international, supra-national and national government policies on adult access from the perspectives of senior managers, academics, professional staff and students across the four case sites with a view to addressing the overarching research question in this study which is, *given the nature of higher education, why and in what way, do Irish higher education institutions provide access for adult learners and, to what extent, if any, has such access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education staff?*

## **4.1 Impact of International and Supra-national Policy**

The following themes emerged from the data analysis: impact of policies of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD); impact of the Bologna Declaration; impact of policies of the European Union (EU); impact of European Union access and lifelong learning funding schemes and the impact of the European Union Multi-Rank Project.

### **4.1.1 Impact of Policies of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)**

In terms of international policy, the policies of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) emerged as a sub-theme. One respondent noted the seminal work on education that started in the 1960s emerging from the OECD Report on *Investment in Education* (OECD, 1962) which resulted in free fees for post-primary education, and ultimately free fees for third-level education in 1992. This report signalled the beginning of the relationship between higher education and the economy:

from a socio-political-historical kind of context, any of the documentation and changes that we've seen have their roots in the Investment in Education kind of agenda that we saw emerging in the 1960s, obviously there was a massive shift at that point in terms of how we as a nation...began to view education, and move away from what had previously been very much a laissez-faire kind of attitude. It may not have been specifically about access, but it was about equity and equality and a right for all to have an education (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 08).

However, only three respondents (8.1%) located in two case sites, Constituent College and IoT, mentioned the access-related policies of the OECD. One interviewee referred specifically to the impact of the OECD's practice of setting quotas for mature student participation, suggesting it was 'positive' (Access Project Worker, Constituent College, 01). In another institution, the IoT, the OECD practice of benchmarking against other countries were considered both useful and motivating for Government:

Ireland wants to be at the races...International practice and benchmarking motivates Ireland at a national level, at a government strategic level, to keep pace...they don't like to see themselves slipping on any of those tables (Access Project Worker, IoT, 03).

Access-related policies of the OECD were not referred to in the Capital University, in the Regional University or by students at any institution. This evidence reveals that there was only slight reference to the policies of the OECD (by three access project workers, in two institutions, the Constituent College and the IoT). This theme was not noted by senior managers nor raised by students across case sites. This suggests in relation to Ireland, OECD adult access-related policies function at the outer perimeter of the applied analytical complexity framework used in this study and across case sites; OECD influence seems not to be highly significant in the area of adult access to higher education in an Irish context. This could be related to the local context of access implementation or, indeed, may suggest that the OECD adult access policies remain under-developed.

#### **4.1.2 Impact of the Bologna Declaration**

A total of four senior staff respondents (10.8%), one in each case site, referred to the impact of the Bologna Declaration. However, with the exception of one interviewee who was conversant with the social dimension of Bologna, its impact has been felt in the need to focus on the teaching and learning environment through the production of learning outcomes, modularisation, the development of the three-tiered system of degree, masters and doctorate studies and in quality assurance to support international collaboration rather than in terms of access (Vice President, IoT, 08; Senior Academic, Capital University, 07; Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01; Head of Department, Constituent College, 03). One respondent remarked that the impact of Bologna was elusive and somewhat indirect:

Bologna is always mentioned...we are aligning with Bologna, but I don't see any tangible link between it and what we do, apart from the modularisation and accredited system, regulations around it...There is a nod to it in strategic plans (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01).

Another senior academic echoed this theme of the lack of impact on access:

I think Bologna was, has had a significant effect but we're talking about access, I'm not entirely sure that it's had, it's translated into that, into that sense of the group (Senior Academic, Capital University, 07).

These findings suggest that the impact of Bologna on adult access appears to be indirect and its influence is more discernible in areas such as the development of learning outcomes and overall structure of degree programmes, rather than in access.

#### **4.1.3 Impact of Policies of the European Union (EU)**

Interviewees differed in their opinions regarding the impact of EU policy with only three references (8.1%) across three case sites, the Constituent College, the Capital University and Regional University. EU policy was not referred to by students in any institutions or by staff in the IoT. The European Union's contribution to the development of the Irish Education system in terms of policy and finance was noted by one senior manager:

when we joined the EU and you began to have money for to have in[sic] investing in people from that point on there was just greater awareness that you would get something back if you invested in education (Senior Manager, Constituent College, 10).

In contrast, the effect of EU policy was seen to be indirect and more related to the political sphere rather than to individual institutional practice by offering guidance for national policy development. One respondent expressed the view that:

the EU rhetoric works at a, you know, a rhetorical level rather than the sort of trickle down... a lot of political cues are taken from the EU where needed, I always think Ireland is wonderfully compliant to the EU (Senior Academic, Capital University, 07).

EU policies on Lifelong Learning were referred to by only one respondent:

[Lifelong Learning] it's still very narrow, it still works within the, you know, the eighteen to twenty two year olds and that's common across most institutes... what kind of vanity buttons do state agencies have to press to get institutions to buy into it, to feel as though it's legitimate and worthy and of value. But I think it moves and it's disseminating in all sorts of different ways there, [sic] I mean [the Capital University] would say that, it would say that it's for postgrads (Senior Academic, Capital University, 07).

This perspective offers some evidence to show that institutions are capable of adapting policy internally to fit their own mission. Overall, these data reveal that, similar to the findings on the impact of OECD and Bologna policies, with respect to adult access to

higher education in an Irish context, EU policy provides guidance at a wider macro level which, in turn, influences meso-level initiatives.

#### **4.1.4 Impact of European Union Access and Lifelong Learning Funding Schemes**

Participation in cross-country projects funded by the European Union emerged as valuable in advancing the adult access agenda. Five respondents (13.5%) across two case sites, the Capital University and Regional University, commented on the merits of engaging in access-related work within the international higher education landscape. The sub-theme of access and lifelong learning funding schemes were not alluded to by staff in the IoT or Constituent College. As these funding schemes target staff employed in the third-level sector, it is not surprising that students did not comment on this sub-theme. In particular, the EU *Grundtvig*<sup>1</sup> funding initiative was mentioned as being helpful and valuable in terms of the sharing of information, knowledge and good practice (Lecturer, Access Course, Regional University, 09). Similarly, another respondent at the same institution expressed the view that: ‘these projects are great, you get good insight in terms of comparative stuff’ (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01).

In addition, three interviewees (8.1%), two from the Capital University and one from the Regional University, mentioned that, at institutional level, there was a need to engage more with Europe. One respondent remarked: ‘we don’t follow the trends, we don’t get out to Europe enough, and we are quite insular in the way we operate...’ (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01). This point was also echoed in two other interviews (Lecturer, Access Course, Capital University, 08; Lecturer, Access Course, Capital University, 05). This evidence indicates that engagement in access-related lifelong learning funding schemes are supportive to the adult access agenda and that meso-level institutions would benefit from more macro-level collaboration.

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<sup>1</sup>Part of the European Commission’s Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-2013, *Grundtvig* focuses on education for adults, whether through formal, non-formal or in informal methods such as autonomous learning, community learning or experiential learning. *Grundtvig* activities are open to any group or institution involved in adult education within the Lifelong Learning Programme countries. [http://www.leargas.ie/programme\\_main.php?prog\\_code=7025](http://www.leargas.ie/programme_main.php?prog_code=7025) [accessed 20 June, 2013].

#### 4.1.5 Impact of the European Union Multi-Rank Project

The sub-theme of an emerging tension between the demands of the local and global dimensions of higher education was expressed in one institution in this study. In the Regional University, one Senior Manager commented that access may be affected by the European Union's Multi-Rank Project<sup>2</sup> (2011) due for implementation in 2013. This respondent fears that if access is not included as one of the key measures, it will become less important for higher education institutions, and hints at a possible emerging tension between access which is seen as a local issue and the increasing challenges higher education institutions confront with the pressure of competing in a global market:

the new Multi-Rank EU project will kick off next year (2013) and lots of access stuff has not got into the final document...if they are not in formal measurement tools, it is very difficult to see how institutions would prioritise access, so what you'll end up with is a situation where there will more pressure on access resources because access is not seen as a priority...it moves down the chain in terms of priorities...this puts a pressure on access, makes it less important (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01).

This perspective highlights that access is excluded from EU performance indicator structures. This suggests that access-related work may be considered lower in status compared to teaching, learning and research.

This same respondent expanded on this emerging tension between the global and the local and suggested that this may threaten higher education access provision and profile:

if you are not in the research area, all your good work in access, teaching and learning, student experience doesn't mean anything...in terms of rankings, we are signed up to six different ranking

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<sup>2</sup>The EU Multi-Rank project started in May 2009 and was finalised in June 2011. This feasibility project examined ways to measure and make transparent the performance of higher education and research institutions, both within and outside the European Union, in their various missions, such as education, research, innovation, regional involvement and internationalisation. The project looked both at performances at institutional level and at programme level (in the selected pilot disciplines of engineering and business studies). The aim of the study was to design and test the feasibility of a multidimensional ranking framework, where the different users can choose their own priorities and create their own personal ranking. [http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/transparency-actions\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/transparency-actions_en.htm) [accessed on 20 June, 2013].

areas at the moment. 160 indicators all together, none in access, no weighted score...access means a lot locally in your community, so it's a balance (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01).

It seems that access work is not embedded in academic or professional staff reward or promotional structures, which are still based on research and teaching. This perspective reveals that there is a growing tension between the traditional work of higher education institutions in teaching, learning and research and the 'new' areas of development, such as the focus on student experience, access, teaching and learning, governance and accountability. These findings point to a tension about the growing complexity of the role and purpose of the higher education system, nationally and internationally.

## **4.2 Impact of National Policies on Adult Access**

The impact of national Irish government policies on adult access surfaced as a strong sub-theme in this study. Emergent themes included: impact of the wider socio-cultural historical context on adult access; role of the Higher Education Authority (HEA); impact of the establishment of the National Office for Equity of Access within the HEA; the introduction of the National Qualification Framework; impact of The Hunt Report; impact of the Springboard initiative and the impact of the HEA funding scheme - Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF). This next section outlines the findings on this sub-theme.

### **4.2.1 Impact of the Wider Socio-Cultural Historical Context on Adult Access**

Reference was made to socio-cultural historical forces of influence on access. First, the high value and status accorded education in Ireland was referred to by an interviewee:

I think it's a plus of Irish society that education still has such a significant place. And it's not just about mobility as well, it's also about knowing, there's an epistemological hunger as opposed to an instrumental one there...the students are, they're not just doing it for the paper, they're doing it because they want to know more. There's genuineness to it (Senior Academic, Capital University, 07).

Second, the same interviewee expressed the view that Ireland's colonial history was still evident and that this was represented by a lack of confidence to set our own agenda. This respondent was commenting on the development of a National Access Research Network:

there were sort of various ideas bounced around and what was interesting was that someone wanted a sort of semi-stuffy conference type thing where the great and the good would be imported and they would bore us to death with their, their rhetoric, you know what they're like, imported from England and tell us all, make us all feel very bad that we're not doing very good work...it's interesting, isn't it? Eight hundred years and it is still there isn't it? (Senior Academic, Capital University, 07).

Third, one senior academic, in the Constituent College, noted the systemic pervasive education inequalities across the education system in Ireland and commented that: 'if we were serious about access as a nation we would in fact be serious about education equality in the primary school, probably in my view more so than the secondary school system which is also deeply inequitable' (Senior Academic, Constituent College, 04). The point was also made by three interviewees across institutions that the third-level sector was now charged with dealing with remediation issues from both the primary and secondary education sectors (Lecturer, Access Course, Regional University, 09; Senior Academic, Constituent College, 04; Senior Academic, Capital University, 07) and that access 'is an ideological cover for grosser inequalities, structural inequalities and cultural inequalities' (Senior Academic, Capital University, 07). Fourth, the lack of cohesion across the sector emerged. The same respondent expanded to express the view that all these measures are in place at tertiary-level because of the short-comings of the education system:

I wish it didn't exist. [Laughs] There you go, there's my wish. I mean there's that paradox there that there is equality opportunities and lack of equality of access to them there, but that it shouldn't be, it shouldn't need [sic] these courses and these programmes and a special division of the HEA to talk about these things, they should be as easy to come to them as it is easy for people to go to primary school or secondary school (Senior Academic, Capital University, 07).

In total, five respondents<sup>3</sup> (13.5%) placed higher education within the context of the broader education system.

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<sup>3</sup>Senior Academic, Capital University, 07; Lecturer, Access Course, Regional University, 09; Senior Academic, Constituent College, 04; Access Project Worker, Capital University, 08; Senior Manager, Constituent College, 10.

#### **4.2.2 Role of the Higher Education Authority (HEA)**

The role of the HEA was mentioned by all 37 staff respondents (100%) in this study as being important to advancing the access agenda. No students commented on the role of the HEA. In all institutions, HEA policy directives and, in particular, the identification of the target groups and setting of quotas for some were considered to be significant developments in advancing equity of access in Ireland for adult learners. However, across institutions, individuals varied considerably in their individual opinions regarding the role of the HEA. In the IoT, a member of the senior management team commented that the institution looks to the HEA for guidance and therefore, internal policy development was ‘informed by the HEA’ (Senior Manager, IoT, 08), whereas in the Regional University, the developmental organic complex nature of access work was alluded to and it was suggested that there was a lack of overall policy coherence:

lots of nuances in access, to be dealt with...very fragmented area. Very local, very tailored, no boundaries set by HEA and development has been too organic, all well-intentioned work (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01).

This later comment suggests that, in the Regional University, there is a desire for more strategic coherence at national level. In contrast, a different opinion regarding the role of the HEA was offered at the Capital University: ‘HEA: they’ve done good work over the years...at the moment they’re like Rottweilers. They really are. They’ve lost the run of themselves. They’re trying to micromanage institutions, which is beyond their remit’ (Senior Lecturer, Capital University, 07). Similarly, in the Constituent College, the following perspective was expressed: ‘the HEA has become centralist and authoritarian and appear to be making decisions without any evidence-based analysis’ (Senior Manager, Constituent College, 09). These findings hint at a growing tension between the endogenous and exogenous environments, with the HEA becoming more involved with the internal governance of higher education institutions and funding of the sector.

One member of academic staff at the Capital University expressed the view that the particular focus of higher education policy in Ireland at the time of writing was largely centred on producing graduates for the knowledge economy, rather than developing well-

rounded citizens: ‘the focus is on generating a particular kind of graduate...there’s real tensions [sic] between a very narrow form of human capital and investment in the self you know all that lovely Foucaulty self-governance’ (Senior Academic, Capital University, 07). This raises an interesting viewpoint about the traditional purpose of higher education and signals a tension around government involvement in higher education and new perspectives emerging.

#### **4.2.3 Impact of the Establishment of the National Office for Equity of Access within the HEA**

The National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education was established in 2003. As noted in Chapter Two, sub-heading 2.2.2, the office has produced a range of documents including two national access plans. All 37 higher education staff interviewees across case sites, (100% of respondents), noted the influence of these plans at institutional level. No students across case sites referred to the impact of the National Office for Equity of Access. It seems that across case sites among staff, rather than students, there was consensus that these documents have had a significant impact. One respondent expressed the view that: ‘I would say some of the strongest pieces that we would have seen would be those that would have come out from the National Access Office since the early 2000s (Researcher, Capital University, 08). Similarly, another added, ‘...the access office is a really, is a great part of the HEA...I think it’s a way of addressing access’ (Senior Academic, Capital University, 07). Clearly, the evidence reveals that the establishment of the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education by the HEA has played a seminal role in promoting adult access to higher education.

Data reflected that in one institution, the Regional University, more policy direction from the National Office for Equity of Access with regard to adult access programmes would be welcome. At this institution, a member of the senior management team stated that:

I don't see policy as being prescriptive, but it should be...a more top-down policy for access and courses would help. We need a standard framework for the entire country, otherwise you'll end up with ten or twelve different models and even more confusion...a one-size fits all approach would be good (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01).

In contrast, a staff respondent at the Capital University noted the flexibility afforded by the HEA in terms of access: 'I think what's refreshing as well about the way access has developed is, while there are levels of sameness around the things we do in different institutions, there's also been great scope to work in an individualised way' (Researcher, Capital University, 08). This point supports the conflicting views expressed across institutions regarding the theme of the degree to which the central authority, the HEA, should be involved in institutional operations. This reflects the differing higher education types, models and cultures across case sites in this study as well as the changing role and purpose of higher education in Ireland.

#### **4.2.4 The Introduction of the National Qualification Framework**

The introduction of the National Qualification Authority of Ireland's (NQAI) framework was identified as providing pioneering infrastructure and was emphasised, by staff interview participants across case sites, as being innovative and helpful in advancing the issues of adult access, progression and programme completion. No mention was made of the NQAI among the student cohort in any of the eight focus groups. The concept of credit accumulation and the overall accessibility of the framework were acknowledged as useful by 14 respondents (37.8%).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Access Project Worker, Constituent College, 01; Access Officer, Constituent College, 06; Lecturer on Access Course, Constituent College, 08; Lecturer on Access Course, Regional University, 09; Access Project Worker, Regional University, 04; Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01; Access Project Worker, IoT, 02; Access Project Worker, IoT, 04; Head of Academic Department, IoT, 05 and 06; Access Project Worker, Capital University, 02; Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03; Lecturer, Access Course, Capital University, 05; Lecturer, Access Course, Capital University, 06.

However, three respondents, (8.1%), an access manager and senior administrator from the Regional University and an access project worker from the Capital University, expressed the view that the universities have been slow to adopt the framework and accept some qualifications that are awarded by the further education sector. One respondent noted the degree of autonomy universities have regarding admissions policies and procedures:

our university doesn't recognise FETAC overall although some disciplines will. The IoTs have no problem but the universities do...there are questions about the quality in some areas. Universities have far too much autonomy about admissions (Access Manager, Regional University, 03).

This perspective supports the point about the Regional University looking for more central direction, as noted in sub-section 4.2.3., thereby reducing individual institutional autonomy over admissions.

Another interview participant commented that more engagement with the NQAI would help promote adult progression to third-level education (Senior Manager, Regional University, 02). One interviewee considered that the further education sector in Ireland is still in development, and stated that in the UK there is more integration between the sectors (Senior Lecturer, Capital University, 07). Analysis reflects that the development of the NQAI is positive, but not without challenge in terms of implementation across all third-level sectors. This reiterates the point about the influence of the different models, cultures and structures across case sites.

#### **4.2.5 Impact of the Hunt Report on Adult Access**

Across all four institutions in this study, among staff, there was consensus that the publication of the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (DES, 2011), also known as the Hunt Report, (see Chapter Two, Review of Literature, under sub-heading 2.2.3), would have an impact on adult access into the future. Specific reference was made to its policies on greater flexible and part-time programme provision. Students did not

mention the Hunt Report across case sites. One institution, the IoT, has been following all recommendations in the document and amending institutional policy accordingly:

we're very much influenced by the Hunt report...if we were to be examined on how faithful we are to the Hunt report we'd probably score quite highly at the moment...We're almost reading it word for word and going through each part...for example our flexibility of delivery is increasing...we have a very active working group for on-line delivery (Senior Manager, IoT, Interview 08).

One respondent in the Regional University commented that the '...policy under Hunt is to move towards equal recognition of part-time and full-time [students] in terms of funding. That will have a huge bearing on access, might kick it down the road...huge impact on how HE institutions do their business' (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01).

Additionally, a member of the access team at the Capital University observed that the Hunt Report was reinforcing the 'whole drive for flexible part-time and skills needs' and that the access team welcome this and hope that this macro-level advance will compel institutions to advance the development of more part-time programmes of study (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03). This respondent continued to state how challenging greater part-time flexible provision is at a meso level for the Capital University:

we're all about full-time provision...there are extra-mural courses but they're not accredited, it's hugely complicated, there's logistical reasons...more flexible computer systems, but it's that's what has to happen... (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 04).

In contrast with these perspectives, an academic at the Capital University institution noted that there was not much 'incentive to do part-time' on the part of the Capital University 'as we fill their quotas with full-timers, they're kicking their doors in to get in, they're turning them away, so why do we need to alter what we do? to accommodate an audience that we don't really need.' (Senior Lecturer, Access Course, 07). Similar views regarding the demand from full-time traditional school entrants were expressed at the Constituent College (Access Project Worker, Constituent College, 01; Lecturer, Access Course, Constituent College, 08).

Findings suggest that the Hunt Report, with policies on greater part-time and flexible programme provision, will impact on adult access, although implementation of same will be challenging for institutions in some instances. Evidence also reveals that market forces and institutional culture play a role regarding this sub-theme and that some elitist perspectives still exist which promote the traditional structures of higher education.

#### **4.2.6 Impact of the Springboard Initiative**

Two of the four case sites in this study, the Regional University and the IoT, are involved in the Springboard<sup>5</sup> initiative, an Irish government scheme introduced in 2009 to up-skill the adult population targeting those not currently employed. As an initiative to encourage adult participation in third-level education with a view to securing employment, feedback from both institutions, the Regional University and the IoT, indicate that Springboard has been a positive development for adult learners in so far as students can complete a programme of study, linked to an area where there are identified national skills shortages while retaining their social welfare payments (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01, Senior Manager, IoT, 07).

One member of a senior management team, (Regional University, 01), observed that since the initiative started in 2009, over 500 adult students have participated in Springboard courses at the institution. However, this has meant that there is less interest in the traditional access programme at the institution and as one interviewee put it succinctly: ‘why return to college for four years when you can up-skill in 12 or 18 months?’ (Access Project Worker, Regional University, 04). Some evidence further demonstrated that Springboard students may have complex academic and personnel support needs, and this

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<sup>5</sup>Springboard is designed to assist unemployed people who have lost their jobs to return to sustainable employment or self-employment. Over 200 courses are available in public and private higher education colleges around the country, at Levels 6-9 on the National Framework of Qualifications. Springboard courses are designed to meet current and future skills needs in Ireland in areas such as information and communications technology (ICT); the green economy; qualifications for the bio-pharma-pharmachem sectors as well as a range of courses developing innovative business and entrepreneurship skills (HEA, 2012).

is causing some resource difficulties, at meso level, mainly because of the large numbers of students involved and that there were hidden costs to institutions:

they are drawing hugely on institutional resources...usually out of education for a while, might have been long-term unemployed, so they draw on a lot of traditional access resources, such as the mature student office, Learning Supports, they need a little more hand-holding...there is no budget for that (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01).

This suggests that such students were drawing from the traditional access budget which has been reduced because of changes made to the Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM), the revised funding model<sup>6</sup>. This revised funding model is based on the numbers of access students enrolled in the first-year and Springboard students are not included in this count. For most institutions, it has led to a reduction in their core access budgets. This means that Springboard students are drawing on traditional institutional access resources, and, as a result, support services are seeing many more students and have less finance in order to provide for them.

Neither the Constituent College nor the Capital University have been involved in the multi-annual three-year Springboard programme (2011-2014), but interviewees at the Capital University acknowledged the merits and challenges of the scheme. One respondent at the Capital University noted that Springboard has brought many more adults into the education system, and that is a welcome development: 'it's a really good change in the system...there's this huge proliferation of courses for mature students', however it seems that Springboard as a policy tool has not 'been well-thought out' (Lecturer, on Access Course, Capital University, 05). Students can only move up the NQAI framework. This means students can progress from a Level Four qualification to a Level Five and so on. However in terms of access, this is problematic as many access courses are located at the interface of Level Five or Six on the NQAI framework. Therefore, if one completes a Level Five in a College of Further Education, and then wants to progress to an access course, and if that course is accredited at Level Five the student may not be eligible to

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<sup>6</sup>During the 2006/07 academic year, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) introduced a new mechanism for allocating recurrent grant funding to higher education institutions based on the calculation of weighted Full-Time Student Equivalents (FTSE) known as the Recurrent Grant Allocation Model.

apply for state financial support such as the BTEA (Lecturer, Access Course, Capital University, 05). Another respondent at the Capital University was critical of the specific nature of many of the courses offered through Springboard ‘for example in Cloud Computing’ and suggested that this may be restrictive for students in terms of future study options (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 02). Clearly, there are both merits and challenges with the Springboard scheme.

#### **4.2.7 Impact of HEA Funding Scheme - Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF)**

As reviewed in Chapter Two, under sub-heading 2.2.2, the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) was a multi-annual fund, amounting to €139 million over the period 2006-2011, administered by HEA, which aimed to support innovation in higher education institutions. Access and lifelong learning were one of the four strands of activity under the scheme. All of the institutions in this study availed of this funding stream which was administered by the HEA<sup>7</sup> and there was consensus from eight respondents, two in each case site,<sup>8</sup> that the SIF scheme was of benefit. A perspective has been selected to support the positive impact of SIF: ‘has been a good exercise... There has been a good outcome overall... Good relationships built and good networks, across a highly political environment’ (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01). Evidence reflects that inter-institutional collaborative work is on-going despite reaching the end of the SIF scheme (see Chapter Nine, Partnerships to Promote Access for more discussion on this theme). SIF ended prematurely in 2011, rather than in 2013, as originally planned due to the public finance crisis.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.heai.ie/en/sif>, accessed 7 June, 2012

<sup>8</sup> Access Officer, IoT, 01; Senior Manager, IoT, 05; Senior Administrator, Capital University, 01; Access Course Co-ordinator, Capital University, 04; Academic, Constituent College, 08; Senior Manager, Constituent College, 02; Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01; Senior Manager, Regional University, 02.

### **4.3 Impact of Financial Policies of Government Departments on Adult Access**

Financial policies adopted by Irish government departments emerged as a theme across all case sites. As documented in Chapter Two, Review of Literature, sub-heading 2.2.2, during the 1990s and 2000s, several funding schemes have been introduced by successive governments, with the aim of facilitating greater participation in higher education for all categories of students, including adult learners.

#### ***Impact of Policies of the Department of Social Protection: Students Financial Schemes***

The impact of the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) emerged as a sub-theme and was mentioned by one staff respondent (3.7%) in the Constituent College and seven focus group members (17.5%) across all case sites that availed of it in the past. These findings suggest that the scheme was seen as being supportive and facilitated adult access, progression and retention. Some quotations have been selected to support this point: ‘in the golden era, BTEA and book allowance increased annually plus I had maintenance and a grant...gave me a go of whole college experience and allowed me do my thing’ (Humanities Student, Constituent College, 02). This point is echoed by a member of academic staff at the Constituent College: ‘this measure [BTEA] allowed many, the luxury of financial support and related benefits throughout their college undergraduate (and in some cases, through to postgraduate) programmes’ (Lecturer, Access Course, Constituent College, 08).

Three staff respondents, (8.1%), commented on the lack of coherence in policy among government departments. Some departments, such as the Department of Education and Skills, have developed extensive policy which contextualises adult access as well as infrastructure such as the National Office for Equity of Access, while the Departments of Finance and Social Protection have reduced financial support for adults interested in accessing third-level studies. Similarly, the Department of Education and Skills has raised the Student Registration Fee, payable at the start of the academic year in all higher

education institutions. One interviewee in the Capital University summed up this paradox as follows:

it costs more to go to college than it does to stay at home, they have to travel, they've their books, they've childcare...it makes absolutely no sense, in one hand you have the national office setting targets...but on the other hand, you know, grants are being cut, it's just a contradiction really...'(Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03).

Additionally, this point was mentioned by one member of the senior management team at the Constituent College who noted that it would be more useful if there was more strategic coherence in the sector, suggesting this will have a positive impact on the access agenda:

we collectively all of us who are stake holders in education and education disadvantage and tackling education disadvantage...we need to do more to work together in a strategic way...join the dots to make it happen (Vice President, Constituent College, 09).

Similarly, this sub-theme was also reflected in one of the focus groups with students in the IoT where students expressed disillusionment with the apparent contradiction in government policy:

they try and encourage us to up-skill so that we can find different career paths, blah blah blah and make a living for ourselves and get off the dole. But yet when you come back into college to try to do the very thing they're suggesting they're putting obstacles in your way (Engineering Student, IoT, 06).

Another form of state financial support mentioned by one student over the course of this study was the Lone Parent Allowance which allows students to study while receiving payments (Humanities Student, Regional University, 01). The Free Fees initiative was noted by one staff respondent as being significant in emphasising the new accessibility to higher education; however, the same interviewee expressed the view that the impact of this government finance scheme could have been wider:

while it's debatable whether this measure hit the targeted group, it did take away a notional barrier for many who might automatically have ruled out going to college on the basis that one had to pay high fees. It opened the way, even if just psychologically, for people to consider returning to college as an option... (Lecturer, Access Course, Constituent College, 08).

### *Government Departments and Administrative Difficulties*

Five students (12.5%) commented on the length of time it can take for payments to be processed when transferring from one state financial scheme to another. Clearly, students find this situation distressing. Some quotations have been selected to support this point: ‘I was on social welfare payment anyway, but when I switched from Job Seekers Allowance to BTEA, I was waiting nearly eight weeks for a payment. We were given no indication when we would be paid’ (Humanities Student, Regional University, 02). Similarly, an adult student commented: ‘no one told me when I got changed from job seekers to the BTEA, so I lost a week of payments’ (Humanities Student, Regional University, 03). Additionally, another respondent added: ‘I didn’t even change from Lone Parents Allowance to BTEA because of the risk of delay in payments’ (Humanities Student, Regional University, 06). One focus group participant observed: ‘I still use my parents’ address, because any change can slow payments down’ (Humanities Student, Regional University, 01). Finally, one student expressed the view that such delays in processing payment mean that state: ‘records aren’t accurate’ (Science Student, Regional University, 07). This evidence indicates that although there were administrative difficulties and a lack of communication and cohesion across departments, across case sites, students were appreciative of the financial support provided by the government-led BTEA, Free Fees Scheme and Lone Parents Allowance.

Across case sites, the reduction in the state maintenance grant was having an impact on adult students’ ability to manage financially, and the issue of finance emerged as a dominant theme in all student focus groups. Members of the focus group across institutions have had their grants reduced by two thirds and these students were finding it difficult to manage financially, especially those with young children or those who had to commute to college. Further, across case sites, students are worried about the impact of anticipated further reductions in student finance for third-level study. The evidence reveals that it is challenging for adult learners to study when concerned about financial matters. Some quotations have been chosen to reflect this point:

I'm on my own with two kids and absolutely no income and you know I just found that I can't pay the electricity...if you're struggling about finances and you can't breathe from a financial point of view it's very hard to give a hundred per cent to study (Business Student, IoT, 02).

I was on welfare for 11 weeks and I don't get much and I didn't qualify for the BTEA. I get €300 a month but my rent is €275 so I have no money at all and I still have to go home to my parents for my dinner (Science Student, Regional University, 10).

There were days I would be in college on a Tuesday or Monday, I mightn't have money till Thursday...and I've two kids at home to feed. I was embarrassed. You know, have I milk? I mean I don't think they realise how difficult it is, I have a little credit thing going in my local shop, you know at least I'd never be stuck for milk...they don't realise that sometimes you're even worried, have I petrol to go to college today? (Business Student, IoT, 09).

With all the cuts to allowance, I am so worried about paying my rent (Humanities Student, Constituent College, 04).

I spend €70 on petrol alone every week (Engineering Student, IoT, 07).

This evidence suggests that cuts to grants and various other allowances are having a negative impact on adult access students.

Respondents at the Capital University have noticed that since the economic demise in Ireland in 2007, and a parallel increase in unemployment rates, the number of applications from adult students has increased. This sub-theme was not raised in the three other institutions. This suggests that more adults are looking to access higher education and up-skill with a view to securing employment: 'we've got a larger application pool every year; our numbers are massively increasing...' (Access Course Co-ordinator, Capital University, 04). Similarly, another interviewee noted the increasing competitiveness for those applying through this entry route at the institution:

to be successfully admitted to college, it's a very, very competitive process because of the current economic downturn, we've had a huge increase in the number of applications. Really, really enormous so it's incredibly competitive. So you know for, say, psychology it's a twenty-five to one chance of being offered a place on that course (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03).

These findings suggest that, in the Capital University, the impact of the wider socio-cultural political landscape has created a more competitive environment for adults interested in entering third-level education through an access route. In contrast, at the Constituent College, a policy of open access has emerged. This means the institution will take all adult applicants onto their adult access course and, therefore, it can be theorised

that the institution has adapted to accommodate the increasing student demand, but it is in a less populated part of Ireland.

Similarly, findings suggest that government financial policies are also having a negative impact on adult access enrolments. One staff respondent at the Capital University commented that although applications for access programmes have increased, acceptances have not (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03). This research participant suggested that the economic climate means that higher education continues not to be financially viable for some adult learners: ‘while we found that our application numbers are way up, it doesn’t always translate into acceptances. And that is because people want to take their place but actually when they do the sums they can’t do it’ (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03), again echoing this theme of the financial difficulties students are encountering.

Equally, lack of finance seems to be affecting progression to undergraduate studies for adult students who gain admission to third-level education via access programme. Findings suggest that reductions in state allowances mean that for some adult students who complete an access course, progression to either full-time undergraduate or postgraduate studies is not a realistic option if it means they have to leave low-paid employment. The frustration with this situation is expressed by one interviewee who was dealing with students daily:

progression onto postgraduate study for adult learners is a real problem at the moment, in terms of funding being cut and people are not in a position to pursue postgraduate studies, so only taking them to one level...they can’t progress, you know? And I’m just inundated, my inbox, from students frustrated. They really want to go on to a degree so, it’s really frustrating (Lecturer, Access Course, Capital University, 06).

Evidence shows that, in some cases, students had to continue to work in order to support themselves while pursuing their studies: ‘it’s just so so [sic] hard to manage, I take any part-time work I can get, cleaning, typing, anything at all’ (Humanities Students, Constituent College, 02). In the Capital University, it was observed that this need for an income may be affecting students’ studies. One staff respondent at the institution noted that adult access students need to continue to work in order to support themselves and that

in summer 2012, two access students left their end-of-year examinations early because they had to go to work (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03).

### ***Impact on Institutional Funding***

Budgetary reductions are also having an impact on higher education institutions. As noted in sub-section 4.2.6, a Recurrent Grant Allocation Funding Model was introduced in 2006/07 and a revised access allocation funding model<sup>9</sup> was introduced in 2011/12 by the HEA. This access ring-fenced revised model is based on the numbers of access students in each institution. In the main, it has led to a reduction in institutional funding. This ring-fenced funding is termed the Core Access Budget and is mainly used by institutions to support their access activities, including payment of access staff salaries. One interviewee noted that this model has some administrative difficulties and the student returns may not be accurate:

we have had a decrease in funding...students don't fill out those forms adequately or, you know, fully...it doesn't capture the picture and I think that therefore mature students are under-represented. We compare them with the returns to our own figures, you know, and there is a difference...that's the interesting thing (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03).

Similarly, another respondent expressed the view that: 'the issue is in terms of the equal access data, how it's collected, who it's collected by and how institutions were engaged within it' (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 08). This evidence suggests that there are complications at the data collection stage of this process.

Despite these difficulties, there was also evidence that institutions were adapting to the new funding environment. In the Regional University, the point was made that despite the financial challenges, colleges do what they can to encourage participation: 'good access courses have low fees and a certain amount of leeway is given to those who really can't afford it' (Lecturer, Access Course, Regional University, 09). In the Capital University, one interviewee commented: 'it's a real struggle in terms of, you know, what

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<sup>9</sup><http://www.heai.ie/en/node/1377>, [accessed on 30 January, 2013].

we can provide them in additional funding...it is minimal...' (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03). At the Regional University, a senior manager expressed the view that: 'we have a nice car but no petrol so we have got to find cheaper and more creative ways of doing things' (Senior Manager, Regional University, 02).

### ***Impact of the Employment Control Framework (ECF)***

Across all case sites, evidence shows that the Employment Control Framework (ECF), which was introduced in 2011, under the National Recovery Plan 2011-2014, and in accordance with the Programme of Financial Support for Ireland agreed with the EU/IMF, was perceived to be posing operational difficulties. It is especially challenging for institutions when staff are on maternity leave and colleagues have to assume their workloads due to the restrictions of the ECF. In addition, front-line staff are finding it challenging to work within the economic constraints: 'the current economic climate is really stressing, you know, to us here working in access, maybe not to, you know, the higher echelons of college life' (Lecturer, Access Course, Capital University, 06). However, there were also signs of adaptation:

from a staffing sense in terms of the context that we find ourselves in, budgets are cut, across the public sector things have had to get leaner, meaner and greener and, as a staff in an access office, you have to make a decision about whether you want to cut or you want to try and keep going and keep developing, and I think what we've seen in the access context across the board is that people have said no, we won't be defined by this, we will continue to research, we will continue to develop, we will continue to move because we must (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 08).

### ***Lack of Investment in Education Guidance and Information for Adults***

Issues around the lack of financial investment in formal education guidance and information for adults who are keen to access higher education were mentioned by staff respondents in both the Capital and Regional Universities, but not in the Constituent College or IoT. This sub-theme was not raised by students across all case sites and was commented on in the context of the increase in national unemployment rates and that more adults were enquiring about progression opportunities to higher education. One

interviewee commented that: ‘guidance is visibly missing. People just don’t know where to go’ (Access Course Co-ordinator, Capital University, 04).

#### **4.4. Tension between Quality and Equality**

While there was widespread agreement that the increased participation of adult access students has resulted in a more diversified student body, issues of quality were raised. Data suggest that adult access initiatives have been of benefit to each of the higher education institutions in this study. Respondents frequently emphasised that increasing higher education access provision has led to a greater participation of adult learners and has resulted in a more diverse student body and that this is a welcome development for both the individual adult learner and the institution. Three comments from two different institutions have been selected to support this perspective:

the access programme really does contribute to college in an enormous way in, you know, diversifying the whole college...just adds to the diversity of college life and despite the tensions, colleges are keen to do that (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03).

Similarly, another senior academic, at Professorial grade, commented:

access, in particular, broadens our horizons about the possibility of education and the importance of education, so I think it very much belongs, say as part of the furniture of the house if it’s not going to be the centrepiece of the room it’s a very important piece of furniture in the house (Head of Academic Department, Constituent College, 03).

He continued to remark that: ‘we now get participants drawn from widely diverse backgrounds, and from all age groups’. A Senior Manager at the Constituent College made a similar observation: ‘access has the net effect of giving us a very different student to profile to our traditional student profile’ (Senior Academic, Constituent College, 04). Clearly, increased mature student participation has advanced the diversification of the student body which is now seen as more representative of the greater population. Diversity among the student body was considered important, and was seen to be of benefit to the teaching and learning environment: ‘the more diverse the college community,

culturally, economically and geographically, the better the teaching and learning experience' (Senior Manager, Capital University, 09). These findings were also reflected in the student focus groups where, among all 40 respondents (100%), there was universal consensus about the personal value of participating in adult access programmes in each case site.

Evidence reveals that, in two institutions, there is an on-going tension with reference to the sub-theme of maintaining academic standards, and therefore quality, while managing to increase intake of students coming through alternative entry routes, many with a restricted educational history. However, overall adult access students are considered good students and are considered to bring a diversity which enhances the classroom (Senior Manager, Capital University, 09). One Professor remarked: 'I think there is a prejudgment on the part of some faculty that people who are coming through this access stream are limping into third-level education' (Head of Academic Department, Constituent College, 03) and the need to maintain quality among graduates was also noted: 'one wants to be inclusive and one wants to provide opportunity for people, but, on the other hand, if these courses are meant to lead people into more formal third-level education there must be some form of assessment and standard' (Head of Academic Department, Constituent College, 03). Diverse opinions were expressed with some members of academic staff strongly supportive of adult access initiatives and others more reluctant about offering alternative admissions route to this cohort. One senior academic at the Constituent College remarked that:

there are people within the institution who are bitterly opposed to the access programmes and are arguing that they are unfair to those who are getting the 500 points in the Leaving...I believe it's an extraordinary achievement to do so well in the face and teeth of such difficult circumstances, but that is not perceived by some in the ivory tower (Senior Academic, Constituent College, 04).

At the Capital University, one researcher noted that part of her work was to:

dispel the myths about access and academic standards. For a long time I think, particularly maybe in older institutions, there was a great fear that if you had non-traditional students you would see a watering down of academic standards. So, you know, a really important part of policy as well and research is to dispel that myth, is to be able to gather statistics and data that shows, well actually this isn't the case (Researcher, Capital University, 08).

These findings point to a continuing tension and may reflect a continuity of elitist practices which is captured by a member of the senior management team at the Constituent College who summed up as follows: ‘positive discrimination agenda, it’s a national struggle, we are feeling our way through...there is now a range of alternative entry routes, and not everyone is comfortable with them’ (Senior Manager, Constituent College, 02).

#### **4.5 Summary and Discussion of Findings on Thematic Area One: Impact of International, Supra-national and National Government Policies on Adult Access**

This section presents a summary and discussion of the findings on thematic area one. The evidence in this thematic area reflects the extensive, moderating and mediating influence of the wider socio-cultural political milieu with its associated policies on the area of adult access.

##### ***Impact of Transnational and Supra-national Policy***

To a small number of staff, international policies were referred to, but surprisingly not that much. Maybe this is related to Ireland’s geographical location (one respondent mentioned even ‘insular’). This could also be explained by level of the development of the HE system in Ireland, in so far as it mainly still consists of teaching institutions and has less prominence in international research. Nonetheless, there was an acknowledgment that such policy did have a slight impact on the field of adult access by providing an overarching context for national policy development and there was a genuine desire to engage more, in particular, with supra-national policy.

The Bologna Declaration was considered important for providing an overarching macro-level context and guidance for the development of the broader teaching and learning environment rather than specifically for access. However, it seems likely that the impact of the later Social Dimension of Bologna will filter down to nation states over time. In addition, institutions appreciated the availability of finance to promote cross-country sharing of practice through the various EU funding schemes. Perspectives expressed offer

some evidence to show that institutions are capable of adapting policy internally to fit their own mission. Overall, these data reveal that, similar to the findings on the impact of OECD and Bologna policies, with respect to adult access to higher education in an Irish context, EU policy provides wider macro-level guidance which, in turn, influences meso-level initiatives. A tension between the ‘global’, that is increased competitiveness among the higher education sector worldwide and the ‘local’, where access is located, surfaced as a paradox and one which may pose challenges to the status of adult access in the future.

As reviewed in Chapter Two, Literature Review, under sub-heading 2.1, adult access to higher education has emerged as a recurring theme across transnational and supra-national policy discourse. The research evidence reveals that many academic staff respondents were not familiar with transnational or supra-national adult access policy and these findings resonates with Sabri (2010) who found evidence that academic staff tend to treat policy as a ‘distant macro–phenomenon’ (p. 193). A global/local paradox was highlighted as a tension which may pose challenges to both the status and resourcing of adult access in the future and resonates with Bowl (2003), who argues that access takes second place in a university’s attempt to gain and maintain a prestigious research reputation. Further, this finding provides some evidence of a growing neo-liberal marketised higher education environment in Ireland with the growing desire among institutions to compete in the global higher education rankings, a finding reflected in the literature (Lolich 2011; Lynch, 2006 and 2010; Lynch, Gummell and Devine, 2012). These findings raise issues about access and the role and purpose of higher education.

In Chapter Two, Literature Review, Figure 2.5., this sub-theme is located at the outer perimeter of the macro level of the complexity framework applied to the area of adult access in this study. The findings unveiled in this section suggest that this is a fitting position for the impact of such policies. This highlights not only interdependence of the various sub-elements, but also confirms the overall interconnectivity of the entire system, reflective of the concept of systems nested within systems which is one of the fundamental characteristics of a CAS. As argued in Chapter Two, one of the attractions of a CAS is that it is capable of accommodating tension. Tension is, in fact, considered to be an integral component of a CAS. Throughout this chapter, findings reflect themes of

juxtaposed tensions and the first tension, local versus the global, emerges here. Viewed through a complexity lens, the evidence points to one of the key attributes of a CAS, that of non-linearity, and reflects a complex, rather than a simplistic, landscape in the overall area of adult access to higher education.

## **Impact of National Irish Policies**

### ***Impact of Wider Socio-Cultural Political Context on Adult Access***

Historical context and systemic inequalities in the Irish education system were also raised in interviews with staff, with five respondents placing higher education within the context of the broader education system. The inclusion of this theme exemplifies that, although the third-level sector is an independent one, nonetheless, it is irrevocably connected with the wider socio-political historical cultural landscape with issues around the role and purpose of higher education surfacing as well as a reference to Ireland's colonial history. It is clear that the third-level sector cannot, in isolation, address the failings of society but it does have a role to play. Considering access to the education system in a more holistic manner is congruent with arguments presented by Morgan and Slowey (2009). The findings in this study place the tertiary-level sector in the context of the education system, and illustrate the importance of the wider socio-political cultural context in the area, reflecting the CAS concept of a system nested within a system. Evidence also suggests that this applied CAS has memory and that this memory influences current thinking about why, and in what way, institutions provide for adult access.

### ***Changing Relationship between Higher Education Institutions and Government-Rise of Managerialism***

With reference to the role of the central authority, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), there was consensus across case sites that Irish national policy has had a significant impact on the area of adult access to higher education and the role of policy in broadening access for adult learners was raised by all (100%) of the interview participants. However, some

research evidence emerged to suggest that the role of the HEA was perceived to be changing, and findings reveal the rise of a more managerialistic approach to the governance of higher education institutions in the neo-liberal tradition. Perspectives expressed highlighted that there is evidence of a policy trend towards an exogenous approach to higher education governance, more aligned to the NPM approach. But institutions varied in their response to this. It was seen as ‘guidance’ in the IoT and the Regional University, both younger HEIs, who look to the HEA for direction and ‘interference’ in the Capital University and Constituent College, who are both long-established institutions. In addition, at the Regional University, interviewees commented on the fragmented, organic nature of access work and clearly wanted more coherent policy in the area. In contrast, in the Capital University, this autonomy was seen to allow for a creative innovative approach to access, congruent with findings in Whitchurch’s research (2008 and 2012b). Nonetheless, despite these cultural contrasts, there was also considerable evidence that HEIs are being responsive to policy recommendations and that the relationship between higher education institutions and government is changing. This is congruent with findings in the literature where it is theorised that there is an intrusion on the part of government into higher education matters (Henkel, 2005; Bosetti and Walker, 2010; Long, 2010).

Although there was conflicting evidence across case sites regarding national Irish higher education policy, such policy was seen to have a profound impact on the area of adult access and in particular, several HEA policy instruments were considered helpful in facilitating adult access. The identification of target groups and the practice of establishing quotas were universally welcomed, as was the establishment of the National Office for Equity of Access. Similarly, the development of the NQAI framework and policies on RPL were highlighted as positive, although both were acknowledged to be challenging in terms of implementation. Overall, the third-level sector has, in theory, welcomed the development of the NQAI framework. However, the university sector appears to be reluctant to adopt some of the aspects of the framework in practice. This suggests that this sector sees its mission differently reflecting the on-going binary divide in Irish higher education. The impact of the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (DES, 2011) was expected to increase as it moves into its implementation phase.

Other funding policy initiatives such as Springboard and SIF, were considered beneficial to the development of the sector, although not without challenge. Springboard did not emerge as a sub-theme in the Constituent College, however, across three of the case sites, the Capital University, Regional University and IoT, Springboard is seen as a welcome policy development tool which supports adult access, however, a number of challenges were noted: namely the resourcing of student support services, possible financial implications for students and the restrictive course offerings in terms of future study options. These findings suggest there is a lack of coherence at national policy level and that more formalised structures need to be developed and sustained. Further, these findings may reflect institutional culture (see Chapter Five, sub-heading 5.3 for more discussion on this theme) and this evidence suggests that a number of challenges in the adult access agenda within the overall education system have yet to be resolved, pointing to the dynamic and complex nature of this work.

Limited literature on the topic suggests that national policy instruments, such as the use of competitive funding schemes, are used increasingly to stimulate and steer the direction of developments in the Irish higher education landscape (Hughes, 2010). It seems that access is no exception. Such trends are representative of a NPM approach to higher education and are documented in the literature (see for example, Courtney, 2013). Hughes (2010: 86) claims that:

higher education competitive funding schemes have been evaluated against criteria which align institutional strategies with national priorities and using criteria which targets particular areas such as institutional restructuring, access, teaching quality and 'smart economy' priorities.

Hughes (2010) argues that this represents a shift in the balance of power and demonstrates a changing relationship between universities and governments, and that this, in the Irish context, represents a movement towards a more NPM approach to the higher education sector (Hughes, 2010: 87). In this study, the Strategic Innovation Fund and Springboard were highlighted as being helpful to advancing adult access. Although there were funding difficulties, delayed starts to projects and sometimes weak inter-institutional collaborations, overall as a scheme aimed at fostering innovation in higher education, it 'produced very strong results' (Davies, 2010). Although the Targeted/ Strategic Initiative

Funding schemes were not mentioned by respondents, it can be summarised that the availability of competitive funding for institutions incentivised the area of increasing mature student participation and therefore have brought about a degree of change at institutional level (Hughes, 2010). The implications of such measures represent a move on the part of government to direct institutional behavioural change by 'steering at arm's length' (see for example, O' Buachalla, 1992; Hood, 2001, cited by Hughes, 2010: 84), 'through targeted, competitive funding schemes aligned with government priorities' (Hughes, 2010: 84). This is reflective of what Kogan and Hanney (2000) argue, in the UK context, is a shift from state-subsided independence to increased dependence and adherence to state policies.

These findings point to an emerging tension regarding the role of the HEA within the Irish higher education landscape and hint at a dissonance between endogenous and exogenous environments, a tension which is widely reflected in the international literature (Pollitt, 1994; Henkel 2000; Manning, 2001; Hood, 2001; Deem 2001; Kogan, 2004; Tapper and Palfreyman, 2010). As noted in Chapter Two, Literature Review, Courtney (2013: 41) argues that this is a global phenomenon and 'governments...are seeking to re-define both higher education and the idea of the university'.

Drawing conceptually from CAS, the development of policy instruments since the mid-1990s, such as numerous strategy and policy documents, the development of a National Qualifications Framework, the establishment of a dedicated unit within the HEA, the National Office for Equity of Access, and the emergence of dedicated funding for institutions and students, represents a bifurcation. These measures introduced access as a central tenet of Irish higher education policy causing change across the wider system. These developments were recognised by many interview participants as being positive and have provided guidance in order to facilitate the development of institutional access work, for those working at 'grass roots'. These findings reveal that this area is complex and as in a CAS, with regard to adult access, higher education institutions in this study are in the processing of continuously adapting to the demands of the exogenous policy environment.

As summarised in Chapter Two, Analytical Framework, Figure 2.5, with reference of the impact of the role of the central authority, in this instance, the HEA, findings point to the dissonance between the norms of the two models of higher education, the collegial and NPM. In this study, both the Capital University and Constituent College, long-established institutions, align themselves more with the collegial model characterised by concepts such as academic autonomy and freedom, whereas findings from the IoT and the Regional University, both newer third-level colleges, are more reflective of an NPM approach. These findings highlight the differing structures of higher education institutions in this study and point to a tension regarding the impact of national policy in the area of adult access.

### *Tensions around Flexible/Part-time Delivery*

Where there is substantial demand from the traditional student cohort and, hence, high academic standards are required in order to gain entry, institutions are more reluctant to engage with the development of part-time programmes of study. In contrast, where institutions are eager to increase their student numbers and demand for their courses, they seem to be more willing to adapt to these new modes of programme delivery. It seems that certificate and diploma programmes are particularly attractive for adult learners, probably linked to the shorter duration of such courses (HEA, 2010a). This links with the point made in the previous sub-section of this summary about the presence of the different models of higher education, the collegial and NPM and suggests that, depending on endogenous culture and environment, institutions in this study respond differently to national policy recommendations. It shows that that in the older institutions, there is a continuity of elitist perspectives of higher education promoting the traditional model of programme delivery.

Findings reflect that staff are capable of adapting policy and this reflects institutional culture. This resonates with Trowler (1998) whose typology of change, at an institutional level, shows that academic staff are capable of innovative on-going adaptation to the policy environment. With reference to this sub-theme, within a CAS analytical

framework, metaphorically, this finding can be interpreted as the on-going need for adaptation to ensure survival. It seems that where there is high demand from the traditional school-leaver cohort, there is less of a need to target adult learners whereas in the IoT, there is interest in expanding student numbers with a view to securing the future of the institution. Furthermore, the IoT has a different mission resulting in a range of programme structures, aimed at serving the educational needs of the local community. Therefore, the IoT, is keen to attract adult learners and, as analysis suggests, like a CAS, the institution engages in creative adaptive ways of achieving this goal.

### ***Financial Policies as a Determining Force***

Finance (both student and institutional) emerged as a significant sub-theme. From the perspective of institutions, measures such as the ECF and other funding cuts were posing operational difficulties. Although there were administrative difficulties and a lack of communication and cohesion across departments, across case sites, students were appreciative of the financial support provided by the government-led BTEA, Free Fees scheme and Lone Parents Allowance. Other emergent themes included the need for a greater investment in adult educational guidance and information, the need for development of the further education sector, the impact of the wider socio-political historical educational context in Ireland and contradictory government policies.

As noted in Chapter Two, finance is a well-documented deterrent to access higher education for many adult learners (for example, Cross, 1981; Ozga & Sukhnanden, 1997 and 1998; Woodley *et al.*, 1987; Thomas, 2001; Reay, 2002; EC, 2010) and certainly in an Irish context, the limited research concurs that finance constitutes a substantial obstacle to pursuing third-level studies (Fleming and Murphy, 1997; Lynch, 1997; Inglis and Murphy, 1999). The findings in this study support this. From the perspective of institutions, measures such as the Employment Control Framework (ECF) and other budgetary cuts, such as the reduction in funding associated with the way equal access data are collected, were posing operational difficulties. Other financial-related challenges noted include an increase in the volume of adult applications, more competition for

places, reduction in financial support schemes for both colleges and students and the impact of the need to work part-time while studying and its subsequent impact of student academic performance.

Although educational guidance is considered an integral dimension of access, findings reflect a lack of investment in this area, congruent again with the body of literature nationally and internationally (Sultana, 2004; National Guidance Forum, 2007; Philips and Eustace, 2010). Similarly, research demonstrates that adults often find it difficult to access information about higher education. This study is consistent with these research findings (see for example, McGivney, 1996; Bowl, 2003, as reviewed in Chapter Two) and shows there is an on-going need for greater investment in educational guidance and information provision. In addition, there was some evidence of both duplication and contradictory policies, for example, the HEA set access targets, yet the Department of Finance is reducing funding available for third-level study and in tandem, increasing the student registration fees annually. Clark highlights that duplication across government departments is standard across countries and goes so far as to suggest that ‘agency pluralism at the top of education systems is an important line of defence against the error of a monopoly of power’ (Clark, 1983: 267). In other words, Clark argues strongly for duplication advocating it is positive, not negative and protects the public against self-interest. There was also some evidence of considerable financial hardship among adult students, which is likely to have an impact on the retention rates of this cohort, particularly at postgraduate level.

Although this theme is located at the macro level of the complexity framework in this study, finance, or lack of, impacts on every level of the system, echoing the CAS characteristics of a system nested within other systems. This can be conceptualised as an independent dimension of the wider socio-political environment but as the evidence reveals, finance, as a theme, is interconnected across the entire system. This sub-theme was the only policy area referred to by students across all case sites, highlighting the crucial role finance plays in facilitating adult access to third-level education. Like a CAS, elements within the sub-system can at times be paradoxical and, as in this case, this

paradox has an impact across the entire CAS causing a degree of frustration for all concerned.

### ***Tension between Quality and Equality***

It was acknowledged that the presence of adults across case sites was leading to a more diversified student body and that this was a positive development. This shows that, in general, values among higher education professions remain unchanged. Teaching all students is an integral part of academic work and the presence of adult access students was seen to enrich the teaching and learning environment. However, issues of equality and quality and access as affirmative action also emerged and the evidence suggests that there is some resistance to new student demographics, hinting at a greater tension emerging. Findings highlight both the operational and normative mode of the higher education system reflective of Becher and Kogan's synoptic model (1992).

The issue of making higher education more accessible and the need to maintain graduate quality emerged as a sub-theme and the evidence suggests that there may some resistance to new student demographics. Such comments are supported by findings in the research literature (for example, Tent, 2000; Skilbeck, 2001; Clancy, 2001, Read *et al*, 2003). Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2005-2007, the Action Plan published by the National Office for Equity of Access highlighted the need for greater communication with regard to the rationale behind improving participation (HEA, 2004). It seems that more research work is needed to show that quality and equity of access can co-exist (Skilbeck, 2001). These findings resonate with aspects of complexity and reproduce themes of on-going tensions with the system and the two opposing models of higher education.

## 4.6 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has explored the findings from the first thematic area in this study: impact of international, supra-national and national government policies on adult access with a view to addressing the overarching research question in this study which is, *given the nature of higher education, why and in what way do Irish higher education institutions provide access for adult learners, and to what extent, if any, has such access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education professionals?* Four main themes emerged from the analysis of findings. These include the impact of transnational and supra-national policy on adult access; the impact of national policies on adult access; impact of financial policies of government departments on adult access and a tension between quality and equality.

Transnational and supra-national policies had only a slight impact on adult access and there was conflicting evidence across case sites regarding national Irish policy. A number of HEA policy initiatives were considered helpful in facilitating adult access. The identification of target groups and practice of establishing quotas were universally welcomed, as was the establishment of the National Office for Equity of Access. Additionally, the development of NQAI framework and policies on RPL were highlighted, although both were acknowledged to be challenging in terms of implementation. The impact of National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (2011) was expected to increase as it moves into its implementation phase. Other funding policy initiatives such as Springboard and SIF, were considered beneficial to the development of the sector, although, again, not without challenge. There was some evidence that the role of the HEA was changing and findings suggest that the rise of a more managerialistic approach to the governance of higher education institutions is emerging. But institutions varied in their response to this trend towards managerialism. It was seen as a positive development in both the IoT and the Regional University who look to the HEA for direction and whereas it is not as welcome in the Capital University or the Constituent College, who have traditionally considered themselves as having a high degree of academic autonomy. These findings point to an emerging tension within the Irish higher education landscape.

Finance surfaced as a significant sub-theme. From the perspective of access within institutions, the economic recession has led to funding cuts and an embargo on staff recruitment. From the perspective of the students, there was a renewed interest in up-skilling or retraining in order to secure employment, but reductions in the range of student financial supports was causing considerable hardship. Other emergent themes included the need for a greater investment in adult educational guidance and information, the need for development of the further education sector, the impact of the wider socio-political historical educational context in Ireland and contradictory government policies. It was acknowledged that the presence of adults across case sites was leading to a more diversified student body and that this was a positive development, reflecting that the values of higher education professionals remain unchanged. However, issues of equality and quality and access as affirmative action also emerged and the evidence suggests that there is some resistance to new demographic, hinting at an on-going tension.

In conclusion, with reference to the first thematic area in this study, findings from interviews with staff and focus groups with students can be framed within a CAS context which shows the considerable impact of the wider socio-cultural political landscape on adult access. Dichotomous themes of tensions, such as the local versus the global, collegial versus NPM models of higher education institutions, issues of quality versus equality and contradictory financial policies at the level of government reflect some of the characteristics of a CAS. Returning to the overarching research question in this study, *given the nature of higher education, why and in what way do Irish higher education institutions provide access for adult learners and, to what extent, if any, has such access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education professionals?*, the findings in this thematic area reflect that institutions provide for adult access mainly because of requirements from the complex exogenous environment and that values of higher education staff remain largely unchanged.

Chapter Five, which follows, presents the findings from the second theme in this study, adult access and wider organisational planning at the level of the institution.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS FROM THEMATIC AREA TWO - ADULT ACCESS AND WIDER ORGANISATIONAL PLANNING**

### **5.0 Introduction**

Chapter Five outlines the findings from the second thematic area in this study, adult access and wider institutional planning. With regard to this theme, each institution has engaged in a wide range of planning activities and has often included access in the wider organisational processes, thus illustrating one of the ways institutions in this study provide for adult access. Findings are presented across the four case study sites and are discussed comparatively under the following thematic sub-headings: ethos/mission statements and adult access; strategic plans and adult access; institutional culture and adult access; institutional support from staff; quality assurance issues and institutional environmental challenges.

### **5.1 Mission Statements and Adult Access**

Access is referred to, sometimes obliquely, in all four mission statements<sup>1</sup> from case sites. Analysis of these demonstrates that institutions differ in their approaches to access in their individual mission statements. However, no explicit mention is made of mature student access in any of these mission statements. The Constituent College makes reference to diversity and to the promotion of equity of access. The Capital University mentions inclusivity and equality of access and refers to the local, national and international context. In contrast, the Regional University does not mention access. It does, however, have as a sub-theme, the idea of being connected with the local community. Access is embedded within the mission statement of the IoT and specific reference is made to equality of opportunity and to the accessibility of programme provision.

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<sup>1</sup>Themes relating to access in institutional mission statements are cited in Appendix H: Access-related Themes in Mission Statements in Case Sites.

At the Constituent College, the mission statement was discussed by three respondents and is seen as significant as it articulates the importance of the access agenda. One staff member at the institution remarked: ‘I feel the mission statement of the college says very definitely that we value diversity and that we are open to promoting justice and equality for all’ (Access Course Co-ordinator, Constituent College, 05). The importance of articulating a commitment in the form of a mission statement to access was echoed by two members of the senior management team (Senior Manager, Constituent College, 02; Senior Manager, Constituent College, 10).

Specific reference to the institutional mission statement was not made over the course of the interviews at the Capital University; however, other institutional documents, such as the Access Policy and Plan and Equity Policy, were highlighted as important in terms of contextualising access work at the university. These are referred to in the next chapter, under sub-heading 6.2. Similarly, at the Regional University, the mission statement did not emerge as a sub-theme in interviews with either staff or students.

At the IoT, a member of the senior management team explained how access is embedded within its mission statement and overall ethos. This quotation suggests that the institution is cognisant of the socio-economic context in which it functions:

the overall mission is, you know of the institute, is to excel in teaching and research, you know for the benefit of the community and, and the wider community as well as the learners we have. We’re a small institute of technology and because of our locality...we have our fair share of students who would fall into access categories (Senior Manager, IoT, 07).

In summary, these findings indicate that the higher education institutions in this study vary in how they express a commitment to access in their mission statements. Three higher education institutions, the Constituent College, Capital University and IoT made specific reference to equality of opportunity. In addition, three institutions, Capital University, Regional University and IoT espouse a commitment to their respective local communities. Evidence reveals that higher education institutions in this study include access and/or community rhetoric in their respective mission statements, albeit at a broader level in some cases than just adult access.

## 5.2 Strategic Plans and Adult Access

Each institution in this study has produced a Strategic Plan and there are a number of commonalities across case sites. Each institution has identified access as an area of strategic importance and relevant excerpts from each plan are quoted in Appendix I: Access-related Themes in Strategic Plans. Access is referred to in general terms in the Strategic Plan at the Constituent College and although mature students are not specifically mentioned, there are several references to lifelong learning. Mature student access is not explicitly referred to in the Capital University. However, similar to the Constituent College, there is a focus on collaboration with other stakeholders, target-setting to improve representation of all categories of access students and an awareness of the need for greater co-ordination at an institutional level is also noted. Mature learners are referred to in the Regional University but only in the context of aiming to increase participation and in the IoT; access is linked with lifelong learning and therefore this cohort are mentioned indirectly, rather than directly.

Institutional Strategic Plans were not mentioned during interviews with staff or students at the Constituent College, Regional University or IoT. This may be because the implementation phase of the plan had just commenced at the time of writing in the Constituent College. In contrast, at the Capital University, interview data suggest that the Strategic Plan is considered to be a significant document and provides a useful context for adult access. One respondent remarked: ‘access-it’s part of our strategic plan...it is very embedded’ (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 02). Similarly, a member of professional services employed in the institution commented:

everybody has taken on board the need to align with our strategic plan...so we make sure when we’re setting our plans or objectives for next year, that we feed into a specific strand...I think that alignment and having it at an institutional level as a strategic objective has fed down (Senior Administrator, Capital University, 01).

Additionally, another respondent noted: ‘access is very much there, it’s strong and the fact we have the access programme, I think we’re very much at the fore in our own strategic plan’ (Lecturer, Access Course, Capital University, 05). Another respondent

noted that since the institution started engaging in strategic planning exercises, the plans: ‘have grown quite a lot’ (Senior Lecturer, Capital University, 07). This evidence suggests that the Strategic Plan at the Capital University provides an overarching framework for the strategic plans at departmental-level. It also provides guidance to staff working at the micro level across the access area and assists with planning at unit level. In addition, there was clearly a strong institutional cohesion reflecting the strategic planning processes from both a top-down and bottom-up perspective.

### ***Recruitment Targets***

Three institutions in this study have identified recruitment targets for all categories of under-represented students including adults. Table 5.1 provides a summary of recruitment targets for adult learners, as identified in institutional documentation.

**Table 5.1: Summary of Adult Learner Recruitment Targets across Case Sites**

| <b>Institution/<br/>Targets</b>       | <b>Constituent<br/>College</b> | <b>Capital University</b> | <b>Regional<br/>University</b> | <b>IoT</b>     |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------|
| Target Set                            | 20%                            | 22% <sup>2</sup>          | 15%                            | Target not set |
| Actual Figure <sup>3</sup><br>Reached | 9%                             | 12%                       | 10%                            | 24%            |

In the Constituent College, targets for categories for under-represented groups, that is mature students, socio-economically disadvantaged school leavers, students with disabilities and students from an ethnic minority background were identified in an access policy dating from 2005. In relation to the adult population, a target of 20% has been identified. This practice of identifying quotas is seen as significant in the institution as it provides a focus to access work: ‘the access and disability policy document that was put to Academic Council by the Access Committee importantly set out targets’ (Senior Academic, Constituent College, 04).

<sup>2</sup>This percentage refers to representation of all under-represented groups, and includes adult learners.

<sup>3</sup>Source: Irish Higher Education Institutional Profiles 2010/11 (HEA: 2012).

At the Capital University, specific targets for addressing adult learners were agreed by the University Council at a meeting on 6 May 2009. These targets include a 22% entrance rate to the Capital University by under-represented groups by 2013 and a 13% entrance rate by under-represented socio-economic groups. The institutional Strategic Plan highlights that achieving these targets is dependent on commitments made by the HEA's National Office for Equity of Access and on the institution's ability to maintain adequate resourcing of student support services (Strategic Plan, 2009). This plan is considered 'highly influential' by staff (Lecturer, Access Course, Capital University, 06). The Capital University highlighted that the previous target of 15% was exceeded in 2008 (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03; and Lecturer, Access Course, Capital University, 06). One respondent commented that:

we were the first university to set a quota for non-traditional students and that has been echoed in all our strategic plans since then and progressed through access plans. And also there has been a lot of work internally looking at equity, both for staff and students...while not focused at access, certainly shines a light on it and provides a broader context to look at the makeup of our college community (Researcher, Capital University, 08).

Similarly, the Regional University's Strategic Plan identifies specific access targets to be achieved over the time frame of the plan: 'as a percentage of the total student population, the number of mature students will increase to at least 15%, students with a disability to at least 5% and students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds to at least 7%' (Strategic Plan, 2011).

In contrast, the IoT has not needed to list targets as participation rates across all under-represented groups are consistently high. This institution has the highest representation of adult learners of all the institutions in this study. One member of the professional services staff explained that this is primarily due to the geographical location of the institution and the fact that the nearest other higher education institution is 110 kilometres away (Access Project Worker, IoT, 02). In addition, a member of the senior management team stated that this success is in part related to the socio-economic breakdown of the local population and the fact that many adults with family or care responsibilities may find it difficult to travel

(Senior Manager, IoT, 08). A senior academic staff added to this analysis to explain why the IoT does not need to set access targets:

[I] think we have our fair share of students who would fall into access categories, and therefore our policies have been, I suppose, developed on the basis of who we get in the door...I am not sure if we achieved [our 24% adult participation rate] by any great strategic feat, or anything other than that's who we have in our catchment area (Head of Academic Department, IoT, 05).

Across three of the four case sites, the practice of identifying targets was considered useful by four senior managers and 13 (42.5%) academic and professional staff, because it provides an overarching focus to each institution's access work. As this sub-theme functions at the level of the institution, it is not surprising that students did not allude to it. However, in the case of three institutions, targets for participation of adult learners have not yet been achieved. How these institutions will meet these ambitious targets was not defined by two of the institutions and in the case of the third institution, the Constituent College, it is expected that the implementation phase of the Strategic Plan will assist with achieving targets.

### **5.2.1 Monitoring of Access Performance**

Monitoring institutional performance in the area of adult access emerged as a theme in this study. Four respondents across two case sites noted that there was a need to improve student tracking and monitoring of outputs and outcomes (Access Manager, Regional University, 03; Vice President, Constituent College, 02; Access Project Worker, Constituent College, 07; Senior Academic, Capital University, 07). One member of the senior management team at the Constituent College remarked that: 'comments [on access participation rates] are impressionistic; there is a need for systematic analysis and tracking' (Senior Manager, Constituent College, 02).

Similarly, the need to develop some form of Management Information System (MIS) 'so that we can compare students who enter from the different access routes to each other and to other students' was stated (Access Project Worker, Constituent College, 07). At the

Regional University, one respondent expressed the view that there was very ‘poor information within colleges that are running access programmes’ (Access Manager, Regional University, 03). Additionally, at the Capital University, an interviewee noted the importance of data-gathering, monitoring and tracking in order to inform research and influence policy: ‘[monitoring] how what we do at the local level can feed into the national level? [sic]To actually start generating a proper research agenda, which is both informed locally but also addresses national priorities as well’ (Senior Academic, Capital University, 07). Findings suggest that review systems for the tracking and monitoring of adult access students could be improved, referring possibly to a need for greater institutional co-ordination.

### **5.3 Institutional Culture and Adult Access**

Institutional cultures vary across case sites and evidence reveals that institutional culture has an impact on how higher education institutions in this study provide for adult access. The Constituent College is a Catholic college and the institution articulates a commitment to social justice, the Catholic religious tradition and the Irish language in its mission statement by stating that it:

seeks to foster in its students a spirit of justice and compassion in the service of others, together with an openness to the religious tradition and values of each individual. The College promotes a sense of identity enriched by an awareness of its Catholic tradition, the cultures, languages and traditions of Ireland, and its special commitment to the Irish language.

For a number of respondents at the Constituent College, at an epistemological level, access is situated firmly within a social justice and public service model. Respondents noted that this philosophy is reflected in the prevailing culture and work ethic among staff at meso-level. One member of the senior management team considered that in terms of access: ‘...staff personalities play a role, staff display a dedication beyond performance of a job, part of our institutional culture...’ (Senior Manager, Constituent College, 02). This theme of a public service institutional culture was also noted by a senior academic:

university lecturers are in the end public servants...they are there because they are financed. I mean I always described academics as the last of society's kept men and women...with very privileged lives. We live with the reality that there is a whole group of people who will never be touched by the university. Access is the beginnings of being able to do something about that. And it is not just an add-on for the university sector. It is absolutely part and parcel of who we are... (Senior Academic, Constituent College, 04).

These findings are supported by student focus group research. One member of the student focus group at the Constituent College stated: 'one of the lecturers bought me a cup of coffee one day, very friendly...very human place' (Humanities Student, Constituent College, 02). Similarly, another adult student added: 'compared to other institutions (and I've been to two others), this is a very friendly place' (Humanities Student, Constituent College, 07). Additionally, one student remarked that there is: 'no divide between staff and students' (Humanities Student, Constituent College, 03).

The Capital University is a long established globally ranked research intensive institution. Traditionally, the university attracts high calibre school Leaving Certificate students. 29% of its student population are pursuing postgraduate studies, with 42% of this population studying at doctoral level. The Capital University has three faculties: Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; Engineering, Mathematics and Science and Health Sciences. The University has delivered access programmes since 1993 and institutional documentation makes specific reference to access and lifelong learning. One respondent stated that this was not just rhetoric, there was a genuine commitment to the area of access: 'in terms of the strategic plans, there is a focus on lifelong learning and access. What is written on the documentation is prioritised in the policies' (Researcher, Capital University, 08). Another respondent commented on the traditional collegial structures in place at the institution:

so even though the place can be a bit odd...it can be very slow to embrace anything particularly new... here's a bit more ponderous, the [Capital University] way, we have all our committees there, but when [we] decide to do it...it's gone through...we tend to try and work in a much more collegiate way there as opposed to that managerialist way (Senior Lecturer, Capital University, 07).

Considered to be a young university (Times Higher Education rankings, 2012), the Regional University was up-graded from a technological college and awarded University

status in 1992. Undergraduate degree programmes in the following disciplines reflect this earlier orientation: Business; Engineering; Science; Health Science, including a medical school for graduate entrants only, established in 2007/08; Education; Arts, Humanities and Science, where the institution's flagship BA in European Studies is located. The Regional University has established links to the business commercial community and has developed a business incubation centre. Students have to complete a work experience year as part of their studies and the university prides itself on having an excellent track record for graduate employment, indicating an instrumental approach.

The Institute of Technology (IoT) was originally designated a Regional Technology College in 1972 and was awarded Institute of Technology status in 1997. 97% of the student population study at undergraduate level (HEA, 2012). The institution has strong vocational tradition and this is reflected in the course offerings in the three schools, (Business and Humanities; Engineering and Construction Studies and Science and Computing), and a focus on certificate and diploma level qualifications. In addition, the IoT is linked to a local industrial park and has an active business incubation unit. One respondent expressed the view that: 'the IoTs have a much more managerial approach' (Senior Academic, Capital University, 07).

With reference to adult access and institutional culture, these comparisons across case sites, suggest that historical traditions, institutional type and size, geographic location and course offerings have an impact on institutional culture, and consequently, institutional provision of adult access.

#### **5.4. Institutional Support from Senior Managers for Adult Access**

Strong institutional support and commitment from senior managers with regard to adult access was expressed in a number of the interviews across case sites in this study. At the Constituent College, one senior academic emphasised that the role of the university is about social cohesion:

yes, university is about knowledge. Well it's about knowledge to a particular end. And that end is about the quality of people lives and when we lose sight of that we have lost a very great deal (Senior Academic, Constituent College, 04).

This emphasis on being student-centred was also reflected to in the student focus groups at the Constituent College: 'the job done is looking after us. Everything is about us' (Humanities Student, Constituent College, 02).

At the Capital University, interview data revealed that there is significant support from senior management for adult access. Support at this top-down level was seen as crucial to making progress with advancing the adult access agenda at the institution. One respondent emphasised that one of the institutional leaders is: 'a huge supporter of the access programme' (Access Course Co-ordinator, Capital University, 04) and another noted the staff involvement at faculty and senior level: '...and all the schools feed into the access programme...and then obviously it is top-down as well in a sense. The [Institutional Leader] is aware of all the policies and international drivers' (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03). One staff member of the access programme at the institution noted:

I think that we are fortunate...we have a lot of support from very senior academics and that makes a massive difference in terms of supporting us, so there's the actual what's on paper, so the strategic plan we're embedded in it and, it's very visible. But unless that carries through to actual support it's just on paper, but it does carry through (Lecturer, Access Course, 05).

Another member of the access team at the institution added:

[the Institutional leader and previous leader] have both been hugely supportive and have been very vocal...there is quite a lot of high level support and then you know, we even have deans who are willing to sit on our access steering committee (Lecturer, Access Course, 06).

Strong support for adult access in the Regional University was evident from data analysis. Two members of the senior management team were interviewed in this study and both were very experienced about the adult access agenda (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01; Senior Manager, Regional University, 02). Similarly, there appeared to be strong support for adult access at the IoT. As one member of staff involved in adult access

stated: ‘senior management here are very supportive, the institution gets it’ (Access Project Worker, Regional University, 04).

Across institutions, there appears to be strong support from senior managers for adult access initiatives and this ‘top-down’ support seems to be helpful to supporting the work from a ‘bottom-up’ perspective.

### **5.5 Support from Academic and Professional Staff for Adult Access**

Across all institutions, there appears to be consensus that academic and professional staff are supportive of the respective access initiatives. At the Constituent College, adult access initiatives are strongly supported by all categories of staff and 50% of the adult access course is taught by full-time faculty members. One quotation summarises why academic staff continue to be involved: ‘as a department, we have taught on the access courses since it started...we get a lot of adult students from it and they are great students...many continue to study at post-graduate level’ (Lecturer, Access Course, 08). From the perspective of academic staff, this investment at pre-entry seems to be worthwhile, particularly as it leads to greater numbers of post-graduate students for the department. Findings from students suggest that adult learners are aware of the committed environment: ‘I liked the opportunity to learn in a relaxed environment. I also enjoyed the support of my peers and teachers...lecturers were very approachable and supportive (Student Evaluation, Constituent College, 16, 2009).

Academic units within the Capital University play an important role in supporting the progression of students from under-represented groups through college. Both Access Programme staff and the Disability Service work with voluntary Academic Liaison Officers across college to raise awareness of particular students’ needs in terms of required supports and the ways to facilitate students at a local level. Individual academic departments within the Capital University also provide discipline-specific support to facilitate the progression and retention of adult students. Such supports include academics reviewing applications for admission and sitting on interview panels, making course

materials more accessible; facilitation for students requiring special examination accommodations and the provision of support and advice. One respondent commented on the support from academic staff: ‘we can’t run access initiatives unless there are academic staff willing to get involved. We’ve got a hundred primary school children coming in to do science and maths...we need them to run the workshops’ (Access Course Co-ordinator, Capital University, 05). Additionally, it seems that professional staff are also deeply committed to the area. One respondent noted this buy in: ‘the admissions office and the academic secretary have been willing to set targets, like, good quotas for non-traditional students’ (Lecturer, Access Course, 06).

At the Regional University, academic and professional staff are supportive of the mature student access programme. Two interview respondents commented on staff dedication and one programme co-ordinator noted that: ‘all the academic staff have been teaching on it for ten years...all very supportive including academic course directors and academic staff’ (Access Course Co-ordinator, Regional University, 07). One of the academic course leaders created a direct entry route to a joint honours programme as a result of teaching on the internal access course (Lecturer, Access Course Regional University, 09). Another respondent stated that: ‘academics see a tangible transition from access to full-time study so it is worth their investment in terms of time and finance’ (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01). Findings from student focus groups echoed this by remarking that: ‘the course co-ordinator was so positive all year’ (Science Student, Regional University, 10) and another student observed that: ‘all the staff are brilliant’ (Humanities Student, Regional University, 02). One respondent noted that: ‘there is a warm supportive atmosphere, home from home for them. Tutors called tutors rather than lecturers, students can feel they can go and chat to you’ (Access Project Worker, Regional University, 05). Clearly, staff involved with the programmes invested heavily both personally and professionally. The evidence suggests that there is strong support for adult access course provision across the university community and that this is both noticed and appreciated by students.

Similarly, in the IoT, the feedback from students indicates that there is support from both academic and professional staff for adult students. A student commented that: ‘one of the lecturers gave me a hand when I was applying for a Masters in a university’ (Business Student, IoT, 03). Similarly, another student noted that staff were helpful: ‘I must credit one lecturer who gave me his mobile number and said if I had any problem in my time here, give him a ring and I did, he answered straight away, and he helped...’ (Engineering Student, IoT, 06).

### **5.6 Major Actors leading the Process- Role of Institutional Access Champions**

A variety of new organisational structures involved in the day-to-day adult access work have emerged at an institutional level across case sites in this study with the result that different actors lead adult access at each institution.

#### ***Constituent College***

In the Constituent College, the evidence shows that the Learning Development Centre (LDC) has played a pivotal role in facilitating greater adult access provision at the institution. The range of academic supports available through the LDC which developed and co-ordinated the *Foundation Certificate for Higher Education* were mentioned in eight interviews (20%) at the institution. A member of the senior management team commented on the crucial preparatory role the centre plays in supporting adult access students: ‘mature students from disadvantaged backgrounds who don’t have that same level of preparation tend to flounder a little bit and this example is the LDC in this regard if you think of that kind of service being in place for access students I think that is a huge help’ (Senior Academic, Constituent College, 04).

Further comments demonstrate the innovative and advocacy role the Learning Development Centre plays in promoting higher education access in the institution: ‘the LDC and the access course options have been strong drivers in this whole process’ (Senior

Manager, Constituent College, 09). One member of the senior management team at the institution commented on the contribution the centre has made to the area at both institutional and national level, ‘LDC have been pioneers, champions and an example of good practice’ (Senior Manager, Constituent College, 02).

### ***Capital University***

Two specific structures have responsibility for the day-to-day work associated with adult access at the Capital University: the institution’s Access Programme and the role of the Mature Student Advisor. One respondent commented: ‘there’s actually a dedicated mature student officer who orchestrates...and offers supports’ (Access Course Co-ordinator, Capital University, 04). Another participant noted that: ‘the Access Programme provides most of the support for mature students’ (Lecturer, Access Course, Capital University, 06). Another respondent suggested that access is driven at: ‘grass-roots level’ (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03).

### ***Regional University***

A number of actors are involved in leading access for the adult student population at the Regional University: Mature Student Officer; Careers Advisor for Adults, Mature Student Counsellor, Access Manager, Mature Student Careers Officer and the Head of Student Affairs. One member of the senior management team remarked that: ‘the access agenda appears to be driven by a bottom-up approach with the Mature Student Officer as the internal driver’ (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01). A strong commitment to widening access was expressed in interviews with staff at the Regional University. One respondent stated that the institution is: ‘driven by a desire to break down barriers, give everyone the same opportunity, so many people are intimidated by this place [the belief is] you need 600 points in your Leaving Certificate to go and you have no business there otherwise’ (Access Course Co-ordinator, Regional University, 07). Another interviewee added: ‘a lot of access students say once they are here they are not an access student, they are a student, not distinguished as being on the access course, it’s really like that’ (Access

Project Worker, Regional University, 05). One member of the management team notes that access is driven from a ‘bottom-up’ perspective: ‘it is very much the people on the ground that are passionate about it and committed to it. It is very much the staff on the ground of the courses who push it and know the benefits of it as well’ (Senior Manager, Regional University, 02). This suggests that staff who work directly with access students at a ‘grass roots’ level have bought into the ethos expressed by the institutional mission statement at the Regional University.

### ***IoT***

At the IoT, adult access is led by the Access Officer whose role is to promote access for under-represented groups to third-level education, identified as: students with disabilities; students experiencing financial difficulties, students experiencing difficulties accessing and participating in third-level studies for personal, social or financial reasons and adult learners. The officer deals mainly with adults who are experiencing challenges such as: returning to education after a period of time; personal circumstances such as on-going illness, disability or learning difficulty; not enough money to get by on; managing family commitments, responsibilities and study and adjusting to a new environment (Access Officer, IoT, 01).

These findings highlight the organic autonomous nature of adult access work, driven mainly by institutional champions and reflect differences in institutional culture, size, type and historical traditions.

### **5.7 Adult Access Student Experience**

End-of-year student evaluations provided by the Constituent College, Capital and Regional Universities showed that adult learners who had progressed to full-time study after completing an adult access course demonstrated high satisfaction with their overall experience. In the case of the IoT, although a number of issues were raised overall

students commented positively about their experiences at the institution. The findings from these evaluations are outlined next across case sites.

At the Constituent College, respondents commented on the introductory nature of the range of modules and shared in the view that these helped them choose the right subjects when progressing to undergraduate study. What seems significant from the student respondents' feedback is the fact that so many enjoyed the course and that participation reflected the joy of learning that many had lost at school, sometimes due to negative experiences of the education system. Some observations from student end-of-year evaluations over the years 2002-2011 have been selected to support this point: one student noted that the lectures were 'very explanatory, lectures were most enlightening and stimulating. I could have listened for hours' (Student Evaluation, Constituent College, 21, 2003). Similarly, another student commented that: 'the content was great, very interesting, I remember I could have stayed all night at history or English' (Student Evaluation, Constituent College, 50, 2004). Additionally, an adult student observed that: 'there was no elitist approaches to anything and the lecturers were very encouraging about the whole program' (Student Evaluation, Constituent College, 70, 2008). Finally, one student commented that: 'the course provided an opportunity to try out third-level education and then decide that it was not for me' (Student Evaluation, Constituent College, 146, 2010). These quotations show that from the perspective of students access courses fulfil many important functions.

Institutional documentation provided by the Capital University demonstrated that students value their experience on the Adult Access programme. Some quotations have been selected to support this point:

my access year laid such strong foundations for my education...and my tutors have commented on my strong work ethic and organisational skills. I'm really looking forward someday to be in a position to return all the good you have done for me and my family. My graduation...was one of the proudest days of my life (Student Evaluation, Capital University, 1, University Website).

Another student commented: 'you have no idea how much my life has changed because of the Access Programme and all your support over the years. I'm so grateful because

my life and my sons' lives are going in a positive direction' (Student Evaluation, Capital University, 2, University Website).

Further,

the tremendous support of staff and tutors has helped put my fellow students and me in a position to go and do what we didn't believe possible. This course is an intensive one but it offers a level of support which, I believe, must be unique (Student Evaluation, Capital University, 3, University Website).

Similarly, with reference to the mature student adult access course at the Regional University, qualitative student end-of-year evaluations for the academic year 2011/12 show high satisfaction with their overall learning experience. The following quotations have been selected that reflect a range of perspectives: 'the course is excellent, gives you a good idea about college life...it has given me confidence in my ability to study' (Student Evaluation, 2012, Regional University, 1). Another added: 'I would recommend it as the whole university experience can't be faked' (Student Evaluation, 2012, Regional University, 2). Additionally: 'the Access Course is a fantastic initial year to help mature students settle in and be familiar with the University. It helps you gradually develop the skills for full-time study' (Student Evaluation, 2012, Regional University, 14). Similarly: 'I found the Access Course is a brilliant way of integrating and transitioning into University, I think everyone should have to do one' (Student Evaluation, 2012, Regional University, 25).

In the IoT, although student evaluations were not available, however, overall students report being satisfied with the quality of their learning experience. One member of the student focus groups observed that: 'this IoT is cosy enough and they are caring enough to direct you' (Engineering Student, IoT, 01). However, a few issues in relation to semesterisation and staff/student communication arose. Four students at the institution commented that the system catered more for school-leavers, rather than mature students and that communication between staff and students could be improved: 'there's a lack of communication from the lecturers' (Business Student, IoT, 03). In particular, the issue of travel emerged as a sub-theme. Many of the adult learners at the IoT have a long commute to college and there have been occasions where a class has been cancelled at the last

minute, resulting in much inconvenience for the adults in the focus group. These cancellations represent both an actual cost (petrol) and an opportunity cost (time) (Business Student, IoT, 02; Business Student, IoT, 03; Business Student, IoT, 04; Engineering Student, IoT, 06). Two students in the IoT reported that some members of the academic staff tended to treat adult learners: ‘dismissively’ (Engineering Student, IoT, 01) and ‘there is a problem with some lecturers and lecturers’ attitudes’ (Business Student, IoT, 05), suggesting a need for staff development in the area of adult access and a shift to a model of partnership with more communication between staff and students.

The pressure of the demands of the semesterisation model emerged also in the IoT, where a blend of continuous assessment and formal examination is on-going. An extract has been selected to reflect this:

now, the lecturers, they say the volume of stuff that they have to get out in the twelve weeks, and the volume that the student has to take on, that ‘tis crazy, it’s a crazy, crazy system (Engineering Student, IoT, 07).

sorry to jump in on your point there now but what I was saying as well it’s like putting a pint in a half pint glass. Like, the lecturers are saying oh we have to get through, we have to get through, we have to get through. But, you know you’re saying there, it can’t be done (Engineering Student, IoT, 06).

it’s a kind of a case of you start the twelve weeks and your head is empty, and then it gets filled with a pile of stuff (Engineering Student, IoT, 01).

tis overload (Engineering Student, IoT, 07).

Additionally, another student remarked:

well my issue with the system is...I detest it...because you’re doing exams before Christmas, you’re doing exams after Christmas, you’re doing exams, say, you’re doing CAs before Easter, you’re doing them after Easter and if you don’t pass your exams at Christmas you’ve to wait until August to do the second sitting (Engineering Student, IoT, 06).

## **5.8 Institutional Environmental Challenges**

Data analysis of the interviews yielded some interesting findings in relation to one environmental planning challenge in the adult access agenda from the perspective of two institutions, the Constituent College and Capital University. Operational logistics associated with out-of-hours delivery for access provision were noted by one respondent:

‘...while the LDC provide every possible support to students from this access route, due to the limited number of tutors and opening hours of our office, it is particularly difficult to provide the level of support that would ensure greater retention of students coming in from this route’ (Access Course Co-ordinator, Constituent College, 05). In the Capital University, a similar perspective was expressed: ‘it’s a nine to five. And I think this place is, and again when [mature] students come in as undergrads I think it’s quite unforgiving in terms of them and their other situations’ (Senior Academic, Capital University, 07). Such operational logistical difficulties in terms of institutional flexibility of staffing and services are on-going challenges for institutions interested in increasing part-time flexible modes of delivery.

Institutions varied considerably in their provision of part-time and/or flexible programme offering. One institution in this study, the IoT, identified the range of flexible options available for adult learners in its access policy. These included Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), alignment of Adult and Continuing Education with access, accommodation of part-time learners within full-time programmes and the development of shorter duration programmes (Minor, Special Purpose or Supplemental Awards) in traditional or blended learning formats. A lack of flexibility of both entry routes and programme provision was observed across all sites, with the exception of the IoT. At the Capital University, the following view was noted: ‘[the] national access plan highlighted certain things, like part-time provision which is very poor here, at 3%, I think’ (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03).

Similarly, at the Consistent College, a related point regarding part-time provision was expressed: ‘our access course doesn’t have an equally flexible follow-on. That is, students who can make it in for two nights a week for an access programme could do the same for a degree programme but there is no night-time or part-time option’ (Lecturer, Access Course, Constituent College, 08). Three other respondents at the Constituent College made the same point (Access Project Worker, Constituent College, 01; Access Officer, Constituent College, 06; Senior Manager, Constituent College, 09).

One respondent raised this issue:

what about the mature student who may be in a caring position and cannot leave the person that they are caring for during the day and can only come back to college in the evening time or who for financial reasons cannot afford to leave their full time job and it might not be a great job because their education background might not be the best and they are prevented trying to further their education because they are caught in a trap...they cannot give up their full-time job which is a low-pay job due to their education qualifications and at the same time then they cannot afford to take on a part-time course because it is too expensive (Access Officer, Constituent College, 06).

Similarly, in the Regional University, lack of flexibility emerged as a sub-theme (Lecturer, Access Course, Regional University, 08; Lecturer, Access Course, Regional University, 09). In total, seven interviewees (17.5%) acknowledged the lack of flexibility in programme delivery at institutional level and noted that the needs of adult learners could be better accommodated. Surprisingly, this sub-theme did not emerge in interviews with students. This may be because these students had already committed to studying in a full-time mode.

## **5.9 Summary and Discussion of Findings of Thematic Area Two: Adult Access and Wider Organisational Planning**

The section presents a summary and discussion of the findings on thematic area two and the evidence reflects how adult access is included in planning at the level of institution.

### ***Managerialism at Institutional Level - Mission Statements, Strategic Planning and Adult Access***

Findings with reference to the theme of institutional environmental planning across case sites indicate that the higher education institutions in this study are, in principle, committed to broadening access for adult students. Extensive planning has taken place across institutions and access is, in the main, included. This is expressed through the findings on the inclusion of adult access into all institutional strategic plans and in some mission statements. Higher education institutions across case sites in this study have produced strategic plans which have many elements in common. First, specific reference is made to access in each institutional Strategic Plan. Second, a number of access-related aims to be achieved over the time frame of the Plan have been identified in three

institutions; the Constituent College, the Regional University and the Capital University. These aims include greater institutional co-ordination of access, a commitment to increasing institutional access provision for under-represented groups, and the need for enhanced collaboration with other stakeholders. However, apart from the Capital University, there was no mention of strategic planning in the context of institutional policies that provide for adult access. This raises questions about both the commitment to, and perception of, adult access at these institutions and reflects a tension about the role and purpose of higher education.

Literature suggests that the development of institutional policy demonstrates strategic commitment (Layer *et al*, 2002; Dodgson and Bolam, 2002; Whelan, 2012) as institutional strategic planning exercises invoke planning and imply agreement to its principles. Without it, Duke (2003) hypothesises that access work risks being reliant on external funding and located on the periphery at project level rather than a more strategic institution-wide basis. In the UK, one out of every four adult learners enters higher education via an access course (HEFCE, 2006). Parry (2006: 395) notes that foundation/access or preparatory courses in the UK are seen as part of the equal opportunities agenda and are the nearest the higher education system came to what could loosely be termed 'affirmative action'. Although at the outset there was a degree of tension surrounding these courses in the UK, '[access courses] were initially discouraged by the central government and, in some cases, branded a threat to academic standards' (Parry, 2006: 395), these were mainstreamed and are now accepted as one of the main three entry routes into higher education, alongside A-level examinations and some vocational qualifications.

Although access courses have gained acceptability, it is argued that such programmes are still 'peripheral' (O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007: 312). This point is also echoed by others such as Jones and Thomas (2005) and Whitchurch (2008 and 2012a). The findings in this study reflect that despite the extensive planning at the level of the institution, largely consistent with recommendations from the HEA (2008) which include mainstreaming, cross-sectoral collaboration, data gathering, monitoring of outcomes and the need for

institutions to develop a college-wide access strategy, access is still work in progress. In this study, evidence reveals that although there was evidence of targeted organisational planning to provide for adult access, as strategic planning for access was not referred to by the Constituent College, Regional University and IoT, the question of how mainstreamed access really is can be critically reflected upon.

This evidence suggests that one of the ways higher education institutions in this study provide for adult access is to include access, more generally, as part of the wider organisational planning environment, resonating with the operational norms identified by Becher and Kogan (1992). Features of wider organisational planning in relation to access such as strategic planning and the identification of aims and goals have more in common with a NPM approach than the collegial model. This highlights the unique structures and processes of the higher education system and reproduces CAS concepts of the importance of structures as well as the adaptive capacity of higher education institutions.

### ***Managerialism at Institutional Level - Recruitment Targets and Monitoring of Access Performance***

Consistent with national policy recommendations, all institutions in this study had an access policy in place since the mid-2000s and three institutions had set quantitative participation targets which are perceived as institutional strategic commitment to access in the literature (Layer *et al.*, 2002; Woodrow 1998; HEA, 2006; Eurydice, 2012). Interestingly, the only institution in this study that has not identified targets has achieved 24% participation of adult learners, but this IoT has not needed to because of its geographical location, course offerings and range of flexible entry routes. The other institutions have not achieved their individual targets and all are engaging in a review process, pointing to the constantly evolving nature of this work, reflective of a CAS.

Across the case sites, this demonstrates the adaptive capacity of higher education institutions and shows that, in terms of adult access, HEIs respond to the exogenous national policy environment (HEA, 2004b; DES, 2011). In addition, although there was evidence in this study that some evaluation of adult access programmes was on-going,

institutions admitted that tracking and monitoring systems at individual institutional level need attention and development and that this would facilitate the development of an evidence-based approach to research in the area. This finding is congruent with conclusions drawn in the UK where, in a summary of the access literature, Gorard *et al.* (2006) unearthed that institutions and external partners have inadequate tracking systems in place and, therefore, find it difficult to evaluate the outcomes of access initiatives. The concept of target setting is more associated with the NPM approach to higher education, rather than the traditional collegial model and results here suggest that in the case of access, this practice is useful.

### ***Unique Starting Point: Institutional Culture and Adult Access***

In this study, there was evidence that institutional culture plays a role in the focus of adult access work. In the Constituent College where access is constructed in terms of a social justice/public service model, there was evidence of collaboration with charities whereas in the IoT, access is part market driven by a desire to attract greater student numbers. In contrast, in the Regional University and IoT, access was aligned more towards economic needs with many students undertaking Springboard programmes. At the Capital University, there was a focus on equality for both students and staff.

Several researchers have explored this relationship between institutional culture and access in the UK (Jones and Thomas, 2005; Burke, 2009; Whelan, 2012). This evidence reveals that institutional culture plays a role in mediating adult access to the case sites in this study. This variance in culture is, in part, caused by historical traditions and is also influenced by geographical location, institutional type and size and course offerings. Institutional culture also has an impact on individual agents and institutional structures, linking the normative and operational modes of Becher and Kogan's (1992) synoptic model of higher education as outlined in Chapter Two, Analytical Framework, sub-heading 2.10, and resonates with Archer's (2013) work on the complex relationship between culture, structure and agency.

In particular, Jones and Thomas (2005) suggest that three divergent models of access to higher education are in existence. The first model is termed the ‘academic approach’ which has a focus on raising standards and activities tend to be located on the ‘peripheries of universities’ (Jones and Thomas, 2005: 617). In this study, this approach was prevalent in both the Capital University (where the access facilities are external to main campus) and Constituent College (where the access course is delivered out-of-hours). The second model identified by Jones and Thomas is considered more ‘utilitarian’ which has the idea of aspiration raising, and considers that the student lacks education, constructing access in a deficit model (Jones and Thomas, 2005: 681). This utilitarian model highlights the relationships between academic credentials and subsequent employment.

In this study, this approach can be found in the Regional University and the IoT (through, for example, institutional approaches to Springboard). According to Jones and Thomas (2005), the third model considers the needs of students by being ‘transformative’. Few elements of this model were evident across all institutions in this study. Table 5.2: Institutional Approaches to Access, across Case Sites provides a summary of these findings in this study and shows that there were some examples of an academic approach and little evidence of transformative methods. There was, however, much evidence of a utilitarian model across all institutions. This confirms that, despite the rhetoric, institutions construct adult access in a neo-liberal, rather than an equity, paradigm and, as Burke (2006: 719) concludes, access policy and practice is based on ‘simplistic notions of raising aspirations...leaving hidden intricate operations of power, privilege and inequity’.

**Table 5.2: Institutional Approaches to Access, across Case Sites, adapted from Jones and Thomas (2005: 615-630)**

| Jones and Thomas (2005) model of access | Key assumptions  | Constituent College   | Capital University  | Regional University   | IoT  |
|---|--|---|---|---|--|
| <b>Academic approach</b>                | Students are gifted and talented; need to raise aspirations, increase motivation and make information available.   | Adult access on periphery-access course delivered out of hours; emphasis on up-skilling adults for study, motivation rewarded by guaranteeing direct access to institution-access curriculum as a microcosm of regular undergraduate programme. | Access initiatives located off main campus; on graduation, students identity more with the access programme than the institution (Share and O'Carroll, 2013); access curriculum adapted, rather than reformed; mentioned in one interview (07). |   |  |
| <b>Utilitarian approach</b>             | Need for system to reform to meet expectations from economy and employers; obstacles to entry and progression.   | Emphasis on post-entry pastoral and academic support; access curriculum adapted to include skill aspect.  | Emphasis on post-entry pastoral and academic support; access curriculum adapted to include skill aspect   | Emphasis on pre- and post-entry supports reflected in number of staff; access curriculum adapted, work experience and emphasis on skill development | Emphasis on post-entry supports, mentoring and guidance. |
| <b>Transformative approach</b>          | Values diversity; HE system must engage in far-reaching structural change; engage in critical reflection, burden to change on institution rather than on individual student. | Diversity mentioned in one interview (04).  | Diversity mentioned in one interview (09).  |   |  |

### *Centrality of Human Agency: Institutional Support from Staff for Adult Access*

Findings suggest that senior managers, academic and professional staff are supportive of their respective adult access initiatives across each institution in this study. The evidence suggests that academic staff find this part of their work rewarding and can see a tangible return on their time investment, particularly when adult access students progress to full-time study. Academic and professional staff at each case site appear to be deeply committed with most of the work emerging through a grass roots approach. Further, there appears to be strong support for adult access course provision from senior managers across each case site. Research evidence suggests that each case site in this study differs with regard to the major actors leading adult access initiatives in the institution. However, across all case sites, institutional champions emerged as key drivers of this work, echoing the importance of agency within complexity. Clearly, these champions have institution-wide support.

The literature supports the findings that staff 'buy-in' is significant to supporting institutional access initiatives and that, in particular, academic staff attitudes facilitate adult students in the acculturation process to third-level education or otherwise (Thomas, 2002; Parker *et al*, 2005). Read *et al*, (2003) argue if the institutional culture is one which highlights that access students are different, this then becomes a significant barrier for such cohorts. From the perspective of students, findings in this study suggest that overall institutions are seen as welcoming places for adult learners and such a culture and ethos encourages adult learners (Thomas, 2002), although there were some issues around communication at the IoT. In addition, the research data gathered during fieldwork indicate that the presence of dedicated staff and institutional champions at each institution does much to support students from a 'bottom-up' perspective and highlights the key role such agents can play in effecting institutional change from an adult access perspective.

This concept of the importance of institutional champions has also been highlighted in the literature and appears to be central to providing adult access at the level of the institution (Lomas, 2006; Thompson, 2007; Whitchurch, 2012a). Research evidence

suggests that each case site in this study differs with regard to the major actors leading adult access initiatives in the institution. However, across all case sites, perspectives expressed suggest that the work is driven from the ‘bottom-up’ rather than ‘top-down’ and reflects the centrality of agency within a CAS framework (Ramalingam and Jones, 2008).

### ***Quality Assurance Issues from the Perspective of Adult Access Students***

Findings showed that in the Constituent College, Capital University and Regional University, students describe their pre-entry access initiatives experiences as enjoyable. In the case of the IoT, although students felt pressured by the semesterised system, overall they regarded their experience of third-level education positively. Clearly, students rate their experiences on the mature student access course and initiatives as being positive and helpful in preparing them for the rigours of full-time study at degree level. Student support facilities and support from academic and professional staff are extensive and greatly appreciated by adult students. Within a CAS framework, the findings from this sub-theme highlight the adaptive capacity of agents operating within existing structures to support adult students.

### ***Institutional Environmental Challenges***

Operational issues concerning the difficulty of managing extra-mural, or out-of-hours provision emerged as a challenge particularly in two institutions, both older institutions. This reflects institutional culture, tradition and type. Where there is substantial demand from the traditional student cohort in the case of the Constituent College and Capital University, and hence high academic standards are required in order to gain entry, institutions are more reluctant to engage with the development of part-time programmes of study. In contrast, where institutions are eager to increase their student numbers and demand for their courses, they seem to be more willing to adapt to these new modes of programme delivery.

It seems that certificate and diploma programmes are particularly attractive for adult learners, probably linked to the shorter duration of such courses (HEA, 2010a). This links with the previous point made in sub-section, Managerialism at Institutional Level, about the presence of the different models of higher education, the collegial and NPM and suggests that, depending on endogenous culture and environment, institutions in this study respond differently to national policy recommendations. In the case of the Constituent College and Capital University who have high demand for places from the school leaver demographic and also work more within the collegial tradition, findings suggest that there is a continuity of elitist perspectives of higher education promoting a traditional model of programme delivery. As a result, structures which would accommodate more flexible learning are only beginning to be developed<sup>4</sup>. This resonates with normative and operational modes of Becher and Kogan's (1992) synoptic model.

With reference to this sub-theme, within a CAS analytical framework, metaphorically, this finding can be interpreted as the on-going need for adaptation to ensure survival. It seems that where there is high demand from the traditional school-leaver cohort, there is less of a need to target adult learners whereas in the IoT, there is interest in expanding student numbers with a view to securing the future of the institution. Furthermore, the IoT has a different mission resulting in a range of programme structures, aimed at serving the educational needs of the local community. Therefore, the IoT, is keen to attract adult learners and as the analysis suggests, like a CAS, the institution engages in creative adaptive ways of achieving this goal.

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<sup>4</sup>In 2013, in the Constituent College, a Blended Learning Unit was established within the Centre for Teaching and Learning and in the Capital University, a new Lifelong Learning Committee was founded in 2013.

## 5.10 Chapter Conclusion

In summary, the findings with reference to institutional environmental planning across case sites indicate that the higher education institutions in this study are, in principle, committed to broadening access for adult students. Extensive planning has taken place across institutions and access is, in the main, included. This is expressed through the findings on the inclusion of adult access into all institutional strategic plans and in some mission statements. All institutions except one have identified recruitment targets and institutions are more pro-active in trying to attract more adult access students. However, there was also some evidence to suggest that access was work in progress, aligned with a NPM approach, not fully mainstreamed and construed in a utilitarian or deficit, rather than transformative, model (this sub-theme will be developed further in Chapter Six). Student support facilities are extensive and greatly appreciated by adult students. Across case sites, academic and professional staff appear to be deeply committed with most of the work emerging through a grass roots approach. Further, there seems to be strong support for adult access course provision from senior managers across each case site. Students rated their experiences on adult access initiatives as being positive and helpful in preparing them for the rigours of full-time study. Operational issues concerning the difficulty of managing extra mural, or out-of-hours, provision emerged as a challenge in only two institutions which reflects the different models and structures of higher education institutions.

Findings suggest that one of the ways higher education institutions in this study provide for adult access is to include access as part of the wider organisational planning environment, reproducing CAS concepts of the importance, and interplay, of agency within structures as well as the adaptive capacity of higher education institutions.

Chapter Six, which outlines the findings from the third thematic area in this study, organisational policies, processes and structures for the implementation of access, follows.

## **CHAPTER SIX: THEMATIC AREA THREE - SPECIFIC ADULT ACCESS ORGANISATIONAL POLICIES, PROCESSES AND STRUCTURES**

### **6.0 Introduction**

Analysis indicates that one of the ways Irish higher education institutions in this study has provided for adult access is by developing specific access-related organisational policies, processes and structures. This chapter presents the findings from this thematic area across each of the four higher education case sites. Differences and commonalities are noted across the following themes in terms of: access policies; admissions policies and procedures; governance and access; dedicated access-related committees; dedicated organisational support structures and roles.

### **6.1 Access Policies**

In this study, as summarised below in Table 6.1: Summary of Access-Related Policies across Case Sites, each of the four higher education case sites have produced access-related policies. These policies typically articulate institutional commitment to the area of access, provide a definition of the different access targeted groups, and, in some instances, explain the multiple access admissions or entry routes. In addition, some access policies identify quotas of targets to be attained. Policies may, or may not, provide a macro-level context but support services available for access students may be outlined. Only one institution, IoT, details the range of flexible programme provision available aimed at the access cohorts. The central role these policies have contributed to advancing access was acknowledged in 29 interviews (72.5%) with senior managers, academic and professional staff across all sites. Students did not refer to institutional access policies in focus groups. At the Constituent College, one respondent observed that, ‘the policy negotiated access to a certain extent’ (Senior Academic, Constituent College, 04) and one member of the senior management team at the same institution noted that: ‘all this commitment was made to access in the institution...having a policy makes a huge

difference to any innovation you want to begin' (Senior Manager, Constituent College, 10).

All four higher education institutions in this study have access policies in place since the mid-to late 2000s. In addition, as documented in Table 6.1, one institution in particular, the Capital University has an Access Plan as well as an Equality Policy. These documents have been aligned with the time frame of the National Access Plan (2008-2013) (HEA, 2008). Commonalities across all case sites include a commitment to equity of access and each institution, except for the IoT, identify participation targets (see Chapter Five, sub-heading 5.2).

Institutions differed in the amount of detail provided in the access-related documents. In one institution, the Capital University, the Access Policy is set within the macro-level legislative context and salient access and equity legislation is identified. These include the *Employment Equality Acts* (1998-2010); *Equal Status Act* (2000); *Disability Act* (2005) and *The Universities Act* (1997). In addition, two institutions, the Capital University and the IoT, provided detail on both the overall work that takes place in access and also the range of supports available for students. Only one institution, the Capital University, outlined both access funding sources and dedicated staffing complement.

### ***Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)***

Two institutions, the Constituent College and the IoT, outline the range of entry routes available to students in their access policies. The other two institutions, the Capital and Regional Universities do not provide this detail. These findings demonstrate that across institutions a number of entry routes have emerged with the most options for students in the IoT institution (see Table 6.1 for a summary). Two of the institutions, the Constituent College and the Regional University, have policies on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) but data analysis indicates that RPL practice is seen as difficult to operationalise. The Capital University does not have an RPL policy and the IoT is in the process of drafting one. At the Regional University, policies on flexible, part-time and recognition

of prior learning provision were referred to. In terms of the part-time and flexible learning provision, the following perspective was expressed, which suggests there is a need to make progress with this agenda:

institutions could do more in terms of RPL. Men are coming in who have had a lifetime experience that money can't buy but don't have a third-level qualification and they are looking for a way of gaining a qualification (Access Project Worker Regional University, 04).

Similarly, another interviewee noted that: 'we have policy statements on RPL but [the] practice of it is not widespread' (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01).

In contrast, the IoT has implemented RPL and a new policy is in draft form and due for sanctioning in 2012/13. Adult learners who have relevant work or experiential experience can be granted exemptions in certain modules on presentation and evaluation of a prepared portfolio for same. The rationale for developing RPL was explained by a senior academic and HoD: 'we're a small institute of technology, we need to be flexible and we need to take people on from their perspective rather than our own regulations' (Senior Academic, IoT, 07).

Such findings suggest that in three case sites, the Constituent College, Regional University and Capital University, there has been a reluctance to engage in some alternative entry routes, indicating a paradoxical tension. On one hand, these HEIs are enthusiastic about increasing adult access; however, there is a lack of a national drive to implement RPL practices and it is a process of slow evolution. In contrast, in the IoT, the institution has developed a range of flexible admissions schemes, which include RPL, aimed at increasing enrolments reflecting its different *raison d'être*, history and culture. Analysis suggests that the IoT is keen to increase enrolments and is more market-driven than the other institutions in this study.

Table 6.1 provides a synopsis of these policies and it shows that these policies have many commonalities as well as some differences, including aspirational commitment to the area, statements of policy aims, definition of target groups and reserving of quotas. In

some instances, flexible entry (for example, RPL) and learning options, student supports, funding and staffing detail are provided.

**Table 6.1: Summary of Access-related Policies across Case Sites**

| <b>Key Principles, Objectives and Targets of Access- Related Policies</b>       | <b>Constituent College</b> | <b>Capital University</b>                           | <b>Regional University</b> | <b>IoT</b>                     |
|---|----------------------------|---|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Access related policy in place  | Access Policy (2005)       | Access Policy Access Plan (2009-2013) Equity Policy | Access Policy (2007)       | Equity of Access Policy (2007) |
| Commitment to equity of access stated/ aim of policy outlined                   | Yes                        | Yes   | Yes                        | Yes                            |
| Target groups defined <sup>1</sup>  | Yes                        | Yes   | Yes                        | Yes                            |
| Range of entry routes for different categories of access students outlined      | Yes                        | No  | No                         | Yes                            |
| Quota of places reserved for each of identified target group                    | Yes <sup>2</sup>           | Yes <sup>3</sup>                                    | Yes <sup>4</sup>           | No                             |
| Context identified, in line with equity legislation <sup>5</sup>                | No                         | Yes   | No                         | No                             |
| Summary of institution's work in access, and range of supports available stated | No                         | Yes   | No                         | Yes                            |
| Range of flexible practices documented  | No                         | No  | No                         | Yes <sup>6</sup>               |

<sup>1</sup>Definition of target groups (Mature Learners, Socio-Economic Disadvantaged School Leavers, Students with Disabilities and Students from Ethnic Minority Backgrounds).

<sup>2</sup>Mature Learners (up to 20%); socio-economic disadvantages school leaver students with disabilities (up to 5%); students from ethnic minority background (up to 5%).

<sup>3</sup>Target of 22% for non-traditional students, including those from a socio-economically disadvantaged background, those with a disability and mature students.

<sup>4</sup>Target of 20% adult participation to be reached by 2013.

<sup>5</sup>*Employment Equality Acts 1998-2010; Equal Status Act (2000); Disability Act (2005) and Universities Act (1997).*

<sup>6</sup>Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPL), alignment of Adult and Continuing Education with access, accommodation of part-time learners within full-time programmes, development of shorter duration programmes (Minor, Special Purpose or Supplemental Awards) in traditional or blended learning formats.

## **6.2 Institutional Reviews of Access-related Policies**

Feedback from interviews suggests that more emphasis on collaboration will form part of the revised access policy which is in draft form (Lecturer, Access Course, Regional University, 07; Lecturer, Access Course, Regional University, 09). In the IoT, the following point was observed: ‘we’ve a new access plan in draft. That is an extremely important piece of work. That is overdue, in fairness, long overdue...’ (Access Project Worker, IoT, 02). Similarly, in the Constituent College, a quality review of access was being scheduled for the academic year 2012/13. These findings suggest that the area of adult access to higher education is constantly evolving to meet macro-strategic policy changes and be seen to respond to them.

## **6.3 Proliferation of Access Admissions Policies and Procedures**

Analysis of institutional documentation suggests that across case sites, a range of new admissions policies, processes and procedures have emerged to provide for enhanced adult access. Table 6.2 below provides a summary of the range of admissions routes for adult learners across the four case sites in this study and shows that there are a number of alternative entry routes available for adult learners across case sites. In all institutions, adults can apply through the CAO scheme. In three institutions, adults can enter via a mature student competition which comprises of an oral interview and, in the case of the Constituent College, the completion of a short essay style written test is mandatory. As noted in section 6.1, three institutions have policies on RPL and all institutions in this study offer some form of pre-entry access or preparatory programmes of study.

**Table 6.2: Summary of Admission Routes for Adult Learners across Case Sites**

| Constituent College<br>(A)   | Capital University<br>(B)  | Regional<br>University (C)   | IoT (D)  |
|--|--|--|--|
| Access course for Adult Learners/a partner in the external access course | Access course for Adult Learners/<br>Three external adult access courses | Access course for Adult Learners, and the lead partner for an external access course | Partner in external access course /Pathfinders pre-entry course/taster programmes/pre-entry programme targeted at international market/ franchised programme delivered in the capital city |
| CAO <sup>7</sup>   | CAO  | CAO  | CAO  |
| mature student competition   | mature student competition   | mature student competition   | Articulated progression & direct entry routes negotiated between further education and third-level sector, from PLC courses to Certificate programmes                                      |
| Policy on RPL  |  | Policy on RPL  | Practice of RPL, new written policy to be available in 2012/13   |

***Development of Preparatory Adult Access Courses***

Preparatory adult access courses represent a new development and addition to the range of admissions policies and procedures in this study. The presence of such courses in three institutions suggest that higher education institutions in this study have developed local responses in order to find creative ways of increasing the numbers of adult access enrolments. Adult access courses will be discussed more fully in Chapter Seven, Adult Access Course Provision. In contrast, although the IoT offers a number of pre-entry programmes, these courses are not branded as access courses and students appear to be evenly distributed across the disciplines in the institution: ‘so we would bring people in, they don’t come into any one particular discipline, they spread themselves across

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<sup>7</sup>The Central Applications Office (CAO) was set up in 1976 to process applications for university undergraduate degree courses, on the basis of a points system linked to performance in the Leaving Certificate Examinations (Hyland, 2012).

programmes quite, you know, according to their interest' (Senior Manager, IoT, 08). This flexibility of admissions policies and procedures was reflected in the findings from focus groups at the institution and seems to encourage adult enrolments:

I came in to do Information Systems Management from a minor award that I did here at night time. And I did it for...is it six weeks we did it for? And then you were taken in on the results that you got. Now only I did the minor award [sic] I'd have never thought of coming back to third-level education (Business Student, IoT, 05).

Similarly, another student who entered via the FETAC route explained: 'I came in from FETAC. I found it a very easy transition between FETAC course and being here, yeah. And, well a positive experience really, you know' (Business Student, IoT, 04). Additionally, a third participant of the focus group at the IoT stated that:

I'm delighted I came back because I came in straight out of FÁS into second year and I finished my honours degree last week. And I was telling the lads outside I'm off to [a university] to do a Masters next year, that's something I would have never thought of (Business Student, IoT, 03).

It is clear that there has been a proliferation of alternative entry routes and, in some instances, more flexible programme delivery across institutions. All institutions offer some form of access or preparatory or pre-entry programmes of study which offer students an opportunity to up-skill in advance of registering for full-time undergraduate studies. Additionally, adult students can apply through the CAO system, and in three institutions, can avail of the opportunity to gain admission via an interview if they do not possess the minimum entry requirement demanded for enrolment. Ten members of staff (25%) and seven students (17.5%) expressed the view during interviews that these access courses are of benefit. Across the case sites, findings suggest that access courses are valuable at meso and micro levels. Table 6.2: Summary of Admission Routes for Adult Learners across Case Sites illustrates that there are a range of commonalities across HEIs, including provision of targeted adult access courses. There are also a number of differences, particularly in the IoT, where a wider range of pre-entry alternative admissions routes have merged and such flexible arrangements contribute to greater progression to third-level studies.

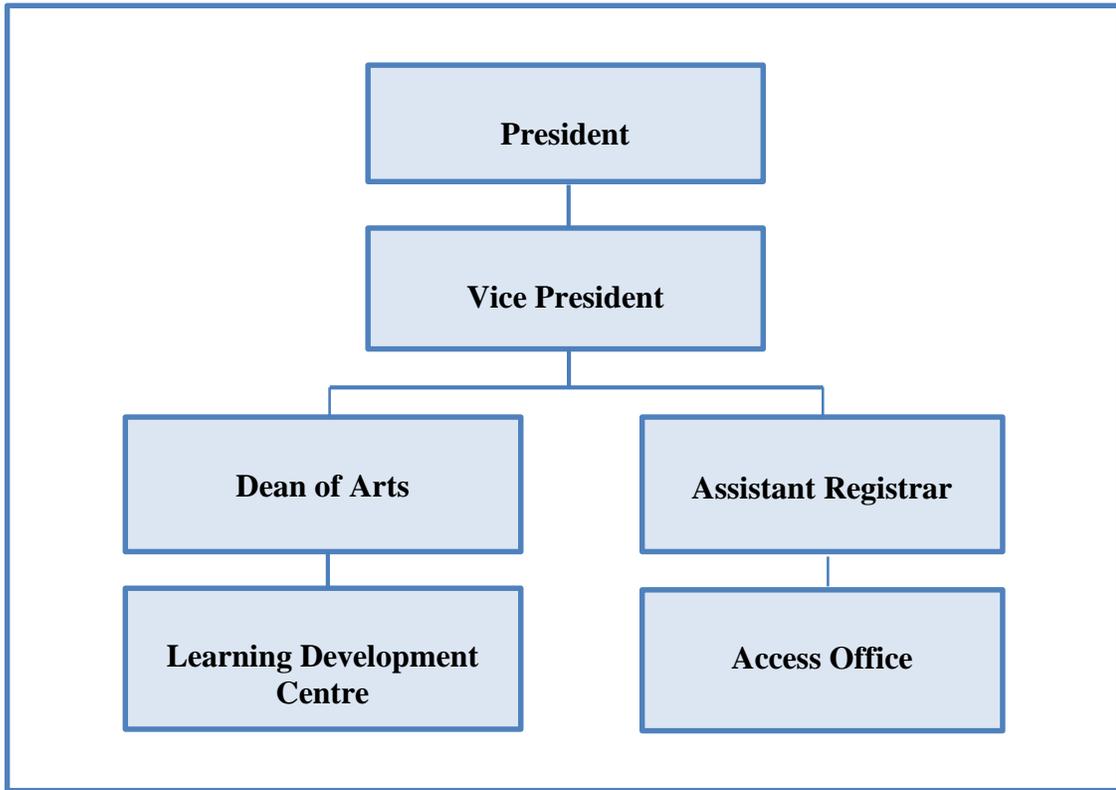
## **6.4 Governance and Adult Access**

At meso level, institutions in this study have provided for adult access by developing unique access governance structures. In three institutions, the Constituent College, Regional and Capital Universities, reviews of access-related governance are in progress. In contrast, in the IoT, governance remains static and no change of access structures is planned.

### **6.4.1 Evolving Governance Structures**

As noted in sub-heading 6.2, a review of access policies is on-going across the Constituent College, Regional and Capital Universities. In the Constituent College, there are two structures mainly responsible for providing access for the adult demographic, the Learning Development Centre (LDC) and the Access Office. The Learning Development Centre addresses the academic aspect of the work and therefore co-ordinates and manages the adult access course and supports progression and retention of this cohort and reports to the Dean of Humanities. The Access Office has responsibility for administrative matters and consequently reports to the Assistant Registrar who in turn is accountable to the Vice President/Registrar. Figure 6.1 below provides a diagrammatic overview. These reporting structures remain unchanged since the foundation of the LDC in 1997 and the establishment of an Access Office in 2005. The Access Committee was established by the institutional President and is an officially recognised key body of the institution in terms of its processes and structures. This Committee is chaired by the Assistant Registrar who reports to the Institutional Management Committee. Further detail on the Access Committee is outlined in section 6.5 of this chapter. A review of access at the Constituent College is scheduled to commence in 2013/14.

**Figure 6.1: Access Governance Structures at the Constituent College**



Similarly, governance structures at both the Regional and Capital Universities are in transition. At the time of writing, institutional governance of access at the Capital University was being reviewed and it is likely that new governance structures will emerge in this process and, as a result, existing access-related institutional governance diagrams were not available for inclusion in this study as they had been temporarily removed. The rapid pace of internal change is mentioned in a number of interviews at the institution. Two quotations have been selected to reflect this rate of change:

it's quite complex, things are changing in here very, very rapidly...we're under the senior lecturers area in college which is over in...the academic side of the house, we're not linked in with student services at all (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03).

Similarly, another interviewee added: 'it's all in flux' (Lecturer, Access Course, Capital University, 06).

The Capital University considers itself to be a democratic organisation with its governance aligned with the democratic collegial tradition: ‘we are a very consultative institution, you know there are lots of consultations and committees and all that kind of thing’ (Senior Administrator, Capital University, 01) and ‘you’d have student reps at council level also’ (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 02). A number of interesting perspectives were expressed about access governance during the interviews. The Access Programme at the Capital University developed organically and it has been mainstreamed. The issue of where the Access Programme should reside was raised in the context of changing governance structures in two interviews. Two quotations have been selected to support this point:

we have a perennial problem of where do we belong? The Access Programme evolved in ninety three...we couldn’t just be sitting unaligned to anything...so we were brought in under the office of the [Vice-President]...but it’s difficult to know where we belong, because we’re involved in administrative work, we’re involved in student support work, pre-entry work so that’s more admissions and then we’re involved in academic delivery, so where do we go? (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03).

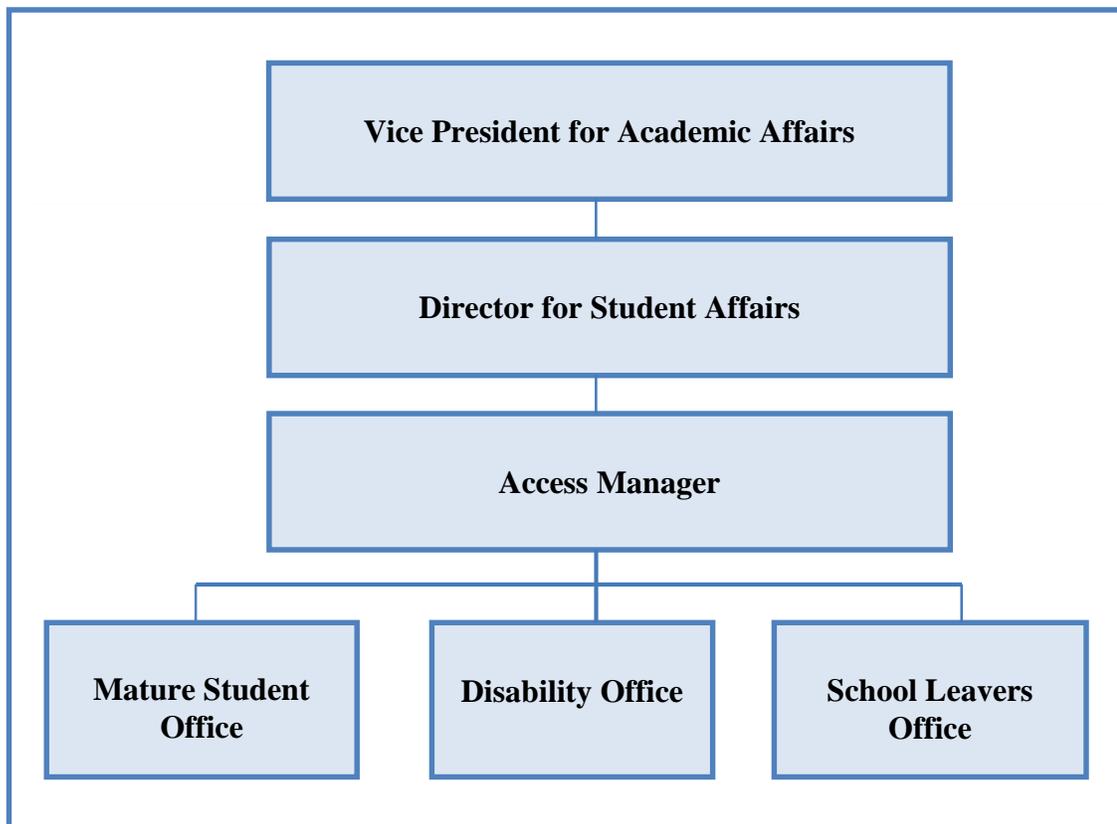
This point was also echoed by another respondent at the Capital University:

there’s a lot of planning going on...it’s all very exciting, a lot of reviewing and a lot of strategic planning and that kind of coinciding with the college’s new review processes and so on and there’s a lot of change happening. So where we will fit in remains to be seen (Lecturer, Access Course, Capital University, 06).

This sub-theme of welcoming a change in governance was echoed in another interview. One interviewee describes the review of institutional governance as being ‘a positive development’ and with the suggestion of the development of a new lifelong learning committee is looking forward to more institutional collaboration and cohesion as ‘you have pockets of people working all over the place’ (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03). This suggests that at meso level, the institution is seeking to develop more strategic cohesion and is indicative of access being a newly developed area in higher education.

Similarly, at the Regional University, a review of all access-related governance and structures is on-going. At the time of writing, the Regional University has three dedicated offices working on specific access activities. The work of these offices involves a range of pre-entry activities, post-entry student support and outreach work in the community. The three offices report to the Access Manager who reports to the Director for Student Affairs who then reports into the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Registrar. The flow chart below (Figure 6.2) summarises this organisational structure. However, in contrast with the Capital University, over the course of interviews, it was clear that access staff at the Regional University had concerns about this review. Three respondents were concerned about their job security and a possible change in work-related responsibilities due to scarce financial resource issues (Access Project Worker, Regional University, 04; Access Project Worker, Regional University, 05; Access Course Co-ordinator, Regional University, 07).

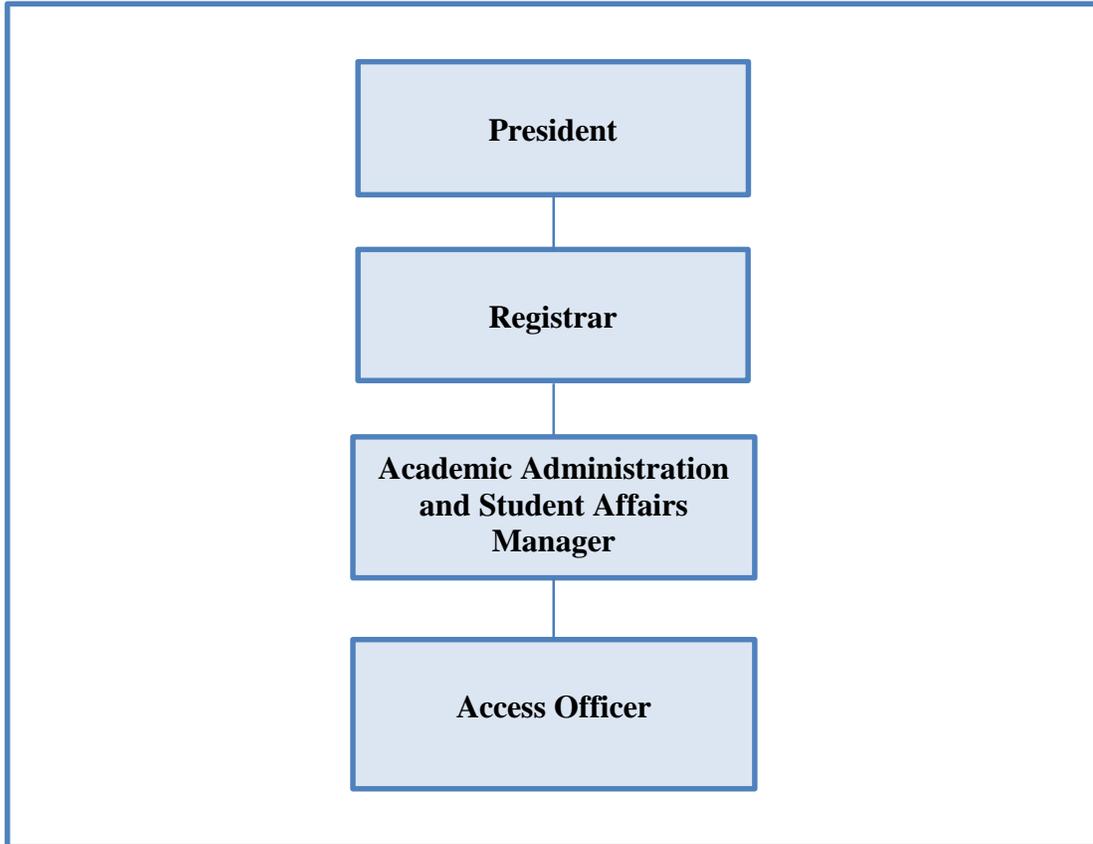
**Figure 6.2: Overview of Governance of Access at the Regional University**



#### **6.4.2 Static Access Governance Structures**

In contrast, governance of access at IoT remains static. This may be linked to the fact that the IoTs have been involved in this work earlier as they tend not to be so elitist in terms of admissions and because of their different *raison d'être* offer more technical and vocational programmes. Similar patterns in governance are in existence in the Institute of Technology sector in Ireland, and therefore, all institutions share the same reporting structures and associated roles. In the case of access, detail as shown in Figure 6.3 below, is the same across all thirteen other IoTs in Ireland. Feedback from interviewees at the IoT suggested that this form of governance is appropriate (Access Officer, IoT, 01; Access Project Worker, IoT, 04).

**Figure 6.3: Governance of Access at the IoT**



In summary, evidence reveals that governance of access varies across case sites in this study. As governance functions at the level of the institution, it was not reflected in the analysis of interviews with adult learners. In the Constituent College, Capital University and Regional University, different areas within access report to different people and reviews of access governance structures are taking place. From the views expressed, this is a welcome development for some, and is a matter of concern and is challenging for others. In these institutions, this represents a commitment and a mainstreaming of the work at a strategic level. In contrast, although access-related policies are being reviewed, governance at the IoT remains stable. Findings indicate that in the case of the IoT, governance of access will remain static as it is standardised across the IoT sector in Ireland and they have been working in this area for a longer period, linking access with industry needs.

## 6.5 Dedicated Access-Related Committees

This sub-theme reflects that new structures have evolved at each institution in order to provide for adult access. In this study, a number of dedicated access-related committees have evolved at each higher education institution. Table 6.3: Dedicated Access Committees below provides a summary and confirms that there is one dedicated committee in three institutions and in the case of the Capital University, two committees are in existence.

**Table 6.3: Dedicated Access Committees**

| Constituent College | Capital University  | Regional University                   | IoT   |
|---------------------|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| Access Committee    | Student Services Committee<br><br>Access Programme Steering Committee | Student Affairs Overarching Committee | ESF Student Assistance Fund Deciding Committee<br><br>Student Affairs Committee |

### 6.5.1 Composition of Access-Related Committees

Composition of access-related committees varies across case sites. An Access Committee is in existence at the Constituent College and is chaired by a member of the management team, an academic. The committee consists of representation from academic and professional services staff. At the Capital University, several committees are involved in steering the work of access. Similarly to the Constituent College, these committees comprise of both academic and professional service staff and are chaired by a senior manager. There is a student services committee and the access programme has its own steering committee:

we have our steering committee here and that's going to change, that has kind of shaped us over the years and there's talk about changing that...its role has changed dramatically over the years (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03).

From the data analysis, it appears that new committee structures overseeing access at the Capital University will emerge following the changed governance structures.

In contrast, at the IoT and Regional University, access committees are steered by senior members of the professional services team with little academic input. This may be related to institutional culture. At the Regional University, access falls under the Student Affairs Overarching Committee which covers the following areas: all categories of access, ICT, student information system, medical centre, admissions. Academic matters revert to discipline-specific academic structures: ‘our courses are offered by departments so we don’t own them, the modules go into department structures’ (Access programme Co-ordinator, Regional University, 07). Findings suggest that in the case of the IoT, existing structures are of value whereas in the Regional University, the review of access indicates that there will be a ‘streamlining of resources’ (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01), pointing at the need for cost-effectiveness from the perspective of senior managers but those working at grass-roots level argue that more investment in the form of resources is required, highlighting the lower status of access work compared to the traditional work of higher education.

At the IoT, the European Social Fund (ESF) Student Assistance Fund Deciding Committee, provides a forum for liaison and collaboration for all disadvantaged students and relevant staff and departments to support access, participation and retention of these students. The institute commits to fair, regular and on-going support to students experiencing disadvantage through the work of the ESF Student Assistance Fund Deciding Committee. This committee reviews the circumstances and well-being of the students applying to the ESF Student Assistance Fund and recommends solutions to assist the student, wherever possible. The membership of this committee comprises:

- Academic Administration and Student Affairs Manager;
- President of the Students’ Union;
- Chaplain;
- Access Officer.

One respondent suggested that this committee was a useful support for access work and is a dynamic group:

there's a structure there for dealing with it that is institute-wide, it's a cross-functional forum...everything moves so fast in our environment that sometimes a need emerges which we won't have anticipated. But we respond well and we do have a good forum for discussion and thrashing out issues in the context of the whole institution at that forum (Access Officer, IoT, 03).

In summary, with regard to access-related committees, across case sites, each institution has established committees to steer and support access-related work and demonstrate that there has been strategic commitment to the area from the perspective of the institution. Findings indicate the composition of such committees varies across sites and that in the case of the long-established institutions in this study, there is representation across the college community, whereas with regard to the younger institutions, professional services staff assume responsibility for steering access-related work and academics are not usually involved, reflecting more of a NPM approach. The sub-theme of access-related committees was not reflected by students over the course of interviews in this study suggesting that such work was functioning at institutional staff level. Findings confirm that there is some on-going change across three case sites, reflective of the dynamic complex nature of the work and on-going resourcing and status issues. However, no institution in this study had established committees dedicated specifically to the oversight of adult learners.

## **6.6 Dedicated Organisational Support Structures and Roles**

Fieldwork indicates that a number of dedicated organisational support structures and roles have developed across case sites. The sub-theme shows that institutions provide for adult access by creating dedicated and ancillary posts as well as developing a range of learning structures aimed at the promoting of retention and progression of this cohort of students. Table 6.4 below shows that there has been institutional investment in terms of the commitment of resources to the area of access. Each institution in this study provides a range of specific student support facilities which can be accessed by mature students. Further, at each case site, additional organisational facilities targeting adult access students have evolved.

At the Constituent College, generic support services are available to all students. These generic services include access to Information Technology laboratories, library facilities, access to counsellors, chaplaincy, and medical centre. In addition, dedicated support for adult access-related initiatives is provided by Constituent College. Subject specific tuition is also provided, for example, through provision of a targeted *ab-initio* course in Information Technology and supplementary classes in Irish Language and Mathematics through the Maths Support Unit (MSU). In addition, the Learning Development Centre (LDC) offers one-to-one academic support for adult learners. Six offices are provided for access staff and 0.5 of a post within the main student services is also reserved for administrative support for the Access/Disability Office. The availability of these services and facilities illustrates a strong commitment to access by the Constituent College. Findings from student focus groups suggest that students greatly appreciate this range of facilities (Humanities Student, Constituent College, 01).

The Access Programme at the Capital University occupies seven offices, two teaching spaces and 'The Studio', which is an informal learning environment with IT facilities. In addition, the Mature Students' Resource Centre, with computer and internet access has been set up to facilitate private or group study sessions. The Mature Students Officer is available at certain times for drop-in sessions at which students are welcome to discuss issues and raise questions. The extensive facilities, including social facilities, which are available to adult learners were mentioned by one respondent (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03) and is seen as being supportive to adult students (Humanities Student, Capital University, 02).

Extensive facilities are provided to support access, progression and retention of adult access students at the Regional University. In terms of academic support, there are three centres: the Science Learning Centre, the Writing Centre and the Mathematics Support Unit. There are also three internal dedicated access offices: Mature Students Office, Socio-Economically Disadvantaged School Leavers' Office and a Disability Office. This institutional infrastructure was noted by one member of the senior management team:

‘internally we have good supports that are used by access students, learner supports in Maths, Science, ICT and writing all housed in the Centre for Teaching and Learning – probably one of the best in the country’ (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01). Another respondent at the Regional University commented on the growing need for student academic support services: ‘huge volumes of Labour Market Activation (LMA)<sup>8</sup> students going through the Maths [Support Unit], out of education for a while...not confident of their skills, they tend to draw on these types of supports more so than a student coming straight from school’ (Senior Manager, Regional University, 02). However, one student commented that ‘there should be more resources for disability, like maybe one-to-one teaching’ (Science Student, Regional University, 10). These perspectives illustrate that there is a definite on-going demand for academic support for adult students.

At the IoT, adult access support services and facilities were integrated into a wide range of mainstream academic and learning supports. These included health; counselling; pastoral care; careers; sporting activities; societies and a crèche. In addition, in terms of dedicated institutional provision for adults, a Mature Students Officer, a Traveller Liaison Officer and a Dyslexia Support Officer were employed. Perspectives expressed by students during the focus groups at the IoT suggested that these positions are helpful:

you also have a Mature Students Officer as well for writing reports and all the rest of it...Well, she has workshops and things during the year and you’re free to drop in to them if you want to. There’s a good help with writing (Business Student, IoT, 05).

The provision of dedicated facilities, such as office space, additional classes and both academic and pastoral support across higher education institutions in this study suggest that there is evidence of the commitment of additional resourcing to adult access by management in order to support institutional plans and policies. In conclusion, findings across case sites demonstrate that extensive new organisational facilities have been developed at each institution in order to support adult access. These are discussed more in the next section.

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<sup>8</sup>Labour Market Activation Fund (LMA) was renamed Springboard in 2011 (as noted in Chapter Five).

### **6.6.1 Dedicated Organisational Roles**

In this study, higher education institutions appear to have recognised the centrality of human agency to support adult access and have created dedicated posts. A number of organisational roles dedicated to supporting access are in existence across each institution; however, the duties attached to each role vary across institutions. This can be attributed to the level of autonomy granted to institutions by macro bodies. With a dedicated staffing complement of 8.5, at Constituent College, the Access/Disability Officer spends much of her time involved in administration and academic/pastoral support is provided to adult access students by the Learning Development Centre (LDC). The Co-ordinator of the LDC also has responsibility for managing the Foundation Certificate for Higher Education: Adult Learners. The role of LDC Tutors with reference to adult access includes the following:

- Support development of study/writing skills;
- Teaching of academic writing;
- Offer one-to-one tutoring to all course participants;
- Provide guidance regarding courses and life/study balance.

However, for all this academic work provision, LDC personnel are classified as professional services staff and are not recognised in other university structures (such as pay-scales, promotion structures and are not able to access research funding or sit on senior academic committees).

At the Capital University, 11 positions are directly employed to support access at the institution. Two full-time staff are committed to the area of access provision for adult learners. One of the Access Project Workers has responsibility for mature students and this officer provides support for adult access students and the co-ordination of the access course for adults is a dedicated post. This post is an integral part of the Access Programmes at the Capital University and is dedicated to increasing the number of mature students, in all categories, and to supporting these students throughout their undergraduate years. The office provides a range of academic supports such as a welcome programme, generic writing support and specific support in Mathematics (Access Project Worker,

Capital University, 03). In addition, 16 tutors are employed to teach part-time on the foundation access courses. Again, this links with the status of access-related work.

In the Regional University, access staff divide their time between access course co-ordination and administration and although not the largest institution in this study, the Regional University has the most staff (18.5) involved in access in this study. As noted in sub-section 6.4.1 the Regional University is involved in a review of its access-related structures and the issue of staffing surfaced as a subtheme. One respondent observed that: ‘we have a lot of staff. That is the issue at the moment...defining the parameters of where we should be operating...’ (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01). Similarly, another member of the senior management team noted that: ‘we’ve had some tough conversations recently. Other colleges our size might have between 14 to 15 staff working in access, why do we have so many staff, we do more is the answer’ (Senior Manager, Regional University, 02). These findings suggest that senior managers are reflecting on the resourcing of access at the institution which is not surprising in the current context of the wider macro-level financial climate.

In the IoT, four staff are employed directly in access. However the majority of the work is carried out by the Access Officer. The duties associated with the post of Access Officer involve substantial administration for all categories of access students, including adults and findings show that staff are busy (Access Officer, IoT, 01; Access Project Worker, IoT, 02; Access Project Worker, IoT, 03; Access Project Worker, IoT, 04).

Across institutions, students did not comment on the staffing complements, rather perspectives were expressed on the next theme, access related-support structures, which they connect with on a daily basis. Table 6.4 summarises the range of dedicated organisational support structures and roles across case sites.

**Table 6.4: Dedicated Organisational Support Structures and Roles across Case Sites**

| <b>Consistent College</b>  | <b>Capital University</b>   | <b>Regional University</b>  | <b>IoT</b>  |
|--|---|---|---|
| Total no of dedicated staff: <b>8.5</b>  | Total no of dedicated staff: <b>11</b>  | Total no of dedicated staff: <b>18.5</b>  | Total no of dedicated staff: <b>4</b>   |
| Access and Disability Officer<br>Half a post in access office<br>Learning Development Centre staff of four (which includes Foundation Certificate Co-ordinator)  | Access Officer<br>Mature Students Officer<br>Programmes Manager<br>Coordinator of the Foundation Courses – Young Adults/Mature Students<br>Post-Entry Progression & Alumni Development Co-ordinator<br>Senior Cycle Activities & HEAR<br>Co-ordinator, Primary School & Junior Cycle Activities<br>Three Administrative Staff | Access Manager<br>Mature and Adult Learner Co-Ordinator<br>Mature Student career Advisor<br>Guidance Counsellor Secondary Schools<br>Liaison Officer Primary Schools Liaison Officer<br>Disability Officer<br>Assistive Technology Officer<br>Four External staff<br>Six Administrators | Access Officer<br>Learning Support Tutor<br>Dyslexia Support Tutor<br>Traveller liaison Officer   |
| <b>Other Staff/Initiatives</b>   | <b>Other Staff/Initiatives</b>  | <b>Other Staff/Initiatives</b>  | <b>Other Staff/Initiatives</b>  |
| Three part-time Tutors<br>Maths Support Unit<br>Subject specific support<br>Student Parent Co-ordinator<br>Medical Centre<br>Chaplaincy<br>Counselling Unit<br>Centre for Teaching and Learning<br><i>College 101</i><br>Orientation Programme | 16 Tutors are employed to deliver teaching on the Foundation access courses<br>Learning Development Unit<br>Medical Centre<br>Chaplaincy<br>Counselling Unit<br>Centre for Teaching and Learning<br>Centre for Inclusion<br>Crèche  | Maths Learning Development Centre<br>Science Learning Development Centre<br>Medical Centre<br>Chaplaincy<br>Counselling Unit<br>Centre for Teaching and Learning<br>Crèche<br><i>The First Seven Weeks</i> <sup>9</sup><br>Orientation Programme  | Mentoring Programme<br>Subject Specific Support<br>Disability Support<br>Medical Centre<br>Chaplaincy<br>Counselling Unit<br>Centre for Teaching and Learning<br>Crèche |

<sup>9</sup>The First Seven Weeks is an initiative at the Regional University designed to provide strong, enhanced and targeted support to students during the early weeks of their time as undergraduate students with a view to facilitating first-year undergraduate student transition to third-level.

### 6.6.2 Access-Related Support Structures

All institutions in this study offer a varying range of support services for the wider student population and findings suggested that adult access students make use of these services. Across the institutions, focus group participants and academic/professional staff expressed their views on the range of support services available.

At the Constituent College, the presence of the Learning Development Centre (LDC) featured strongly in data analysis and was mentioned by eight of the ten (20%) respondents in interviews at the institution. The (LDC) was established in 1997 with funding provided through the Targeted Initiative Scheme administered by the HEA. The Unit was mainstreamed in 2006 and is funded by the core access grant. The LDC aims to:

- create independent learners;
- facilitate students to graduate with appropriate degrees;
- raise the academic standards of students at the institution;
- develop awareness across the institution of what is involved in being a successful student.

The LDC was the first of its kind in Ireland and the model has been successfully exported to other institutions (Senior Manager, Constituent College, 02). Core LDC services within the institution include one-to-one tutoring, lecturing and involvement in access initiatives. Initially, the LDC focused on the needs of mature students by providing support in the transition to third-level study and thus improving the quality of their learning. It emerged that many of these needs were generic to the whole student cohort and, consequently, LDC services were mainstreamed. The LDC are also involved in increasing participation rates among a range of socio-economic groups, including adult learners, currently under-represented in tertiary education (Quality Review, 2010). A number of quotations have been selected to capture the range of perspectives expressed by respondents in this study. Two quotations illustrated that the LDC positively influences retention and course completion:

I think that probably the thing that springs to mind is the LDC...probably from my experience it has had the biggest impact...I could tangibly say yes x number of students are here and stay here and complete because of this (Head of Academic Department, Constituent College, 03).

Similarly,

the setting up of the LDC has helped increase access and retention through the provision of access courses and providing on-going support to students as they progress through the college. When students are supported, they are less likely to drop out (Lecturer, Access Course Constituent College, 08).

Additionally, the pastoral aspect associated with the work of the LDC was noted (Senior Manager, Constituent College, 02). Likewise, perspectives expressed by adult students in the focus groups conducted at the Constituent College supported these findings. One quotation has been selected to support this point: 'LDC, extremely helpful, academically and humanly, great to have someone to talk at and think at...for the meltdowns' (Humanities Student, Constituent College 02). Other generic institutional support structures mentioned by respondents at the Constituent College include the Counselling Service and the support provided by the Student Parent Co-ordinator. One member of the focus groups commented on the availability of: 'in-house counselling...fantastic, part of personal development' and another member of focus groups at the institution remarked on the support she received from the Student Parent Co-ordinator as: 'most helpful service ever' (Humanities Student, Constituent College, 10).

At the Capital University, the Access Programmes are a range of initiatives aimed at increasing the participation rate to third-level education of young adult and mature students from socio-economically under-represented groups. These programmes are funded by the core access grant. In addition to these dedicated programmes, all adult access students can avail of mainstream support structures and facilities at the Capital University. These include the Student Counselling Service; the College Health Service; the Tutorial Service; the Day Nursery; Student Learning Supports; the Careers Advisory Service and the Library. Data concerning the use of mainstream services by such students is not readily available for the aforementioned services and supports, with the exception of the Student Counselling Service. Analysis carried out by the Student Counselling Service over the 2007/08 academic year revealed that adult learners accessed services disproportionately.

The Capital University also has a dedicated Student Learning Development service which offers academic advice, resources, one-to-one consultations and a staff referral service. The aim of the services is to provide learning support to help students reach their academic potential and again, a high number of adult access students avail of this support. One interviewee noted: ‘they’re better at seeking help and knowing when they need it and also we target them to a certain extent’ (Senior Administrator, Capital University, 01). Another respondent echoed this finding: [adult learners are] ‘better at seeking it, they’re more confident about looking for help...we would see more mature access students compared to their percentage in college...’(Access Project Worker, Capital University, 02). Additionally, another respondent observed that these support services are necessary, particularly for adult learners:

for adults, there’s that whole confidence issue, haven’t taken an exam in years, haven’t written an essay...there’s just the whole role confusion in a sense you know often they’re parents, they have multiple responsibilities...I think it’s a big challenge for them (Lecturer, Access Course Capital University, 02).

At the Regional University, data reveal that students appreciate the support services available through the provision of dedicated roles which are funded by the core access grant. One adult student noted that: ‘the academic support is brilliant, helped so much, all my grades improved by 10-15% (Humanities Student, Regional University, 01).

Perspectives expressed from the student focus group in the IoT support the findings from other institutions. Respondents speak highly of their experiences of the support services available in the institution. These support services are funded by the core access grant. For example, one student expressed the view that: ‘...the dyslexia support, it’s first class here’ (Business Student, IoT, 03). Similarly, another focus group participant commented on the presence of the mentoring programme in place for adult learners: ‘the mentor program that they have as well for the mature students, that’s helpful as well’ (Engineering Student, IoT, 01). Additionally, one student noted that the merit of additional subject-specific support:

other services they provide is grinds for students. I get grinds in programming which is great, you know and I got grinds in other subjects as well that I felt I was kind of going down. And they were free because I was getting a grant so I didn't have to pay for the grinds which was fantastic (Business Student, IoT, 04).

### ***Student Orientation Programmes***

In addition, two institutions have developed targeted orientation programmes, *College 101* at the Constituent College and *the First Seven Weeks* at the Regional University. These orientation programmes are designed to facilitate integration to the third-level learning environment and are aimed at supporting students in making the transition to third-level studies. In the Constituent College, the Students' Union run the *College 101* programme and in the Regional University, the *First Seven Weeks* is co-ordinated by the Centre for Teaching and Learning, reflecting institutional commitment to the area of the student experience and engagement.

Clearly with sixteen mentions (40%) across the fieldwork in this study from the perspectives of staff and students, access-related support structures can be identified as playing a significant role in encouraging, retaining and supporting adult students in higher education at a range of levels, showing how systems are embedded in systems.

### **6.7 Summary and Discussion of Findings for Thematic Area Three: Dedicated Access Organisational Policies, Processes and Structures**

The section summarises and discusses the findings for thematic area three and findings reveal that institutions provide for adult access by developing dedicated access policies, processes and structures.

### ***Development of Specific Access Policies***

Findings in this study have suggested from the perspective of staff that there is a high degree of engagement with Irish national adult access policy and institutions adhere, in the main, to national policy recommendations. In line with recommendations from the National Access Plan (2008: 7), institutions have largely mainstreamed adult access initiatives, and have started gathering and monitoring access data. In addition, all institutions in this study had developed a college-wide access strategy. Brown and Scott (2010: 2) describe this trend in policy development as a growing ‘vertical shift upwards’, a tendency also echoed by Clancy (2011), resonating with the CAS concept of systems nested within systems and a NPM approach to the area of access.

### ***Tensions regarding Alternative Entry Routes***

Across institutions in this study, a number of alternative entry routes for adult learners have become available. These findings are reflective of the international literature on broadening adult access where admissions policies and procedures can ‘push’ or ‘pull’ adult students (Woodrow, 1998). As Gorard *et al.*, (2006) argues, there is enormous variation in admissions practices and the acceptances of alternative entry routes in the UK. It seems that Ireland is somewhat different. Although each institution has an RPL policy in place, apart from the IoT, it seems that overall institutions are finding it difficult to operationalise. Research shows that RPL poses many challenges to higher education system where programme compatibility can vary enormously across higher education institutions and providers (Osborne 2003; Gorard *et al.*, 2006; Eurydice, 2012). Except for the IoT, higher education institutions in this study appear to be experiencing similar difficulties. In institutions where limited part-time and flexible arrangements were in place, findings suggest that there is indeed a need to develop this mode of provision, as noted in Chapter Five, sub-heading 5.8. Within a CAS framework, this reflects the concept of adaptation for survival and shows how one institution, the IoT, provides for adult access because it needs to, in order to maintain enrolments.

Some evidence emerges in this study which demonstrates that the university sector is reluctant to accept FETAC qualifications as an alternative admissions route suggesting reluctance to institutional change. The majority of expansion in the university sector in Ireland has come mainly from the Leaving Certificate younger school population (Clancy, 2001; Skilbeck, 2001; Morgan and Slowey, 2009) and entry standards have remained consistently high. This finding points to a continuation of what may be considered elitist practices and to the on-going binary divide in the third-level sector in Ireland, similar to experiences in England (Longden, 2000; Marks, 2000). In both the Constituent College and Capital University, there was perceived to be little incentive to develop part-time/flexible models of programme delivery or to engage with RPL, as both institutions were over-subscribed with applications from traditional students. Nonetheless, it was encouraging to note that institutions were working in partnership with the further education sector and FETAC accredited courses are being used to facilitate adult access within this model of programme delivery. This is congruent with the concept of the blurring of boundaries associated with a CAS.

Preparatory adult access courses represent a new development and addition to the range of admissions policies and procedures in this study. The presence of such courses in three institutions suggests that higher education institutions in this study, as part of a CAS, have developed local responses in order to find creative ways of increasing the numbers of adult access enrolments. Adult access courses will be discussed more fully in Chapter Seven, Adult Access Course Provision.

### ***On-going Institutional Reviews of Access-Related Policies-Status of Access Work***

In the main, adult access was construed as being on the periphery of institutions, considered lower in status than core work, with students who, in general, were seen to have ‘additional’ needs. Questions over where access should be located within the internal structures of the institution emerged as a strong thread. In the Capital University, the issue of where access ‘belongs’ emerged and interviews reflect this theme of

disenfranchisement where all access initiatives are located off-campus. Access is, as one member of staff expressed: ‘essentially an academic soup kitchen’ (source asked not to be identified). In the Constituent College, access is divided up among two different structures and in the IoT and Regional University, access is seen as being administrative work with academic involvement limited mainly to teaching on access courses. In addition, staff at the Regional University were anxious about the review of access being undertaken at the time of writing and had concerns about their employment security and in the Capital University, part-time tutors were contracted to teach on the access courses.

This theme of the causalisation of higher education labour has been noticed by the Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) (Clarke, 2013) and is also emerging as a theme in the international literature (Lynch, Gummell and Devine, 2012; Courtney, 2013). Drawing from a CAS metaphor of constant evolution, at the meso sub-element of the system, access policies at all institutions are being revisited. This finding illustrates that one of the ways some institutions provide for adult access is by constantly engaging in strategic evaluative processes. This represents the complexity attribute of adaptation to change from within, due to policy changes externally.

The thread of adult access being on the periphery was also evident in institutional documentation. Adult access was referred to, obliquely, within strategic plans and mission statements and interview data reflected this, apart from Capital University where there seemed to be buy-in from all members of the college staff. But, in the main, there were dedicated access plans and policies in place which were not integrated with core institution strategic planning work. This evidence echoes Whitchurch’s (2008 and 2012) concept of access being located in a different symbolic space which she terms the ‘third space’ (2012b: i). This study reflects that, although considerable progress has been made in the adult access agenda, it has been because government dedicated and ring-fenced finance has been and continues to be available, albeit in smaller amounts.

### *Governance, Adult Access and Managerialism*

At the level of the institution, governance of access reflects NPM characteristics, in so far as it was hierarchical and vertical. With regard to the governance of higher education access, three of the four institutions in this study are undergoing a restructuring process and two institutions, the Constituent College and the Capital University are planning a quality review of access for academic year 2012/13 - again, reflective of a complex adaptive system, one which is never static, rather it is constantly evolving. Equally, the review of access governance at two institutions in this study confirmed that institutions may be becoming more proactive and strategic about their access work and are eager to improve it. In both instances, findings tentatively suggest that access services may become more centralised, a finding echoed in international literature (see for example, Layer *et al.*, 2002). This trend of reviewing access governance structures is consistent with national higher education policy development, where a review of higher education governance is taking place, led by the Minister for Education and Skills at the time of writing, Minister Ruairi Quinn. The Royal Irish Academy (2012) is supportive of this review process. Similarly, echoing the CAS concept of nested systems at supra-national level, the need to reform traditional governance structures across higher education institutions has also emerged (Eurydice, 2008). This mirrors a key CAS concept, that of the adaptive capacity and constant evolution of the system and therefore, developing structures to support the processes of this work, mirroring the CAS construct of local contextualisation, adaptation and evolution.

In higher education, committees play a vital role both in terms of steering policy and developing structures and processes. By their nature, within higher education, committees also define practice and inherent are concepts of power, influence, negotiation, decision-making and resource allocation. In two institutions, the IoT and Regional University, access is administratively dominated and academic staff are not represented on the various institutional access-related committees where key decisions about institutional access policy are discussed. This may be related to institution type as both cases were established in 1972 and the IoT only came under the remit of the HEA in 2006. This tendency of not

having academic representation or involvement in policy matters is also reflected in the literature. Sabri (2010) observes this trend and notes that increasingly academic staff are not included in policy discussion and development and that this is not, perhaps, the best approach in institutions that have always worked well collegially. Overall, as evidenced by Figure 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3, although individual governance for adult access differs across each of the higher education institutions in this study, nonetheless governance is mainly vertical and, therefore, hierarchical in structure, more consistent with NPM model of higher education than the collegial model.

Further, access personnel have to account for their work externally and progress in achieving targets is monitored by the National Office for Equity of Access. In addition, institutions were awarded funding on the basis of full-time undergraduate numbers more than for the effectiveness of initiatives, many of which are at the pre-entry level. Pre-entry access work should be acknowledged as important and be more embedded in formal processes and structures of institutions.

In sum, all institutions in this study had adhered to national policy recommendations. This confirms that in terms of adult access, institutions look upwards, but not outwards and inwards, and suggests that, at the level of the institution, adult access is conceptualised more in the NPM, rather than the collegial model of higher education. Although adult access is a discrete sector within an overall higher education system, this finding does suggest a change of the 'locus of power' (Lomas, 2006: 243) and given the timbre of the Report to the Minister for Education and Skills on System Reconfiguration, Inter-institutional Collaboration and System Governance (HEA, 2013), it seems likely that this change in the 'locus of power' (Lomas, 2006: 243) will continue. These changes in access are part of much wider changes taking place in higher education and public policy more generally.

### *Adaptive Capacity of Structures*

Institutions, like a CAS, have responded to the adult access agenda and have evolved to develop new facilities and accommodate this change at meso level. A wide range of organisational facilities, services and governance arrangements have been designated by managers in order to support adult access initiatives across all case sites, which represents institutional commitment to the area. It is encouraging to note that across all institutions, at micro level, adult access students seem to avail of these services and believe them to be of the highest quality.

At meso level, the provision of personnel and services suggests that institutions have used some of the ring-fenced access core budget to provide academic and pastoral support and that this is a practical manifestation of their resources and commitment. These findings are consistent with those in the literature and suggest that institutions have taken on board their role in retention and progression for adult access students (Dodgson and Bolam, 2002; Sellers and van der Velden, 2003; Castles, 2004). It also seems that higher education institutions are taking the issue of first year attrition seriously, again consistent with Irish research into third-level attrition (Healy, Carpenter and Lynch, 1999; Eivers, Flanagan and Morgan, 2002; Davies, 2003; Roberts *et al.*, 2003; Yorke and Longden, 2007). The importance of providing dedicated lengthy orientation programmes, as is evidenced in two of the institutions, (*College, 101*, in the Constituent College and *the First Seven Weeks*, in the Regional University) aimed at promoting integration into college life, is reflected in the literature (Chance, 2004).

Across all case sites, a number of structures such as academic, counselling, and subject specific supports have been established in order to support all categories of access students, including adult learners. However, higher education institutions provide support to students in diverse ways and are managed differently, reflecting the high degree of autonomy institutions have in this regard. Such services range in breadth and scope but, in general, most offer assistance with acquiring study skills and personal issues and many also have a focus on the genre of academic writing. Some support services tended to

operate at the central administrative level overseen by the Registrar's Office, while responsibility for others was devolved to academic departments or, in the case of the LDC at the Constituent College, are under the Office of the Dean, echoing international practice (Thomas, Quinn, Slack and Casey, 2002; Riddell *et al.* 2002; Eurydice, 2012). Delivery of student support is multi-factorial and complex and some literature exists which suggests that academic support is essential for adult learners (Young, 2000; Askham, 2004; Elliot and Brna, 2009).

One approach that is consistent with international good practice is the idea of an integrated learning development model which seeks to overcome criticism that central services are separate and detached from teaching activities or that they adopt a remedial model of learning (McAllister and Shapiro, 2004). This type of model allows for coherent planning and avoids fragmentation and duplication in work which is of benefit to students. Two of the institutions in this study, the Capital University and Constituent College, have adopted this form of integrated support and in the case of the Regional University, a number of satellite learning development units have emerged which are housed under the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the institution, again echoing international practice (Thomas *et al.*, 2002; O'Reilly, 2008).

All institutions except for the IoT are members of the Inter-University Retention Network, which was established to exchange ideas and information that relate to the issue of retention among students, and to promote best practice on tackling non-completion (Moore, 2004). Though, overall, it has been noted that as there is limited research on the practice and effectiveness of academic support for adult learners (Searle, 1997; Layer *et al.*, 2002; Thomas *et al.*, 2002; Tones *et al.*, 2009), findings in this study illustrate that adult learners greatly value and benefit from the array of supports that have emerged.

In conclusion, new structures have evolved across case sites, congruent with the constantly evolving attributes of a CAS. Table 6.3 shows that there has been institutional investment in terms of the commitment of resources to the area of access, reproducing the

concept of feedback where each of the higher education institutions demonstrate that they understand the overall system and can contextualise their approaches to adult access.

These findings reveal that one of the ways institutions provide for adult access is by developing and adapting structures and processes through committee negotiation, dialogue and key decision-making, especially regarding resources to accommodate this particular cohort of learners. Applying the analytical framework in this study, a number of dimensions associated with complexity emerge, such as themes of on-going tensions within the sub-elements of the system and the capacity of institutions to adapt endogenously. In addition, the concept of feedback is represented and evidence reveals that each of the higher education institutions demonstrate that they understand the overall system and can contextualise and adapt their approaches to adult access in order to survive. Nevertheless, the evidence reflects that there is an on-going tension with the rise of a NPM approach to adult access.

## **6.8 Chapter Conclusion**

In this study, evidence reveals that higher education institutions, like a CAS, have evolved to develop new dedicated organisational policies, processes and structures specifically for enhanced adult access provision and are evolving constantly to respond to government policies and changing student demand. These organisational policies, processes and structures are seen as mostly effective by both staff and students. Specifically, in the Constituent College, the following themes emerge in the data analysis: dedicated access policies; importance of the *Foundation Certificate for Adult Learners to Higher Education* as an access route; institutional governance structures; dedicated personnel and other institutional structures, such as counselling facilities; student parent co-ordinator and particularly the work of the LDC in providing both access and academic support to adult students. This is from both a meso-level ‘top-down’ (academic managers/faculty) and a micro-level ‘bottom-up’ perspective (student).

Similarly, in the Capital University, three documents focused on equity of access: access policy, an access plan and equity policy. Both the access policy and plan timelines run in tandem with the HEA's National Access Plan 2008-2013. Adult students can gain admission through the CAO application procedure or can apply directly to the institution through a mature student competition. In addition, the Capital University offers an access course specifically for adult students. Access governance is currently under review. Ten members of staff are dedicated to access while a number of other services also support students. As with the Constituent College, feedback suggested that the creation of dedicated resources, in the form of personnel and structures, represents the commitment of the institution to broadening access for adult learners. However, the need to develop more flexible models of programme delivery emerged as a challenge.

The Regional University has had an access policy in place since 2007. This policy is currently being re-drafted. The institution also has policies on part-time/flexible learning provision as well as RPL. An institutional review of all access initiatives, including adult projects, is taking place. Findings suggest that access is well-resourced in terms of dedicated staffing and there are a number of dedicated committees and quantitative targets in place. Teaching on access courses reverts to individual academic subject disciplinary structures. Analysis also shows that there is a tension regarding the role and parameters of increasing access. Consequently, Regional University is engaging in a review of its access structures, policy and planning.

Similarly in the IoT, a new access plan is being developed and has a number of pre-entry routes and courses available. With a mature student participation rate of 24%, the IoT has exceeded national access targets. Access governance is hierarchical, vertical and, in contrast to the other institutions, remains static. This approach is standard across the Irish IoT sector. Creative approaches to staffing of access can be found and the work is overseen by a committee. Perspectives expressed suggest that access is integrated into the overall work of the Institution.

In conclusion, research data analysis has shown that institutions in this study have developed significant access-related organisational policies, processes and structures. These include access policies; new admissions routes; governance structures; dedicated organisational support structures and roles. Institutional committees have emerged as important organisational infrastructure with their associated policies and procedures for attracting, supporting and encouraging adult access students in their studies. Findings show that at meso level institutional access work is responsive and has adapted to national policy recommendations and is greatly valued by students at micro level, but is not without tension. Some evidence emerged to suggest that access, as a relatively new area in higher education in Ireland, is not yet fully developed and mainstreamed. In addition, some status-related issues in relation to the working practices of access professionals emerged. Like a CAS, in this thematic area, there were indications of the endogenous adaptive capacity of institutions and the concept of feedback, where all of the higher education institutions demonstrate that they understand the overall system and, accordingly, contextualise their approaches to adult access. Returning to the research question in this study, the evidence in this chapter reveals that both structure and agency play integral roles in providing access for adult learners at the level of the institution and that it appears working practices among higher education professionals are changing.

Chapter Seven follows which outlines the findings on thematic area four, Adult Access Course Provision.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: FINDINGS FROM THEMATIC AREA FOUR - ADULT ACCESS COURSE PROVISION**

### **7.0 Introduction**

This chapter contains the findings on the theme of adult access course provision across the four case study sites in this study. The analysis demonstrates that the emergence of adult access courses is one of the ways in which higher education institutions enhance adult access. An overview is provided of the reflections, opinions and perspectives on adult access courses or access initiatives from the point of view of academic and professional staff, institutional managers and students.

### **7.1 Emergence of Adult Access Courses at each Case Site**

Three of the four institutions in this study, the Constituent College, Capital University and Regional University, offer access courses which target the adult population. However, the fourth institution, the IoT, has developed a suite of pre-entry initiatives, designed to facilitate adult access and, because of their distinctive mission, has been working in this area longer. This section provides a brief overview of the historical background context of the adult access courses or initiatives at each site.

#### ***Constituent College***

At the Constituent College, an adult access course was designed and piloted in 2001 with the aim of increasing adult learner enrolments on all undergraduate degree programmes at the institution. A further objective of the course has been to increase participation of adult learners from categories of students currently under-represented in third-level education in Ireland, that is, those from a background of socio-economic-disadvantage, students with disabilities and those from ethnic minorities. Initially, this course was

funded by the Targeted/Strategic Initiative Fund (1996- 2005). However, in 2009, course fees were increased to €400 and medical card holders are charged €50 per semester. The increase in revenue generated through fees had the effect of making the course self-financing and this change in course finance has had the effect of mainstreaming the course.

### ***Capital University***

At the Capital University, an adult access course was established in 1997 as part of a strategic initiative. It was one of the first full-time preparatory courses for third-level education established in Ireland and applicants have to be 23 years of age or over on 1<sup>st</sup> January on the year of entry. Similar to the Constituent College, this course was funded by the Targeted/Strategic Initiative Fund (1996-2005) and is part-funded by the institution, with additional financial support from corporate donors. Students do not make any contribution in the form of fees. The course aims to offer an alternative entry route to third-level education for mature students whose social, economic and cultural experiences have prevented them from going to college and prepares mature students, both personally and academically, to go on and study for a degree. There are no standard educational requirements, such as the Leaving Certificate or an aptitude test. Institutional documentation states that the Capital University:

... is proud of the achievements of its mature students who, often in the face of challenging circumstances, have achieved personal growth, academic qualifications, and are seen as role models by their family members, friends and communities. Many mature students successfully complete the Foundation Course and go on to fulfil a long held dream of a third-level education (Publication Celebrating Ten Years of Course Delivery, 2010).

### ***Regional University***

At the Regional University, a mature student access course has been delivered since 2002 and emerged as a way of increasing adult enrolments. The course aims to up-skill adult learners and prepare them for the rigours of full-time study. Again, the course was seed-funded by the Targeted/Strategic Initiative Fund (1996-2005) and is now funded by the

institution and supplemented by a student fee of €500. The course is well-established and is valued both by the institution and students. As one interview participant commented:

talk to students who have done the courses, all agree the best thing they have ever done, makes such a difference to them to feel they are part and parcel of College...some gone onto PhDs now (Access Project Worker, Regional University, 05).

### *Institute of Technology*

In contrast with the other three institutions in this study, the IoT does not deliver a specific access course targeting adult learners, rather it offers a suite of pre-entry courses, and offers a wide range of minor or special purposes awards<sup>1</sup>. This may be related to the fact that the IoT sector was not eligible to avail of the Targeted/ Strategic Initiative Fund (1996-2005) as it did not come under the remit of the HEA until 2006. In addition, the IoT has negotiated a range of innovative entry policies and procedures designed for all students, including adult learners. As outlined in Chapters Six and Eight, one of the alternative entry routes is via the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS), which is a national scheme to promote progression for students who have completed Post-Leaving Certificate Courses in further education colleges. Another programme aimed at promoting access is the Pathfinders<sup>2</sup> initiative, which is a taster programme open to school-leavers and adults. In addition, in order to encourage transfer and progression, all courses delivered locally in the further education sector have been mapped on programmes of study in the IoT.

In summary, three higher education institutions in this study offer on-campus adult access courses. The fourth institution provides a suite of pre-entry options aimed at facilitating access for all categories of under-represented groups, including adult learners.

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<sup>1</sup>Minor awards provide recognition for learners who achieve a range of learning outcomes, but not the specific combination or volume of learning outcomes required for a major award. The associated learning outcomes of these awards form a component part of the learning outcomes of a major award Special Purpose awards: are standalone and are made for specific, relatively narrow purposes.

<sup>2</sup>Pathfinders is a Special Purpose Award which has been developed by this Institute of Technology, in response to a request from the local Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development (RAPID) Steering Committee.

## 7.2 Course Structure and Co-ordination

Access or preparatory courses vary in structure across case sites. At the Constituent College, the *Foundation Certificate for Higher Education: Adult Learners* is delivered on a part-time basis for the academic year with a total of 24 weeks of class contact. This consists of two two-hour sessions per week on Monday and Wednesday nights, totalling 100 hours. Academic Writing is a built-in component of the course and is delivered throughout the year. A library tour is provided outside programme hours on a Saturday morning at the beginning of the course, and an educational guidance group session is also provided in semester two (usually in early March) to facilitate university application deadlines for mature student applications. A break of three weeks is provided between Christmas and the third week in January (due to an inter-semester break).

At the Capital University, the adult access course is full-time and runs from September to May over one year. There are up to 20 hours of lectures and tutorials each week with an additional 20 hours of self-directed learning. Welcome sessions are organised to provide orientation for students participating in the course and academic and pastoral support is offered throughout the academic year. The course is designed to be preparatory in nature, offering adults an opportunity to sample third-level study and up-skill.

At the Regional University, the *Mature Student Access Certificate Course* is a one-year full-time pre-degree course designed for those individuals who feel that they lack the skills to successfully undertake a degree course. It offers the opportunity to learn/refresh key learning skills and the opportunity to take foundation-level subjects in one of the following areas: Humanities; Science; Electronic and Computer Technology; Business and Engineering. The access course is provided over the full academic year (two 15 week semesters inclusive of examinations) and runs Monday to Friday from 10.00am - 3.00pm. An induction day for adult learners is held in late August to provide an opportunity to meet fellow access students and to familiarise students with the campus before starting in September.

In the case of the IoT, many of adult learners progress from external programmes including those delivered by the further education sector, and subsequently transition into

full-time or part-time study. These external programmes, which are vocationally oriented, run typically for the duration of the academic year, may be delivered on a full-time or part-time basis and tend to be awarded by FETAC<sup>3</sup>.

In conclusion, programme structures vary across the institutions in this study. Adult access courses offered at the Regional and Capital Universities are full-time, while in the Constituent College, the adult access course is delivered on a part-time evening basis. In contrast, at the IoT, courses can be taken in both modes, may be delivered externally and students can choose whether to pursue single subject accreditation or register for a minor or major award.

It is noteworthy that in the Constituent College, Capital University and Regional University, these preparatory courses are co-ordinated by access (professional services) staff, rather than by academics. These programmes are the only third-level courses in Ireland which are not overseen by academic staff. The LDC co-ordinates the adult access course in the Constituent College. In the Capital University and Regional University, the courses are overseen by members of the access offices. This raises an issue about the status of access work and links with previous points on access being located on the fringes of institutions.

### **7.3 Student Numbers**

Since 2009, all institutions in this study report an increase in enrolments in their various adult access courses or initiatives. In the Constituent College, enrolments have steadily increased from an intake of 16 students in 2001/02 to a high of 81 students in 2009/10. 55 students were registered in the academic year 2011/12. Similarly, at the Regional University, during the academic years 2008/09 to 2010/11, a total of 149 students were registered on the *Mature Student Access Course* and an intake of 80 students was expected for the academic year 2012/13. One member of staff at the Regional University

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<sup>3</sup>The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) is the statutory awarding body for further education and training in Ireland. FETAC makes quality assured awards that are part of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) from levels 1-6 (FETAC, HETAC, NQF all under a new body, QQI, since November, 2012).

commented that adult student numbers are increasing annually and that this may be fuelled by the impact of the *European Globalisation Adjustment Fund (EGF)*<sup>4</sup> (Access Project Worker, Regional University, 10). Similarly, at the IoT, there has been a proliferation of adult students, attributed mainly to the success of the Springboard scheme at the institution.

In contrast, at the Capital University, student enrolment numbers are capped at an intake of approximately 25 students every year. However, as with the two other institutions, increases in applications and expressions of interest have emerged, and, as a result, there has been a parallel increase in staff workloads (Access Course Co-ordinator, Capital University, 04; Access Project Worker, Capital University, 05). One member of staff involved in course delivery stated: ‘there’s [sic] about a hundred and seventy mature applications this year...now all the staff help with interviews and they help assessing them, but it is a huge amount of work...’ (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 05). This increase in the level of student interest may be linked to the economic recession and to the high unemployment rates of 14.1% in Ireland (CSO, 2013). Therefore, it is possible that many adults are looking to gain higher education qualifications to access employment.

#### **7.4 Student Profile**

Findings show that across three institutions in this study the profile of a typical student on the various access courses is changing. Institutional data from the Constituent College on the profile of 398 students who participated in the *Foundation Certificate for Higher Education: Adult Learners* over a ten year period from 2001 to 2011 revealed the following: a small number of participants (6.5%) stated that they were not of Irish origin. The majority of participants were female (60.6%) and 37% were under the age of thirty at time of enrolment. It is of note that 12% are over 51 years of age. A significant number (51%) are between 31 and 50 years old. 48% come from an urban background and 52% from the rural hinterland. The largest concentration of course participants originate from

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<sup>4</sup>The European Globalisation Adjustment Fund (EGF) was established in 2009 by the EU to support redundant workers as a consequence of the global financial and economic crisis.

skilled manual backgrounds and a further 27.6% did not state their occupation, suggesting that perhaps they were not currently employed or were working in the home (Brosnan, 2011).

In terms of educational history, 40.5% did not have any qualifications, while only 11.5% achieved over 300 points in the Leaving Certificate. The majority, 58.5%, (272 students from a cohort of 398), have participated in some form of training as adults and 31.7% did not participate in any form of formal or informal post-compulsory schooling. The most commonly cited motivator for participation in the course was direct access (once students have achieved a merit on the *Foundation Certificate for Higher Education: Adult Learners*, they are guaranteed a place on the BA (Liberal Arts) at the institution) (Brosnan, 2011). Clearly, the fact that completion of the course results in a guaranteed place in an undergraduate programme is of significance to many of the students.

An advocacy statement on the *Foundation Certificate* course, produced by the Capital University in 2010, found similarities between access mature students and the wider student population in terms of gender distribution. This document illustrates that overall, the demographic profile of students in the institution is changing with a greater number of older students now participating (Capital University, 2010). The majority of course participants came from Dublin (Capital University, 2010). Course participants had much in common in terms of family history, childhood education experiences, occupation (nearly all homemakers) and level of participation in adult education programmes (Capital University, 2010). Among the sample of 243, from 1997-2007, self-concept, individual motivation, family and system incentives such as grants and academic support were all motivators (Capital University, 2010). Challenges faced by course participants include access to information; availability of places; perceptions of the institution; finance; home/study balance; course content and transition to undergraduate studies. In addition, there are cultural barriers such as academic discourse and the stress of coping with day-to-day life as a full-time student (Capital University, 2010).

In the Regional University, 149 students have enrolled in the adult access course from academic years 2007/8 to 2010/11. Since the economic recession, in 2007, there has been a change in the traditional demographic with two thirds of the cohort now male: ‘amount

of men really interesting...who have never used a computer and left school with no qualifications...worked on the buildings...' (Access Project Worker, Regional University, 05). This point was echoed in another interview at the Regional University: 'my work is predominantly with people who don't have a traditional entry point into third-level education...I see a lot of young men who availed of the economic circumstances and are now looking to retrain' (Lecturer, Access Course, Regional University, 09). Two interview respondents observed that these adult students seem to be highly committed: 'they know what they want' (Lecturer, Access Course, Regional University, 06). High levels of motivation among this cohort were also noted in another interview: 'we are getting people in their 30s and 40s who are out of education and may have been working, they are really motivated' (Access Project Worker, Regional University, 10).

As noted in Chapter Five, Adult Access and General Institutional Environmental Planning, the Regional University offers programmes in Technology, Science and Engineering. It seems that such programmes may be of interest, particularly to men coming from the construction sector of employment who, because of the economic situation in Ireland since 2007, may find themselves out of work. Similarly, since the launch of the government Springboard initiative in 2009, 735 adult students have enrolled in the IoT. Like the Regional University, many of these students, mostly male, are taking courses in the area of Science, Engineering, Business and Technology, again hoping to access employment.

In summary, evidence shows that across case sites, at the micro level, the profile of adult access students is changing. First, there has been an increase in the demand for places and second, both the gender balance and age profiles have fluctuated. Institutions report that both more male students and older students are interested in studying at higher education and that, in general, these students are motivated to learn. This can be attributed to the changes in the macro-economic climate, pointing to the dynamic nature of adult access work.

## 7.5 Course Contact Hours

Contact hours varied across all institutions in this study, and range from between 100 at the Constituent College to 480 at the Capital University. Table 7.1 below summarises this detail. The table shows that institutions differ in the amount of contact hours required to complete their respective adult access programmes, with the most number of class contact and independent study hours required at the Capital University and the least at the Constituent College, highlighting the high degree of autonomy institutions have in this area.

**Table 7.1: Access Course Contact Hours across Case Sites**

| <b>Access Course detail</b>   | <b>Constituent College</b>   | <b>Capital University</b>                      | <b>Regional University</b>                     | <b>IoT</b>                 |
|---|--|--|--|----------------------------|
| <b>Total Contact hours</b>  | 100<br><br>Lectures only<br>(and optional tutorials if students want to avail of them) | 480<br><br>(Lectures and compulsory tutorials) | 240<br><br>(Lectures and compulsory tutorials) | Varies depending on course |
| <b>Additional number of hours of individual student effort expected</b> | 220  | 480  | N/A  | Varies depending on course |

## 7.6 Course Delivery Style

Findings reflect that, despite policy recommendations of increasing flexible modes of programme delivery, across all institutions in this study, delivery of adult access courses remains traditional. Courses are delivered on campus and are class-based. Evidence suggests that higher education institutions in this study believe that there are advantages in delivering adult access programmes on campus. At the Constituent College, feedback from student end-of-year evaluations suggest that it is important to offer the programme in the institution, as there is strength in place of delivery and it establishes familiarity with the layout of college. This point has already been noted earlier in this study in Chapter

Five, Adult Access and General Institutional Environmental Planning. One student observed: ‘it was a big help [to be on campus] to introduce one to how the College system works’ (Student Evaluation 05, Constituent College, 2008). The value of on-campus delivery was also noted in one of the interviews that took place at the Regional University:

if you are offering access courses from a distance there is a huge paradox in that you virtually are saying we want to bring you in but you are still separate, still different... whereas if you welcome somebody on to the campus you have this huge notion of the academy as a place of hospitality...externally-based students do not engage with the colleges, they don’t engage with the support services, they don’t form the relationships... (Senior Manager, Regional University, 02).

This perspective was echoed by an academic at the Capital University where the access offices and classrooms are located off the main campus. This respondent suggested that the facilities for adult access students should be located on campus:

the students, they should be on campus. It actually feels though they’re not part of the institution then... they’re stuck out there... (Senior Academic, Capital University, 07).

Across case sites, students did not express views on this sub-theme. It seems that adult learners are appreciative of the opportunity to access higher education, regardless of the location of courses or initiatives. In summary, the evidence suggests that first, despite policy rhetoric, course delivery at this level remains traditional in style and that second, higher education institutions, rather than students, argue that there is much merit to delivering access courses on campus.

## **7.7 Adult Access Curricula**

One of the ways higher education institutions in this study provide for adult access is to adapt existing curricula designed to suit the learning needs of this cohort. From examining Table 7.2: Summary of Adult Access Course Curricula across Case Sites below, it is clear that there is variety in the adult access curricula delivered across case sites.

At the Constituent College, the *Foundation Certificate for Higher Education: Adult Learners* is awarded by completing all of the mandatory modules mentioned below in Table 7.2 and satisfactory fulfilment of assessment criteria. The course is delivered by

full-time faculty on campus. This strategy is seen as beneficial in terms of creating relationships and also indicates the commitment of academic staff to the area of adult access (Access Project Worker, Constituent College, 07; Lecturer on Access Course, Constituent College, 08). In addition, course participants can avail of a Learning Development Centre (LDC) Tutor who can be consulted for one-to-one academic support in person, or by telephone, post or e-mail to address individual academic writing concerns.

At the Capital University, students can choose from two broad areas of study: Arts and Social Sciences or Science. The Arts and Social Science modules include: English; History; Political Science; Law; Sociology and Social Policy; Economics; Philosophy; Psychology; Mathematics and Statistics. Students select up to five modules. The Science modules are: Biology, Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics. Science electives prove to be particularly difficult for this cohort of adult learners:

we don't have very many who pick science stream, maybe between kind of two and five every year would pick the science stream and that is a huge challenge for them. That's probably the biggest, because very few of them would have much of a maths or science background (Access Course Co-ordinator, Capital University, 04).

In addition, all students take three core modules in Study Skills, Information Technology and Educational Guidance.

In the Regional University, the *Mature Student Access Course* comprises the following compulsory subjects: Mathematics, Computer Skills, Study Skills and Educational Guidance. Spanish and Personal Development are offered as optional electives. All students are required to choose one of the following academic electives:

- Humanities (History; Politics and Public Administration; Sociology; English);
- Science (Biology; Chemistry; Physics);
- Introduction to Electronic/Computer Technology (Electricity and Magnetism, Electronic devices and circuits, Computer Architecture, Programming modelling for computers);

- Business Studies (Economics, Accounting and Finance);
- Engineering (Introduction to Engineering, Manufacturing Technology and CAD).

Student feedback suggests that they would ‘like more academic work and less of the skills side’ (Science Student, Regional University, 10).

As many of the pre-entry courses to the IoT are externally-located in the further education sector, no data are available and research on same is beyond the scope of this study.

**Table 7.2: Summary of Adult Access Course Curricula across Case Sites**

| <b>Access Course detail</b> | <b>Constituent College</b>  | <b>Capital University</b>                                       | <b>Regional University</b>   | <b>IoT</b>                   |
|-----------------------------|---|---|--|------------------------------|
| <b>Core Subjects</b>        | Academic Writing, Educational Guidance, History, Geography, English Language & Literature<br>Irish Heritage Studies, Philosophy<br>German Studies | Study Skills, Educational Guidance, IT                          | Mathematics, Study Skills, Educational Guidance, IT                                  | Can vary depending on course |
| <b>Electives</b>            | N/A   | Choose one from list of two: Arts and Social Science or Science | Choose one from five options: Humanities, Science, Technology, Business, Engineering | Can vary depending on course |
| <b>Optional</b>             | Library Introduction<br>Information Technology  | N/A   | Spanish, Personal Development  | N/A                          |

In summary, although the curricula of adult access courses differed across case sites, it was reflective of undergraduate degree offerings at each institution, suggesting the ability of each institution to adapt endogenously by adjusting and augmenting curricula aimed at providing adult access.

### 7.7.1 Suitability of Curriculum

End-of-year student evaluations and perspectives expressed in the student focus groups demonstrate that most respondents identify the curriculum as being suitable and enjoyable. Findings confirm that staff were cognisant of the specific needs of this demographic. At the Constituent College, one student commented: ‘I could have stayed and listened all night...such an interesting variety of subjects’ (Student Evaluations, 2008, Constituent College). At the Regional University, another student noted that the course was: ‘really well put together...it feels like third-level course rather than a course you are just doing...prepares you for third-level studies’ (Humanities Student, Regional University, 06). Similarly, at the Capital University: ‘the access course was really interesting and I did well, surprisingly, and now I am here’ (Humanities Student, Capital University, 03) and another student added it was a: ‘different way of teaching, we were treated like adults’ (Humanities Student, Capital University, 03). Likewise, similar views were iterated at the IoT: ‘I came in from FETAC. I found it a very easy transition between the FETAC course and being here. And, well a positive experience really’ (Business Student, IoT, 04). This evidence demonstrates that students clearly enjoyed the teaching and learning experience and felt that the curriculum was interesting, enjoyable and preparatory in nature.

Development of higher order critical thinking and learning skills that are important for success at third-level study were highlighted by a number of respondents. These skills are mentioned in national policy documentation (as reviewed in Chapter Two, Literature Review) and provide both an example of how the endogenous and exogenous environments interact in the area of adult access to third-level education across case sites. As outlined above, in sub-section 7.1, the courses aim to prepare participants for the rigours of third-level study. Student evaluations and focus groups demonstrate that students perceive this also. For example, a student stated: ‘what was covered was informative and still stands while in college. It gave a good foundation which to build on’ (Student Evaluation 10, 2009, Constituent College). Similarly, at the Capital University, a student noted: ‘the access course was challenging...what we have done gives you a good base...really feel [the] benefit now’ (Humanities Student, Capital University, 02). Again,

at the Regional University, the following view was expressed: ‘the access course really prepares you for third-level education’ (Humanities Student, Regional University, 06).

The value of adult access courses was also supported by the interviews with both academic and professional staff in this study. One respondent commented:

I think the beauty of the foundation course is that it really does equip people with the skills to succeed at third level. It also helps to break down those barriers they become really familiar with [the Institution] before they start (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03).

Additionally, another interviewee added:

Access courses are focused specifically on the learner. It works from where they are at their point of entry and looks to develop them incrementally in terms of their knowledge, their skills, their confidence, their readiness (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 08).

Similarly, a staff member noted at the Constituent College observed:

the *Foundation Certificate* prepares students for a third-level programme of study, by equipping them with the necessary set of transferrable skills that will enable them to succeed within a third-level environment (Access Course Co-ordinator, Constituent College, 05).

In addition, at the Regional University, the following view was expressed: ‘[access courses] ease the individual back into formal education without having the pressure of heavy workload; intense formal curriculum; it deals with softer areas, pastoral supports and academic skills’ (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01). Finally at the IoT, a senior manager noted that access courses are: ‘like induction I suppose, over a longer period, over a full year, and they work’ (Senior Manager, IoT, 08). Overall, findings show that access course curricula are perceived as equipping and preparing students for the demands of a full-time degree course because they offer a microcosm of what a full-time programme demands.

### **7.7.2 Taster Function**

Access courses, or initiatives, also fulfil a ‘taster’ function. These programmes of study provide students with an opportunity to decide if studying at this level is what they wish

to do in the future without committing to a full undergraduate programme of study. This was a point mentioned in three staff interviews that took place at the Constituent College:

...for a lot of people it also points out to them this is what it's like and they decide it's not for them...the *Foundation Certificate* will give a taste of it and then they will know whether or not they really want to spend my time on this...(Access Project Worker, Constituent College, 07)

they give students a chance to sample education before commitment (Lecturer, Access Course, Constituent College, 08).

...provides a challenging microcosm of what first year undergrad is like, including the challenges, the lecturers, the deadlines, lecture note-taking essay writing, etc., all in a scaffolded structure (Lecturer, Access Course, Constituent College, 08).

This point was also echoed by a member of academic staff in another institution: 'even if students decide not to progress to full-time study, it is better than dropping out later because they are swamped' (Access Course Co-ordinator, Regional University, 07). As the IoT does not offer a targeted general access course, this theme did not emerge in fieldwork at the institution. Similarly, this theme did not emerge in interviews with the student population. This could be attributed to the fact that students who participated in focus groups had progressed to full-time study and were clearly committed at the outset of their respective access courses<sup>5</sup>.

In conclusion, staff, rather than students, expressed the view that access courses provide adult learners with an important opportunity to sample third-level education before making a more serious commitment. Findings suggest that the provision of access courses before undergraduate study may play a significant role in facilitating subsequent adult student retention.

### **7.7.3 Access Routes to Undergraduate Award Programmes**

Across case sites, adult students can progress to institutions on successful completion of an access course. A direct entry guarantee was important to nine student<sup>6</sup> respondents

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<sup>5</sup>Although beyond the scope of this study it would be interesting to hear perspectives on this theme from those who exited or choose not to progress to undergraduate studies.

<sup>6</sup>Humanities Students, 01, 02 and 03, Capital University; Humanities Students, 01, 02, 03, 04 and 05, Constituent College; Science Student, Regional University, 09.

across case sites, who noted, specifically, that the relevant access course provided direct entry to the institution. This point was also echoed by one academic:

the certificate programme is first and foremost an access route, which offers successful participants, direct entry to the B.A. Degree and therefore offers an alternative route to third-level education for non-traditional students (Access Course Co-ordinator, Constituent College, 05).

Perspectives from six students reflect the importance of the adult access course as an entry route at the Constituent College. One student noted that the course was ‘life changing and lifesaving’ (Humanities Student, Constituent College, 02) in so far as subsequent participation in higher education led to employment and an improvement in their mental health. Another student, (Humanities Student, Constituent College, 08) observed:

if I hadn’t done the access course, I wouldn’t have stuck it. The access course was good preparation...the course was presented as doable...the structure of course, different assignment types, IT exam, essays, good range of subjects, diverse subjects...good taster of what was to come...so no nasty surprises.

Findings indicate that at the Constituent College, this course is valuable from the perspectives of senior managers, staff and students.

Likewise, at the Capital University, the *Foundation Certificate for Mature Students* is considered useful in breaking down the barriers associated with entering university education for some adult learners (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03). This sub-theme is supported by four members of the focus groups (Humanities Students, 01, 02 and 03; Social Science Student 04, Capital University). At macro, micro and meso levels, it seems that there are merits in offering the adult access course:

people’s lives are being completely changed, and it is a genuine privilege to be part of that process...I think a huge merit is for the institution. I think they contribute massively to the student body and to academia and adults have different voices...they can bring a great learning style to a class, that can be quite different to younger students...there’s the community effect, there’s the intergenerational effect (Access Course Co-ordinator, Capital University, 04).

As noted in Chapter Five, sub-heading 5.2., the Regional University currently has a 12% intake of mature students with a target of 20% to be attained by 2013. The internal access course is seen as a mechanism of increasing these statistics and reaching institutional

targets: ‘the access course provides a guaranteed pool of mature students every year’ (Lecturer, Access Course, Regional University, 09). One student commented: ‘it’s a trap we are in, a poverty trap; the plan is to get out of it through education, though this course’ (Humanities Student, Regional University, 02). These quotations illustrate that these courses are of value, both to the institution and to the individual student.

At the Regional University, a member of professional services staff recorded that it is a: ‘huge step for students coming back into college life, takes a lot of balancing for students, most have families and outside commitments, it takes time to [sic] adjustment to balance with home life’ (Access Project Worker, Regional University, 10). This suggests that access courses for adults provide an opportunity to work out the challenges of balancing personal responsibilities and full-time study before committing to an undergraduate degree programme. Clearly, the fact that access courses provide a mechanism for direct entry to the third-level sector was seen as positive to respondents in this study.

#### **7.7.4 Assessment**

Assessment procedures are similar across two of the institutions in this study. In the Regional and Capital Universities, students are assessed via a combination of compulsory attendance, end-of-year formal examinations and on-going continuous assessment through the academic year. At the IoT, as many of the adult access initiatives are located externally, and awarded by the further education sector, the theme of assessment was not directly referred to by staff or students. The Constituent College differed in its approach, as assessment is on-going throughout the academic year with no end-of-year formal examinations. Analysis reflects that assessment for this cohort is not without its challenges.

At the Constituent College, successful completion of the course involves submitting four written assignments, usually in essay format and two in-class formal examinations which are corrected by full-time staff and examined by an extern examiner. This array of assessment means that students work hard for their Certificate. Academic staff

commented on the way that this model of assessment is similar to undergraduate study at the institution and that this approach prepares students well for future study at this level:

the course continuously assesses students in a way which realistically resembles first year. That is whereby they have rolling deadlines for essays and assignments. The fact that there is a mix of assessment instruments is better than there being one end of programme exam... (Lecturer, Access Course, Constituent College, 08).

Findings from students support this also:

very challenging and interesting. There were some tough essays. In fact looking back all of them were tough. But this certainly benefited us in first year (Student Evaluation, Constituent College, 2007).

As the course aims to prepare students for third-level study, the academic standard required is set realistically high. Comments on academic standards are reflected on by both cohorts, that is students and academic staff, and one quotation has been selected from each to reflect this perspective:

excellent, the grades I got in the Foundation Course were a fine reflection of my ability. Course content was challenging and not too basic (Student Evaluation, Constituent College, 2005).

A member of academic staff commented: 'the course doesn't compromise on standards. Students work hard for merit grades and, as a result, their achievement carries more currency in the end' (Lecturer, Access Course, Constituent College, 08).

The fact that the form of assessment resembles undergraduate study is also reflected in the Regional University. One interview participant comments that the assessment model is the: 'same as full-time study, making it more realistic...students also have to do formal presentations which is great for undergraduate training where these are mandatory here, and keep a learning diary' (Access Project Worker, Regional University, 05).

However, one academic respondent noted that assessing adult learners whose initial education experience may have been restricted can be challenging (Senior Manager, Constituent College, 10). This point was echoed in another institution where one

respondent commented that assessing adult learners whose previous experience may have been negative and limited can be difficult:

it's hard to assess students, you know? A lot of the mature students we work with are hugely damaged by experiences they've had. And their confidence is gone. They haven't necessarily had very positive experiences with formal education. So there's a lot to build up and there's a lot of trust to make and that is, whilst it's rewarding it can be hugely challenging (Lecturer, Access Course, Capital University, 05).

In summary, across institutions, all courses are examinable and reflect typical undergraduate assessment procedures and models. Evidence in this study confirms that this approach is considered to prepare students well for subsequent undergraduate study.

### **7.7.5 Student Evaluation**

All adult access courses have been evaluated and reviewed across each case site in this study. In the Constituent College, a student evaluation evening is held annually shortly after the course is completed. Course participants complete student evaluation questionnaires and data from these evaluations have informed this study. In the Capital University, extensive review of the access course has taken place and several documents have been published. All of these indicated that students and staff find the course to be of value in introducing and preparing students for the rigours of third-level study. End-of-year student evaluation also takes place. Annual student evaluation of the adult access course also takes place at the Regional University and data from these have informed this study. At the IoT, student focus groups sessions are also regularly conducted (Access Officer, IoT, 01). In summary, course evaluations and reviews across case sites have been undertaken.

### **7.7.6 Course Accreditation and Certification**

Institutions in this study vary in terms of accreditation and types of certification awarded to adults who successfully complete an access course. At the Constitution College, the *Foundation Certificate for Higher Education: Adult Learners* is a Level Six Special

Purposes Award. At the Capital University, the course is accredited internally and students who successfully complete the course receive a certificate. Similarly, at the Regional University, accreditation is internal and is not linked to the NQAI framework. This point was not referred to by staff or students at either institution. In the IoT, unlike the other institutions in this study, all programmes must be located within the NQAI framework. One of the interesting differences in the model used by the IoT sector is that students can chose to take a minor or major award in some areas. This results in more flexible options for adult students. In summary, certification procedures of adult access courses vary across case sites with different histories of award accreditation.

### **7.8 Access Course Progression Data**

Institutional data indicate that the progression rates vary from adult access courses to full-time undergraduate study but nonetheless, such courses act as one mechanism institutions in this study employ in order to provide for adult access. Table 7.3: Adult Access Course Progression Data across Case Sites provides an overview.

In the Constituent College, institutional documentation highlighted that a cohort of 164 adults who completed *the Foundation Certificate for Higher Education* have progressed to full-time undergraduate students at the institution (Brosnan, 2011). Anecdotal evidence foregrounds that an additional small number opted to continue their studies in another tertiary level institution, however once students leave the institution, it becomes very difficult to track them accurately (Access Course Co-ordinator, Constituent College, 05). Institutional data from the Constituent College illustrate that students who enter via the access course constitute almost 50% of the mature student enrolment on the BA undergraduate degree programme at the College. Although the course creates an access route and an opportunity for second chance learning, challenges are noted. Some members of staff commented on the lack of flexible alternatives to full-time provision. Such flexible provision which is seen as being more adult friendly may facilitate greater progression. This point was raised in two further interviews at the Constituent College:

it doesn't have an equally flexible follow-on. That is, students who can make it in for two nights a week for *Foundation Certificate* could do the same for a degree programme but there is no night time or part-time BA (Access Project Worker, Constituent College, 07).

Likewise, another respondent added:

students do the *Foundation Certificate* part-time but then they have to go into first year full-time day time and the need is there very clearly for part-time evening BA that has at least some sort of flexibility...but I do think that it's disappointing when you have come to an end of a course like that it has worked incredibly well for you...so that's a shame (Access Officer, Constituent College, 06).

This finding suggests that there may be a need for the development of a flexible undergraduate programme, designed to meet the needs of adult learners at the Constituent College. At the Capital University, students who get a grade of at least 50% on the *Foundation Certificate for Higher Education: Mature Students* can compete for places on degree courses at the institution. This means that students are not guaranteed entry to third-level, on completion of the course, but their applications are viewed favourably if they have successfully completed the preparatory programme. Some areas of study such as Social Work, Law and Psychology are popular with adult learners and students are encouraged to apply to other institutions on completion of the programme (Lecturer, Access Course, Capital University, 06). As evidenced in Table 8.4 above, progression rates are high.

At the Regional University, progression rates to undergraduate degree study from the *Mature Student Access Course* to undergraduate courses at the institution from 2007/08 to 2010/11 stand at 74%. Institutional data confirm that the numbers of access students who have progressed from the *Mature Student Access Course* to degree courses represent 19% of the overall adult learner population at the institution.

**Table 7.3: Adult Access Course Progression Data across Case Sites<sup>7</sup>**

| Year                   | Constituent College |                          | Capital University |                          | Regional University |                           |
|------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
|                        | Access Intake       | Progression <sup>8</sup> | Access Intake      | Progression <sup>9</sup> | Access Intake       | Progression <sup>10</sup> |
| 2002/3                 | 24                  | 14 (58%)                 | 26                 | 20 (77%)                 | N/A                 | N/A                       |
| 2003/4                 | 32                  | 14 (44%)                 | 25                 | 17 (68%)                 | N/A                 | N/A                       |
| 2004/5                 | 45                  | 23 (51%)                 | 26                 | 21 (80%)                 | N/A                 | N/A                       |
| 2005/6                 | 40                  | 16 (40%)                 | 23                 | 19 (83%)                 | N/A                 | N/A                       |
| 2006/7                 | 58                  | 26 (49%)                 | 26                 | 21 (81%)                 | N/A                 | N/A                       |
| 2007/8                 | 34                  | 16 (47%)                 | 24                 | 18 (75%)                 | 17                  | 7 (41%)                   |
| 2008/9                 | 32                  | 16 (50%)                 | 24                 | 16 (67%)                 | 37                  | 27 (73%)                  |
| 2009/10                | 81                  | 29 (36%)                 | 27                 | 22 (81%)                 | 50                  | 37 (74%)                  |
| 2010/11                | 66                  | 31 (47%)                 | 26                 | 17 (65%)                 | 45                  | 39 (87%)                  |
| Total                  | 371                 | 164                      | 227                | 171                      | 149                 | 110                       |
| Mean Progression Rates |                     | <b>51%</b>               |                    | <b>75%</b>               |                     | <b>74%</b>                |

As noted in sub-heading 7.1 of this chapter, the IoT differs in its approach to access. It offers a range of minor and special purposes awards, aimed at up-skilling adults in areas linked to skills shortages as identified by government. Although these awards are mainly vocational and aimed at training adults for the labour market, students may choose to progress to undergraduate study. Table 7.4: Summary of Enrolment and Progression Rates from Minor and Special Purposes Awards at the IoT provides a summary of the enrolment in, and progression rates from, such initiatives at the institution. This table shows that the Springboard scheme has attracted significant interest from adult learners

<sup>7</sup>The IoT does not offer a targeted adult access course, rather many of its courses can lead to undergraduate study, and therefore statistics from the IoT are addressed separately in Table 7.4.

<sup>8</sup>Internal progression only.

<sup>9</sup>All progression, internal to Capital University and external to other HEIs.

<sup>10</sup>Internal progression only.

who are looking to access the labour market, rather than higher education. As one respondent noted: ‘Springboard has been wonderful for us and has brought many adults through our doors who are trying to access the labour market’ (Senior Manager, IoT, 08).

**Table 7.4: Summary of Enrolment and Progression Rates from Minor and Special Purposes Awards at the IoT**

| <b>Academic Year</b> | <b>Student Numbers</b> | <b>Progression to full-time study</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|----------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------|
| 2008/09              | 123                    | 15                                    | 12%               |
| 2009/10              | 169                    | 17                                    | 10%               |
| 2010/11              | 178                    | 15                                    | 8.5%              |
| 2011/12              | 154                    | 4                                     | 2.5%              |
| 2012/13              | 111                    | N/A                                   | N/A               |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>735</b>             | <b>51</b>                             | <b>7%</b>         |

It is clear that across case sites adult access courses and initiatives are valuable to each institution as they provide a means of augmenting student numbers and achieving institutional adult participation targets.

## **7.9 Summary and Discussion of Findings for Thematic Area Four: Access Course Provision**

The section presents a summary and discussion of the findings on thematic area four. Evidence reflects that new structures in the form of dedicated pre-entry access courses specifically targeting adult learners have emerged in the higher education landscape across three of the institutions in this study. The Constituent College, Capital University and Regional University used seed-funding from the Targeted/Strategic Initiative schemes to develop these courses in line with policy recommendations (See Chapter Two, Literature Review, sub-headings 2.2.1 and 2.2.2) and institutions have followed international practice in the area of adult access (HEFCE, 2006; Parry, 2006; Eurydice Network, 2012). In the fourth institution, the IoT, a wide range of pre-entry initiatives have been developed since the 2000s.

### *Curricula Delivery Styles Adapted (even though content remained the same)*

Across case sites, although there were differences in programme structure, contact hours and accreditation, course delivery and modes of assessment remain traditional, on campus and class-based. Evidence shows that course content has not altered much in relation to macro-level policy demands and climate. Academic standards and quality remain the same for all students, access and others. What has changed though are course delivery styles and modes to accommodate the needs of adult learners. This suggests that academics understand contexts they are working in at system and local levels and resonates with Becher and Kogan's (1992) normative and operative modes in their synoptic model of the structures and processes of higher education (as reviewed in Chapter Two).

However, in terms of course content and delivery, outside agencies such as the central authority, the HEA, defer to academics and higher education professionals and allow them to have autonomy and academic freedom to assess and accredit courses, reflecting a collegial approach to the teaching and learning environment. Many departments are involved in assessment at the stage of admission as well as formatively and summatively within programmes and modules. Internally, institutions allow, through flexible autonomous processes, for courses to be negotiated collegially. This links to professional norms and working practices, as outlined in Becher and Kogan's model of the structures and processes of higher education (1992) in Chapter Two, sub-heading, 2.10. Human agency plays a fundamental role and different units within each higher education institution work with the other internal elements in partnership, for example, different academic departments, support services and administrative offices, as well as students, thus showing that different levels are 'empowered' at different stages within the CAS.

As noted in Chapter Two, the literature foregrounds that, despite the vast body of theory, changes to curricula and course structures to facilitate and accommodate adult learning are slow (Drudy and Lynch, 1993; O'Brien and O'Fathaigh, 2007). Critics, such as Bourgeois and Frenay (2001), comment on the content-based nature of access programmes designed for adults and suggest that they are a replication of traditional

school leaving examinations and do not consider the particular needs of adult learners. In this study, findings reflect that there was not much evidence of a transformative approach to curricula and existing disciplinary offerings were either adapted or re-structured. The only new inclusions were skills components, such as Information Technology, reflecting a neo-liberal approach to higher education (DES, 2011).

Although there was little evidence of innovation in terms of programme structure or delivery across case sites in this study, nonetheless, the curriculum was more aligned to that of the higher education sector. In addition, the various modes of assessment, that is continuous assessment and formal examination, are reflective of the third-level sector. It is possible that this may account for the high progression rates from access courses or initiatives to undergraduate studies in the Irish context. In this study, mean progression rates ranged from 51% in the Constituent College, to 74% in the Capital and Regional Universities, in contrast with average rates of 32% in the UK (HeFFE, 2006). These high progression rates may be linked to the fact that, in this study, access courses are delivered on campus whereas in the UK, many of these types of courses are delivered in a collaborative partnership model and tend to be located off campus in the further education sector.

Analysis suggests that access or preparatory programmes developed because seed funding was available and these courses provide a 'feeder' into under-graduate programmes of study, thus increasing the number of mature students at each institution. Now that this funding scheme has ceased, in two colleges, the Capital and Regional Universities, these initiatives are funded from the core access budget and in the third, the Constituent College, the course had to become self-financing. Findings reflect that there are different rationales for offering these courses from the perspectives of managers (funding) and academics (more diverse student body and learning culture). But in the main, analysis confirms that institutions develop this genre of programme in order to augment mature student numbers and be accountable to external funders for 'survival' in the system.

Findings in this study indicate that overall, higher education institutions have adopted HEA policy recommendations and one of the ways they provide for adult access is by

adapting and augmenting existing disciplinary provision to suit the needs of the adult learner cohort. There was also much evidence of basic units involved in various access services linking together internally. This concept of systems nested within systems is a feature of a complex adaptive system. It seems that the organic nature of access development in Ireland is driven in part by macro-level competitive funding policy instruments. This has meant that, at meso level, higher education institutions respond to public policy demands and therefore, access work is rarely static. It is in a constant state of flux and, like any complex adaptive system, institutions are constantly evolving and adapting to their changing exogenous and endogenous environments. This reflects the CAS concept of the capacity for adaptation where each institution has either restructured or adapted existing disciplinary provision based on local needs.

### ***Institutions Adapting to the Changing Student Population***

Since the economic decline in 2007 in Ireland, an increase in the demand for such programmes across case sites has been recorded and correspondingly, typical adult student profiles also appear to be changing. The growing numbers of adults within the context of a national and global economic recession accessing higher education has meant that each case site in the system has had to adapt in order to accommodate this changing demographic.

Across case sites, more male students and older students are returning to higher education. Some of these students are presenting with additional needs in terms of support services and institutions are making efforts to adapt to accommodate such students. This finding is congruent with a CAS framework, where the three levels within the system interact and evolve. This proves that the system is continually evolving and adapting. As the profile of students is changing, in turn, higher education institutions are adapting to accommodate and provide for this cohort of learners. Since the introduction of these courses, drawing from a CAS metaphor, a critical mass has developed and such programmes of study are part of the infrastructure of higher education institutions in this study.

### ***On-going Tension regarding On-Campus Delivery***

Findings in this study support the concept of on-campus delivery of access courses. From the perspective of adult students, this type of delivery appears to facilitate the deconstruction of institutional barriers which have been widely researched (as reviewed in Chapter Two, sub-headings 2.3.1 and 2.3.2). Evidence reveals that on-campus delivery is seen as helpful for both students and institutions. Such findings are supported in the literature on adult access (Fleming and Murphy, 2000 and 2003; Bowl, 2001; Read *et al.*, 2003; Gorard *et al.*, 2006). Fleming and Murphy's (1997) research on mature student participation in National College of Maynooth (NUIM) suggests that the type of access course taken by adult learners matters in terms of subsequent academic performance and retention. Fleming and Murphy's work (1997: 68) shows that:

the nearer the courses were both in teaching methods and course content, to the experience of university, the most positive the response was from the students...there was a negative reaction if an access course and its surroundings did not resemble that of the university itself.

Echoing findings from the literature, (Woodley *et al.*, 1987; Fleming and Murphy, 1997; Inglis and Murphy, 1999), participation in an access course was seen as overwhelming positive. From the perspective of adult learners, such programmes offer a second chance to participate in third-level education; a taster of what an undergraduate programme is like; direct entry; the opportunity to develop higher order critical thinking and learning skills and clearly students seem to find the curriculum both enjoyable and suitable. In addition, these courses fulfil a 'cooling out' function (Clark, 1960), that is, adults have an opportunity to sample what higher education is about and then decide if it suits them or not, at a particular point in their lives. There is, however, on-going debate concerning the location of access courses (Hyland, 2004; HEA, 2007b; HEA, 2010). Department of Education and Skills policy since 2003 has been trying to locate access courses in the further education sector. Like a CAS, there is on-going tension in this thematic area.

Within a CAS framework, the development of adult access courses or initiatives reflects the concept of a sub-element nested within a nested system with its own set of distinct

structures, processes and agents. The development of these courses can be conceptualised within the analytical framework in this study as an example of one of the fundamental principles of a CAS where the characteristics and behaviours of systems and actors emerge from interaction. In this instance, the four institutions engaged with national policy recommendations which advocate increasing adult access and developed local responses in order to ensure that there is a practical way of increasing adult access, creating new sub-elements within the overall system. In addition, the inclusion of this theme reflects the adaptive capacity of structures within the system.

### *Rise of the ‘Quasi-Academic’*

The sub-theme of access course co-ordination raises interesting perspectives on the status of access work. Findings reflect that access or preparatory courses are co-ordinated by professional services, rather than academic staff. Within the higher education environment, it is unusual to have courses not overseen by academic staff or departments. There was evidence to show that academic departments are involved but from a teaching and assessment perspective, rather than in programme management. This sub-theme will be discussed more fully in Chapter Eight: Partnerships to Promote Adult Access.

## **7.10 Chapter Conclusion**

Chapter Seven confirms that, since 1997, one of the ways higher education institutions provide for access for adult learners is to offer access courses specifically targeting this cohort. These courses have emerged across three of the institutions in this study because of seed-funding, and in the IoT, a wide range of pre-entry initiatives have been developed since the 2000s. Across case sites, there are both differences and similarities in the various admissions procedures. An increase in the demand for such programmes is recorded and correspondingly, a change among this demographic is emerging, with more older and more male students participating. Across case sites, there are differences in programme structure (some courses are full-time and others part-time) and in the number of contact hours associated with each programme. Accreditation also varies across sites. Delivery

remains traditional, on campus and class-based. On-campus delivery is seen as helpful for both students and institutions. There are also many similarities in terms of assessment, evaluation and co-ordination. Student progression rates to undergraduate study remain consistently high. In one institution, a need to develop more flexible options for progression was noted.

Findings confirm that at meso-level institutional access work is overall responsive to macro-national policy recommendations (HEA, 2008) and is greatly appreciated by students at micro level. Data from student evaluations and focus groups were supported by staff through interviews across sites and provided evidence that access courses are highly valued and clearly students seem to find the curriculum both enjoyable and suitable and as one student summed up succinctly: ‘everyone should have to do one’ (Humanities Student, Capital University, 01).

In summary, although there was not much evidence of a transformative approach to curricula design, evidence suggests that curricula across institutions in this study are considered suitable for access by the institutions and the individual student. At micro level, students, professional and academic staff find programmes to be of relevance. At meso level, these courses do much to augment student numbers and therefore feed into macro-level public policy concerns. The emergence of this theme illustrates that, like a CAS, one of the many ways institutions provide for adult access is to adapt existing disciplinary provision and deliver access courses targeted at adult learners.

Drawing from an applied CAS analytical framework, by developing courses as a mechanism to provide for adult access, the findings in this thematic area reflect the endogenous ability of institutions to self-organise and interact innovatively with the wider exogenous environment, resulting in the creation of a new sub-element within the nested system. In addition, there was much work with other basic units within the internal system (Becher and Kogan, 1992).

Chapter Eight which follows outlines the final thematic area in this study, partnerships to promote adult access.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT: FINDINGS FROM THEMATIC AREA FIVE - PARTNERSHIPS TO PROMOTE ACCESS**

### **8.0 Chapter Introduction**

This chapter reports on the findings across the four case sites in relation to the theme of partnership. The thematic area of partnership as a mechanism for the promotion of adult access emerged in the data analysis and identifies one of the ways in which higher education institutions in this study provide for adult access. This assists in providing an answer to the research problem of, *given the nature of higher education, why and in what way do Irish higher education institutions provide access for adult learners and, to what extent, if any, has such access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education professionals?* Key findings are presented on the following areas: international, national, regional and local partnerships, collaborations with external partners and partnerships within institutions to promote access at each case site. Partnership initiatives to promote adult access are discussed comparatively across each higher education institution.

### **8.1. Institutional Commitment to Partnership**

Although each case site refers in their various mission statements to the importance of teaching and learning, research and knowledge transfer, none explicitly mentions either partnership or collaboration. However, each institution in this study has a tradition of engagement with the wider community and makes reference to collaboration in their respective strategic plans.

The theme of partnership is included as Goal One of Pillar Five of the Strategic Plan at the Constituent College and aims to: ‘advance social inclusion through the medium of education and a strategy of Partnership’. Pillar five within the Strategic Plan (2012-2016) at the Constituent College states a commitment to the principles of partnership: ‘to promote inclusion through education...underpinned by a clear recognition that this

enterprise has many stakeholders and that a commitment to partnership is as essential as the enterprise itself' (Institutional Strategic Plan, 2012-2016: 33).

Similarly, at the Capital University, collaboration is an underpinning theme of the Strategic Plan (2009-2014: 11) which states:

Collaboration is a major feature of this strategic plan. Collaboration can also create the critical mass needed to deliver effectively to our students and to society, and the collaborative actions in this plan cut across the major themes of education, knowledge generation and transfer, student experience, and engagement with society.

Further, both the Regional University and the IoT refer to the importance of collaboration in their respective strategic plans. At the Regional University, the Strategic Plan notes the importance of: 'being connected to our communities...collaboration with academic institutions, corporations and government agencies in ways that support mutually beneficial activities' (Strategic Plan, 2011-2015: 27).

In addition, another document, the Access Policy, at the Regional University seeks to promote collaboration. It articulates that the institution: 'seeks and promotes collaboration with other[s]...supporting regional and educational development in order to develop and sustain flexible access routes for students from under-represented groups' (Access Policy, 2007: 3).

In the IoT, the Strategic Plan documents the importance of collaboration, and unlike the other institutions, the plan acknowledges the importance of both internal and external collaborative partnerships. The Strategic Plan (2009-2010: 6) at the IoT declares that: 'the Institute recognises the power of collaboration...internally...the Institute will continue to add its weight to external alliances'.

In summary, these institutional strategic plans make reference to the importance of collaboration. In addition, all strategic plans document their respective complex external operational environments and are aware institutions are part of a wider system. The theme of collaboration is mentioned in three institutional strategic plans (Capital University,

Regional University and the IoT) and specific reference to partnership is made in the Constituent College and the IoT). This rhetoric suggests that institutions according to their strategic documentation are, at least, aspirationally committed to the concept of an external partnership approach to access. However, it is interesting to note that institutional documentation regarding the theme of partnership was not mentioned in interviews with either staff or students. This may be attributed to the fact that working in partnership is a relatively new area within higher education and it has not percolated down the institution.

## 8.2 International Collaborations with External Partners to promote Access

International partnerships emerged as a sub-theme in the findings in this study across all case sites. Each institution collaborates with external partners, with some HEIs more extensively networked than others, as seen following in Table 8.1.

**Table 8.1: International Collaborations with External Partners to promote Access at each Case Site**

| Constituent College   | Capital University  | Regional University  | IoT   |
|---|---|--|---|
| Involved in EU Erasmus Access and Lifelong Learning Funding schemes | Member of European Access Network (EAN)<br><br>LDC is member of UK Learning Development Higher Education Network<br><br>Access staff participate in international networks/study visits | Involved in EU <i>Grundtvig</i> Erasmus Access and Lifelong Learning Funding schemes | Involved in Erasmus networks to promote international agenda in the institute |

### 8.2.1 International Partnerships

As Table 8.1 above shows, differences in the degree of participation in international collaborations to promote adult access exist across all case sites. Data suggest that the Capital University engages the most internationally. The Student Learning Development

Centre at the institution is a member of the UK Learning Development Higher Education Network and one respondent noted that: ‘we’re members of the English Learning Development Higher Education Network and again a lot of the topics on retention and access and different student needs, we kind of feed into that and take a lot of guidance from that’ (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 02).

In addition, the access team at the Capital University are members of the European Access Network (EAN). One member of staff at the Capital University commented that through active participation in EAN, she is aware that overall Ireland is ‘ahead in access, at the last EAN conference, I noticed how developed we are, with all our pre- and post-entry supports’ (Access Course Co-ordinator, Capital University, 04). Another member of the access team observed that EAN: ‘is a great place for sharing of information, looking at best practice in particular areas and learning about developments’ (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 08). These findings suggest that in one institution, the Capital University, international partnerships offer opportunities to engage in comparative research-related work at grass roots level and learn from access practice in other countries. This sub-theme was not mentioned in the other three institutions, the Constituent College, Regional University or IoT. As this enterprise is located at the level of the institution, this theme was not referred to either by students.

### **8.2.2 International Study Visits/Exchanges**

In two institutions, access staff had visited higher education institutions in other countries. Specifically, at the Capital University, access personnel participated in international networks in 2012 which involved study visits overseas. Findings from one respondent suggest this international collaboration is considered to be beneficial and there is much to be gained from participating in such schemes. This respondent noted:

I’m just back from the States for a week on an exchange and we were visiting universities all over the kind of New York and New Jersey region...[US Colleges are] so different...we can certainly pick up bits and pieces from people (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03).

In another institution, the Regional University, staff had a track record of engaging with the EU *Grundtvig* funding scheme which encourages comparative learning across the European higher education system. This theme of learning from others emerged in findings from the Regional University: ‘we’re involved in European projects... *Grundtvig*...great...very valuable...we learn from each other, get examples of good practice in the broad area of student services’ (Lecturer, Access Course, Regional University, 09). However, a caveat was noted by another respondent who highlighted the lack of status accorded such collaborative access work in international university rankings:

we’ve taken on lifelong learning funded EU projects, my criticism is that there is not any formal integration into core performance management structures that you are tied to in terms of international rankings (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01).

These perspectives suggest that the traditional work of higher education institutions in teaching, learning and research remains higher in status, as universities are still largely structured and organised along collegial lines in these core areas of work. Therefore, traditional academic work is viewed more favourably and this is where the academic rewards and recognition are located. Access work is relegated more to the periphery of higher education as it is yet not embedded as successfully in key structures, having largely developed to accommodate changes in external public policy.

In summary, institutions vary considerably in the extent to which they engage internationally in order to promote access. This can be attributed to the internal status of access work and associated budget constraints for access-related research in three of the institutions, the Constituent College, Regional University and IoT. Nonetheless, these findings indicate that there are micro-, meso- and macro-level benefits associated with engaging in international comparative work as it informs the grass roots level.

### 8.3 National Collaborations with External Partners to promote Access at each Case Site

National partnerships were one of the sub-themes which emerged in the findings in this study and each institution participates in a range of networks at national level. Table 8.2 following details this involvement and respondent perspectives are noted in the following sub-headings, 8.3.1, 8.3.2 and 8.3.3.

**Table 8.2 National Collaborations with External Partners to promote Access at each Case Site**

| National Collaborations with External Partners                                     | Constituent College | Capital University | Regional University | IoT |
|--|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-----|
| Access Made Accessible (AMA) <sup>1</sup>  | √                   | √                  | √                   | √   |
| Mature Students Ireland (MSI) <sup>2</sup>   | √                   | √                  | √                   | √   |
| AHEAD <sup>3</sup>   | √                   | √                  | √                   | √   |
| Inter-Institutional Retention Network <sup>4</sup>                                 | √                   | √                  | √                   | N/A |
| Conference of the Confederation of Student Services in Ireland (CSSI) <sup>5</sup> | √                   | √                  | √                   | √   |
| Links with National Adult Education Centres  | √                   | √                  | √                   | √   |
| Member of Higher Education Links Scheme <sup>6</sup>                               | N/A                 | N/A                | N/A                 | √   |

<sup>1</sup>Access Made Accessible (AMA): network of access officers working in third level in Ireland.

<sup>2</sup>Mature Students Ireland (MSI): network of mature student officers working in third level in Ireland.

<sup>3</sup>Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) is an independent non-profit organisation working to promote full access to, and participation in, further and higher education for students with disabilities, and to enhance their employment prospects on graduation.

<sup>4</sup>Inter-Institutional Retention Network: network consists of representatives from each of the Irish universities and was set up to exchange ideas and information that relate to the issue of retention among students and to promote best practice on tackling non-completion.

<sup>5</sup>Conference of the Confederation of Student Services in Ireland (CSSI): the CSSI is the representative body of student services and student affairs in Higher Education in Ireland, North and South. CSSI advocates policy development and change on issues affecting students.

<sup>6</sup>Higher Education Links Scheme: national scheme to promote progression for students who have completed Post-Leaving Certificate Courses in Further Education Colleges.

### 8.3.1 National Partnership Organisations

As Table 8.2 above demonstrates, all institutions are involved with various national access networks. In 1996, the Access Made Accessible (AMA) group, a national network of access officers from a variety of institutions, was established to provide a forum for discussion, mutual support and the sharing of experience and information for those involved in access. Mature Students Ireland (MSI) is a national network of Higher Education Institutes in Ireland working for the improvement of services for mature students and was founded in 2003. MSI membership includes mature student officers, mature student access co-ordinators and others working for the welfare of mature students in Irish universities, institutes of technology and colleges of education. Both groups meet regularly and are represented on the executive of the National Office for Equity of Access at the Higher Education Authority. Two respondents from the Capital University (5%) highlight the benefits of institutional involvement in national support networks. One interview participant noted that:

I have found the MSI very beneficial...the ability to network and the sharing together of information and working together on issues...I think has been incredibly useful for me...it has a good dynamic...seen as a good lobby group [for the HEA] (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03).

Involvement in the Inter-Institutional Retention Network, which was founded by a member of staff at the Regional University in 2004, was also seen as useful in highlighting awareness of retention at the Capital University: ‘now more locally, we are aware of retention and we advertised our services more so as to target those at risk’ (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 02). These national collaborations were not mentioned in the other case sites or by students in any of the higher education institutions. The IoT is not involved in the Inter-Institutional Retention Network as membership is confined to the university sector. Similarly, the Capital University, Regional University and Constituent College are not members of the Higher Education Links Scheme (See sub-heading 8.3.3 for more analysis on this). These findings suggest that there is a range of national macro-level partnerships across the higher education sector.

### **8.3.2. Partnerships with Adult Education Centres**

All four higher education institutions in this study engaged with adult education centres nationwide with the aim of marketing their courses and institutional supports to attract adult learners. Notably, at the Capital University, one of the access project workers maintains informal links with over 100 adult education centres nationwide and attends a number of careers events and information sessions for prospective applicants each year. In addition to providing information at general information sessions, the officer is also available for one-to-one meetings with prospective students (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03). Findings suggest that such collaboration with Adult Education Centres were in existence across all case sites in this study (Access Officer, Constituent College, 06; Access Project Worker, Regional University, 05; Access Officer, IoT, 01).

### **8.3.3 Partnership with the Higher Education Links Scheme**

Across the sites, the IoT is the only member of the Higher Education Links Scheme. This can be attributed to the historical development of the institute of technology sector in Ireland as it was previously linked to the vocational, rather than the higher education, sector. For example, the IoTs continue to be members of the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI), rather than Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT). The IoT sector has well-established progression routes from the further education sector, and actively targets students who have completed a FETAC accredited Post-Leaving Certificate course.

In the IoT, all courses have been mapped from further education to the IoT. This is seen to encourage progression (Senior Manager, IoT, 08). This point was supported by two focus group participants, who had progressed, over a number of years, from an evening adult education class to further studies in the IoT (Business Students, 02 and 03, IoT). This is not the case across the university sector. Individual academic departments may recognise FETAC qualifications but a national progression scheme to the university sector has yet to be developed. This finding can be attributed to a lack of policy progress

and some tension around ‘academic standards’ (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01).

In summary, higher education institutions in this study are extensively networked at national level. Such involvement is seen as beneficial in terms of sharing of information, networking, and targeting and attracting students. Partnership also affords opportunities to interact at a national macro level and provides a forum for political lobbying.

#### **8.4 Regional Collaborations with External Partners to promote Access at each Case Site**

Across case sites, each institution is involved in regional partnerships which, as summarised in Table 8.3 below, are in the form of higher education consortia.

**Table 8.3 Regional Collaborations with External Partners to promote Access at each Case Site**

| <b>Constituent College</b>  | <b>Capital University</b>   | <b>Regional University</b>  | <b>IoT</b>   |
|---|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local Consortium<sup>7</sup></li> <li>• South Western Regional Access Alliance (SWRAA)<sup>8</sup>.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regional Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA)<sup>9</sup>.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local Consortium</li> <li>• SWRAA</li> <li>• Strategic alliance with another regional university.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local Consortium</li> <li>• SWRAA.</li> </ul> |

<sup>7</sup>A consortium founded by the Strategic Innovation Fund scheme (2006-ongoing) which consists of four higher education institutions.

<sup>8</sup>South Western Regional Access Alliance (SWRAA) is a higher education consortium comprising of seven higher education institutions in the Mid- and South-West of Ireland.

<sup>9</sup>Regional Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA) which comprises of four universities and four Institutes of Technology in the greater Dublin area.

#### **8.4.1 Overview of Higher Education Consortia Partnerships**

As noted above in Table 8.3, each institution in this study is involved in higher education collaborations aimed at targeting adult access. Many of these consortia or alliances were founded in response to the SIF funding scheme. The Constituent College, Regional University and IoT collaborate with a number of higher education partners specifically to promote access. These three institutions are among the partners in a consortium, which was established in response to the macro-level Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) in 2006, and aims to promote access and lifelong learning as well as teaching and learning and postgraduate education.

In addition, the Constituent College, Regional University and IoT are active members of the South Western Regional Access Alliance (SWRAA) which comprises of seven higher education institutions in the Mid- and South-West of Ireland. At the Capital University, a strategic alliance called the Dublin Regional Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA), which comprises of four universities and four Institutes of Technology in the region, was formed with support from SIF (2006-2011). Access is one of the strands of work undertaken in all consortia. At the time of writing, although the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) has been withdrawn by the HEA in 2011, work is continuing across all consortia. With the exception of the SWRAA, all other consortia and alliances were top-down clusters and funding-related. The SWRAA emerged in response to an access-related project, led by agents working in the institutions and, therefore, can be considered a ‘bottom-up’ initiative.

#### **8.4.2 Benefits of Working in Partnership with other Higher Education Institutions**

Across case sites, the theme of the benefits of working in partnership with other higher education providers emerged. With regard to the DRHEA, the eight members of the Alliance have identified four strands of activity where collaborative action will lead to efficiencies and increased capacity for development. These enhancements are in learning,

graduate education, internationalisation and access, and findings confirm that staff engaged with this model of partnership: ‘we work actively with it and have developed a lot of resources and did an undergraduate research conference and a variety of things like that...all to support learning’ (Senior Administrator, Capital University, 01). Similarly, another respondent observed that there is: ‘...a body of work going on looking at again kind of streamlining admissions routes for mature students. That’s on-going; it’s something that is quite influential, I suppose, in the region’ (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03). This finding suggests that there is a new phase of adult access work in development.

As noted in sub-heading 8.4, the Regional University is also involved in a local consortium, as is the Constituent College and the IoT. Feedback from interviews suggests that the consortium is valuable, for example: ‘the notion of the [consortium] was a very important model; the model was unique in the country. Competition is always healthy but each institution has a unique contribution to make for the student’ (Lecturer, Access Course, Regional University, 08).

One of the flagship projects of the consortium was the establishment of two outreach centres. Both centres aim to increase adult access provision to a broader demographic and target access at a more local level by offering education to those who may be unable or reluctant to travel to one of the third-level colleges. One of the outreach centres, located in the city, delivered an external access course, *Certificate in General Studies*, in partnership with three other higher education institutions and the local VEC from Academic Years 2006/7 to 2011/12. One member of staff at the Regional University observed that: ‘the partnership of all HEIs in the region has been a very important part of my work’ (Lecturer, Access Course, Regional University, 08). The IoT is also a member of this consortium and similarly to the other institutions in this study, findings suggest that this involvement has been useful and ‘positive’ as it provided additional ‘institutional resources to target access’ (Senior Manager, IoT, Respondent 08). This perspective suggests that financial gains to the institution as a result of participating in the SIF scheme

played a significant role in fostering inter-institutional collaboration, which has continued since the funding scheme ceased in 2011/12.

In this study, there appears to be consensus across staff in case sites that involvement in higher education collaborations are useful for a range of reasons, including the accessing of finance and system improvements at meso level. The unique contribution of each local institution was acknowledged as was the macro-strategic value of making higher education more accessible for adult students. However, it should be noted that it is unlikely that collaboration would have taken place without a top-down requirement for receiving funding, as institutions typically had a history of operating autonomously. The incentive came from the macro level to work in this new way.

### **8.5 Local Collaborations with External Partners to promote Access**

Local collaborations emerged as a sub-theme in this study with each higher education institution complexly networked with its respective local education community. Table 8.4 next provides a summary.

**Table 8.4 Local Collaborations with External Partners to promote Access at each Case Site**

| <b>Constituent College</b>  | <b>Capital University</b>                                   | <b>Regional University</b>   | <b>IoT</b>   |
|---|---|--|--|
| Adult Access Course delivered in partnership with local VEC <sup>10</sup> | Adult Access Course delivered in partnership with local VEC | Adult Access Course delivered in partnership with local VEC            | VEC – (Bonus points scheme)  |
| PAUL Partnership <sup>11</sup>  | Appointment of a Community Liaison Officer (CLO)            | Number of partnerships with community-based adult learning initiatives | Memorandum of Understanding with FÁS <sup>13</sup>   |
| Involved with charities such as the St. Vincent de Paul Society           |   |  | Member of RAPID Community Development Programme  |
| Member of City Wide Lifelong Learning Committee                           | Voluntary Tuition Programme                                 | Partnerships with women groups and a Men’s Shed Group                  | Dedicated member of academic staff   |
| Member of RAPID <sup>12</sup> Urban Community Development Programme       | Member of RAPID Community Development Programme             | Member of City Wide Lifelong Learning Committee                        | Represented on interagency Traveller strategy group; local employment services; Travellers’ Development project; SCP and Charities Committee; Community Service Initiative (CSI) |
| Represented on School Completion Programme (SCP)                          |   | Member of RAPID Community Development Programme                        |  |

<sup>10</sup>VEC: A Vocational Education Committee (VEC) is a statutory local education body in the Republic of Ireland that administers some secondary education and most adult education.

<sup>11</sup>PAUL Partnership is an organisation made up of communities, state agencies, social partners, voluntary groups and elected representatives who work with local communities that have benefited least from economic and social development and aims to promote social inclusion and improve the quality of life of people living in these communities.

<sup>12</sup>Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development (RAPID): urban community development programme.

<sup>13</sup>Foras Áisteanna Saothair (FÁS): National Statutory Employment Agency.

Table 8.4 demonstrates that all institutions in this study are particularly networked in local cross-sectoral collaborations aimed at promoting adult access and that there are many commonalities across case sites. For example, all institutions are represented on the local urban RAPID groups. There are also some differences between institutions and this next section highlights some of these.

### ***Partnerships with Charities***

The Constituent College differed in its approach to partnership in the following way. The Constituent College is involved in several community and charity partnerships such as PAUL Partnership and the Catholic charity, St. Vincent de Paul Society (SVP). This involvement reflects the culture and ethos of the Constituent College, as documented in Chapter Five, sub-heading 5.3. One respondent made the point that: ‘engaging in such work might help with targeting the most marginalised’ (Access Project Worker, Constituent College, 01). Further comments reveal that for some respondents, more partnership work with charities might facilitate more efficient and effective targeting of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Access Project Worker, Constituent College, 07 and Lecturer, Access Course, Constituent College, 08), highlighting the benefits of such partnerships.

### ***Creation of a Dedicated Post for Community Liaison***

Another institution differed in its approach to local partnership by sanctioning a dedicated post to the area. At the Capital University, a Community Liaison Officer (CLO) was appointed. The role of the CLO is to coordinate relationships with local communities and to further develop access and outreach activities. The CLO is involved in a number of initiatives which aim to ensure that the College contributes, in as full a way as possible, to the regeneration and development of the local area and to building stronger links with local residents. These initiatives include membership of the Local Area Implementation Team under the Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development (RAPID)

urban community development programme, and acting as a formal point of contact for the Voluntary Tuition Programme.

The Voluntary Tuition Programme is a partnership between third-level students, parents and volunteers from the local inner city communities. Each year it matches over 400 students, graduates and staff members, as tutors, to children and teenagers studying in nearby schools. This programme has been running for over twenty years. In addition, the Capital University hosts a Mature Student Information Evening to specifically target and accommodate potential applicants from this group. One member of the access team at the University visits further education colleges, meets potential applicants on an individual basis and brings community groups on campus for full day visits. This is seen as ‘labour intensive but very rewarding work’ (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03). Although the creation of a post was not referred to during the interviews with staff or students at the Capital University, nonetheless the employment of a dedicated person to staff this area indicates institutional commitment to the concept of local partnership.

### ***Community-Based Adult Learning Initiatives***

Institutions in this study are involved in a number of community-based adult learning initiatives. At the Regional University, the Mature Student Office has developed a large number of partnerships with community-based adult learning initiatives including adult education centres, five women’s groups and a men’s shed group located in the inner city: ‘we meet a lot of community groups that come in every year, they get a tour of the campus, bring them around and go for coffee with them and we go out to them as well’ (Access Project Worker, Regional University, 10).

In summary, all institutions in this study work in collaboration with a wide range of local statutory (community groups) and non-statutory agencies (charities) and are deeply embedded in their local communities. The benefits of such local partnership are noted by senior managers, professional services, academic staff as well as students. These findings also suggest that institutions are both cognisant of, and responsive to, their exogenous

environments, particularly at local level and are aware of the importance of context in the area of access.

## **8.6 Collaboration with the Further Education (VEC) Sector**

Table 8.5: Summary of Adult Access Courses Delivered in Partnership Model shows that all institutions in this study offer externally-located adult access courses, accredited by FETAC, aimed at promoting progression to undergraduate studies. Across case sites, higher education institutions are partly responsible for the delivery of adult access programmes in partnership with the local further education providers, the Vocational Education Committees. The curriculum for the external partnership model of adult access programme delivery across case sites is broadly similar. Across cases, a wide range of academic subjects, designed to introduce adults to third-level study, are available to students and in addition, students must complete a skills component. At the other three case sites, the Constituent College, Regional University and IoT, there was one significant difference in the curriculum on offer, where adult students had to complete a work experience and work placement module. These modules are mandatory requirements in order to be awarded this particular full FETAC Level Five certification. However, the core subjects on the adult access partnership programme remained similar to that in the Capital University and included modules on Information Technology, Communications and Personal Effectiveness in addition to the Work Placement module.

Data reveal that across case sites, students found these courses to be of benefit in a number of different ways. One respondent noted the quality of teaching: ‘level of teaching on access course great, brought you out of your comfort zone’ (Humanities Student, Capital University, 01). Another student added that he: ‘got a lot out of it personally’ (Humanities Student, Capital University, 08). Additionally, another student remarked that the course prepared her well academically for the demands of undergraduate study (Humanities Student, Capital University, 02). Similar to the Capital University, students commented positively on their experiences in the Regional University. One member of the student focus group noted that the course helps prepare them for the challenges ahead by

introducing students to the third-level teaching environment (Humanities Student, Regional University, 06). The opportunity to access student support services throughout these courses was appreciated by students (Humanities Student, Regional University, 09). Some of these course participants use the library facilities at the Capital University and this was seen as helpful in: 'getting to know your way around the place, so you are not intimidated when you start a degree here' (Humanities Student, Capital University, 01).

**Table 8.5 Summary of Adult Access Courses delivered in Partnership Model**

| <b>Overview of adult access courses delivered in partnership with VEC</b> | <b>Constituent College</b>  | <b>Capital University</b>  | <b>Regional University</b>  | <b>IoT</b>  |
|---|---|--|---|---|
| <b>Description</b>  | Partner in SIF funded Outreach Centre – delivers <i>Foundation Certificate in General Studies</i>   | Three FETAC accredited adult access courses in partnership with local VEC  | Lead partner in SIF funded Outreach Centre - delivers <i>Foundation Certificate in General Studies</i>  | Partner in SIF funded Outreach Centre- delivers <i>Foundation Certificate in General Studies</i>  |
| <b>Start date</b>   | 2006  | 2004   | 2006  | 2006  |
| <b>Target group</b>   | Over 18   | Over 22  | Over 18   | Over 18   |
| <b>Curriculum</b>   | Study skills, educational guidance and information technology. Introductory electives in the humanities or sciences. Work experience and work placement module. | Study skills, educational guidance and information technology. Introductory electives in the humanities or sciences. | Study skills, educational guidance and information technology. Introductory electives in the humanities or sciences. Work experience and work placement module. | Study skills, educational guidance and information technology. Introductory electives in the humanities or sciences. Work experience and work placement module. |
| <b>Structure</b>  | Full-time, average of 20 hours a week for academic year.  | Full-time, average of 20 hours a week for academic year.   | Full-time, average of 20 hours a week for academic year.  | Full-time, average of 20 hours a week for academic year.  |
| <b>Accreditation of adult access partnership courses</b>                  | Accredited by FETAC (Level 5).  | Accredited by FETAC (Level 5).   | Accredited by FETAC (Level 5).  | Accredited by FETAC (Level 5).  |

In summary, there were many commonalities in the curriculum, accreditation procedures, mode of programme delivery, programme structure and student supports across case sites. Evidence confirms that students both enjoyed and found the courses to be of benefit both academically and personally. The main difference was that in three case sites, the Constituent College, Regional University and IoT, students had to complete both a work placement and experience module which, as noted above, is a requirement of some FETAC awards.

### **8.6.1 Progression Rates from Adult Access Courses delivered in Partnership**

Findings demonstrate that progression rates from the partnership model of adult access course delivery are encouraging. Since 2005, 73 students have gone on to degree courses in the Capital University, which represents a progression rate of 16.2%. Although further quantitative data were not available, and beyond the scope of this study, anecdotal evidence suggests that many other students have progressed to other colleges and universities. Institutional evaluation reveals that these courses are valuable to the adult learners. Two quotes from the institutional documentation have been selected to support this point: ‘this course has given me the chance to realise a lifelong ambition of going to third-level’ (Student 1, Evaluations, Capital University, year not provided), and, ‘it was a very tough year but I believe now I am prepared for anything and I am excited about my next few years in University’ (Student 2, Evaluations, Capital University, year not provided). Additionally, comments expressed by the adult students in the focus groups at the Capital University support the merit of offering this preparatory route of entry (Humanities Students, Capital University, 01, 02 and 03).

Similarly, since 2008, approximately 90 students have completed the *Foundation Certificate in General Studies* (FETAC Level Five) delivered by the Outreach Centre for the Constituent College, Regional University and IoT. Progression rates from the external

outreach course to undergraduate study are currently at 73% and direct entry routes have been negotiated to 48 courses across all four partner institutions. Perspectives expressed in a focus group suggest that students greatly value this programme (Humanities Student 06; Science Student 07, Regional University).

These findings suggest that this partnership model of adult access programme delivery is greatly appreciated by course participants who choose to progress to undergraduate studies as it creates direct entry access routes into a range of higher education institutions.

### **8.6.2 Evaluation of Partnership Model of Adult Access Programme Delivery**

Evaluation of the partnership model of adult access programme delivery has taken place. Key findings of the annual evaluation of the *Foundation Certificate in General Studies* (CGS) course delivered by the Constituent College, Regional University and IoT revealed that graduates reported being highly satisfied that key components of the CGS contributed towards their effective third-level participation. Almost all respondents (91%) felt that elective modules on the CGS were helpful in preparing them for third-level education (McMahon and Whisker, 2011). Core modules, Information Technology, Communications and Personal Effectiveness and Work Placement, were rated somewhat lower (76%) but were still considered useful in preparing students for higher education (McMahon and Whisker, 2011). Almost all respondents (80%) were satisfied with their overall performance to date in third-level education (*ibid*, 2011). The graduates reported coping less well with balancing study and family commitments (62%), juggling study with other commitments (57%) and financially supporting themselves while undertaking full-time study (19%) (*ibid*, 2011). From the perspective of the institution, challenges emerging from the evaluation of the course include a need for greater monitoring and tracking of students. In addition, finance and staffing are constant resourcing issues (*ibid*, 2011).

Extensive evaluation of the access programme at the Capital University has also been conducted. These evaluations include the students who have completed the external

access partnership course and have been referred to in Chapter Seven, sub-heading, 7.7.5. Similar to evidence from the Regional University, documents indicate that students and staff believe the course to be of value in introducing and preparing students for the challenges of third-level study. These findings suggest that although not without some finance and resource issues, the partnership model of adult access programme delivery has many merits, especially from the perspective of students.

### **8.6.3 Benefits of working in a Regional Partnership Model with the Further Education Sector**

Findings suggest that across all institutions collaboration with the further education sector has many merits but also poses a number of challenges. First, the development of strong relationships and the value of partnership are seen as positive at micro, meso and macro levels. For the Constituent College, the Regional University and the IoT, through the work of the outreach centre, strong relationships have been developed with three local Vocational Education Committees. Two VECs are represented on the Steering Committee at the Outreach Centre. One VEC co-delivers aspects of the access course and has responsibility for the delivery of two modules involved in the eight module course (design, delivery, finance, and assessment).

Second, comments show that from the perspective of some respondents, partnership work facilitates more efficient and effective targeting of adult students from backgrounds of restricted opportunity: ‘I think that the institution doesn’t target disadvantaged groups in the way we would like to target them...engagement outside the college helps’ (Access Project Worker, Constituent College, 07). A similar perspective on external engagement with other agencies was expressed by a senior lecturer at the Constituent College (Lecturer, Access Course, Constituent College, 08).

Third, two respondents noted that working in partnership with other agencies, and in particular with the further education sector, would help avoid the issue of programme

duplication (Senior Manager, Constituent College, 09; Senior Manager, Constituent College, 10) and that it might be more cost effective to work together. It was also noted there was potential to increase cross-sectoral collaboration with the further education sector, that is, with the VEC sector (Lecturer, Access Course, Constituent College, 08). A member of the senior management team at the Constituent College suggested the way forward might be to consider the introduction of a partnership model with an element of quality assurance in-built by the third-level sector and highlights that the VECs are the 'real statutory providers'. This respondent continued to make the point that the VECs have more generous financial infrastructure for such work, through their adult education budgets, than higher education institutions (Senior Manager, Constituent College, 10). These findings suggest that working in partnerships with the further education sector provides a means of reducing financial overheads associated with adult access programme delivery for the third-level sector, highlighting the need for institutions to be more cost effective, an on-going tension in the higher education sector in Ireland.

The merits of strategic working are observed by an institutional Senior Manager, who suggests this will ultimately increase access provision:

we know enough about access to know that we collectively all of us who are stakeholders in education and education disadvantage and tackling education disadvantage...we need to do more to work together in a strategic way...I think about it in the simplest terms possible that's it's the phrase I always use is join the dots you know otherwise it's not going happen...join the dots to make it happen (Senior Manager, Constituent College, 09).

This evidence reveals that there may be an overall lack of strategic coherence at macro level, a theme which also emerged in Chapter Four, sub section 4.3. Students also noted the value of local partnership. One focus group participant made the following observation:

education is the way out of difficult economic situations, bring people into the College, it will have a knock-on effect...anything that can bring people into an institution like this can only be good, on them, and for society. If you open the gates of the College and bring people in for their yoga class, school plays etc., that will help in opening people's minds to third-level education as an option for them (Humanities Student, Constituent College, 01).

Analysis reflects that there are many micro-, meso- and macro-level merits to working in a partnership model, such as greater strategic cohesion; dialogue around issues around programme duplication; more effective targeting of adult students; pooling of resources and the creation of strong relationships in the local education community.

#### **8.6.4 Challenges of Local Partnerships with the Further Education Sector**

Collaboration with other education providers is not without its challenges. One respondent commented: ‘the collaborative model sounds great, but in reality...with an external programme you may invest resources and get nothing out of it’ (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01). This perspective suggests that higher education institutions may commit deeply to the collaborative partnership model and may contribute resources such as personnel and finance to an external access programme which may not yield returns in terms of student progression rates through to undergraduate studies. This evidence hints at an on-going resistance to change, somewhat paradoxical to statements made in strategic plans.

In addition, there were questions raised about the boundaries between the further education and higher education sectors. A member of the senior management team at the Constituent College noted that each sector within the education system should operate strategically and questions whether the type of access-related interventions currently delivered are appropriate for a third-level college. This respondent questioned whether it is appropriate for third-level institutions to continue to be responsible for delivering access courses and suggests that other key work of the third-level sector might be adversely affected. This view raises some interesting perspectives about the role of a lecturer in higher education compared to the role of a teacher in the further education sector: ‘there is an opportunity cost; you’re not doing the research, you’re not doing the reading, you are not doing the stuff that enhances you at third-level, if you get so immersed in second-level stuff’ (Senior Manager, Constituent College, 09). This respondent expressed the view that perhaps engaging in a franchising model where higher education institutions would provide the quality assurance and the further education

sector would assume responsibility for the programme delivery might be an option to consider for the future (Senior Manager, Constituent College, 09).

These findings suggest that adopting a partnership approach to access with the further education sector has both merits and challenges and is not without tensions and paradoxes, particularly depending on whether you are operating from the perspective of a university manager, academic, professional administrator or that of a student.

## **8.7 Partnerships within Institutions related to Access**

Intra-institutional partnerships are in evidence across case sites. In the main, as noted in Chapter Six, sub-heading 6.5, these partnerships appear as formal committees established either by the institutional leader or by formal bodies such as Academic Councils. Further, in two institutions, informal networks at an institutional level have developed and across institutions there was also evidence of partnerships developing among the adult student body, mainly in the form of mature student societies. The following sub-headings outline this evidence.

### **8.7.1 Informal Internal Partnerships**

In two institutions, the IoT and Constituent College, informal internal partnerships have been formed. For example, in 2011, a Student Support Network was established at the Constituent College, which comprises of all staff involved in supporting students at the institution. This informal network has wide membership and includes staff from the Learning Development Centre; Access/Disability Office; Chaplaincy; Counselling; Medical Centre; Health Promotion Unit; Students Union; Student Parent Coordinator; Student Services; Senior Office Administrators from Arts and Education Faculty Offices. Senior management are also represented at these network meetings by the Vice President Administration. This group engages with the national forum for student support, the

Conference of the Confederation of Student Services in Ireland (CSSI), which has representation from all HEIs in Ireland. Similarly at the IoT, an informal partnership between the Access Officer and the Head of Development, which is a senior management post in all the IoTs in Ireland, has evolved. This informal partnership is seen as being of strategic benefit to the access agenda at the institution:

...a lovely internal collaboration between the Development Office and Access and it's a wonderful strategic link to have...you just pick up the phone and you just roll it out...so I have my manager's manager, and I have the Head of Development as well, because we collaborate very successfully...it's been very fruitful (Access Officer, IoT, 02).

The sub-theme of informal intra-institutional partnerships did not emerge from the analysis in either the Regional University or the Capital University. Therefore, in summary, findings suggest that in two institutions in this study, informal access-related intra-institutional partnerships have emerged.

### **8.7.2 Access Partnership Infrastructures**

Specific institutional environmental access-related partnerships exist across case sites. At the Constituent College, two centres were established which support access for under-represented groups. One centre works in partnership with disadvantaged primary schools to support teachers and pupils with a view to encouraging greater educational attainment. The Learning Development Centre (LDC) focuses some of its work on promoting adult access and retention and has membership on the steering committee of the other centre. At the Capital University, the Access Office is represented on the Equality Committee. This is seen as a useful internal linkage as: 'it gives a really good overview of all the student body and the diversity and highlights the mature student' (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 06). Similarly, in the IoT, the Access Officer sits on the Student Affairs Committee, which is a sub-committee of Academic Council. In addition, in the IoT, as noted in Chapter Six, sub-heading 6.5, specific infrastructure in the form of the ESF Student Assistance Fund Deciding Committee has been developed. This committee steers and oversees access work at the institution.

In the Regional University, a new committee, chaired by the Head of Student Affairs, was established in 2012 which aims to promote greater collaboration between those involved in access internally. The need for this new committee has emerged through an organic development and historical governance of access and its role is to bring more internal strategic cohesion to this work (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01). As noted in Chapter Six, sub-heading 6.4.1, up to Academic Year 2011/12, each of the three access offices, that is the Mature Student Office, Disability Office and the School Leavers Office, reported to different members of the senior management team. However, since 2011/12, with the appointment of a new Access Manager, all three access offices now report to the new appointee. One respondent noted that ‘...even internally access it’s a problem, let alone externally’ (Lecturer, Access Course, Regional University, 09) and another interviewee observes that the purpose of this committee is: ‘institutional collaboration...there is a table where we have to log our work...to see where is opportunity for collaboration...essentially to find out what everyone else is doing institutionally’ (Access Project Worker, Regional University, 10). Students did not make specific reference to internal institutional partnerships in the field work in this study. This suggests that these partnerships function for the purposes of staff working.

In conclusion, these findings point to a network of complex institutional environment relationships and suggest that the institutions are aware of the need for greater internal collaboration. One institution in particular, the Regional University, is making a concerted effort to bring more internal cohesion and strategic direction to its access work. Such evidence indicates that across case sites there has been an increase in specific institutional environmental access partnerships.

### **8.7.3 Internal Access Partnerships with Academic Departments**

Other internal partnerships emerged as a sub-theme in this study. A wide range of relationships between individual academic departments and access course co-ordinators

have evolved. In the Constituent College, for the purposes of the adult access course, the *Foundation Certificate for Higher Education: Adult Learners*, partnerships have developed with the following academic departments: Philosophy; English Language and Literature; Irish Heritage Studies; History; Geography; Mathematics and Information Technology and in German Studies. In the Regional College, relationships have been forged with a number of faculties, including Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Engineering, Mathematics and Science and the Faculty of Health Science. In addition, at the IoT, the School of Business, Computing and Humanities School of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics and School of Health and Social Science interact with Access Office staff. Similarly, in the Capital University, partnerships with academic staff have been formed who are involved in the access interview process, teach on the internal adult access course, have membership on access steering committee and/or staff who engage or oversee access research. These intra-institutional partnerships with academic departments suggest that offering adult access provision has resulted in a complex range of new partnerships among staff who work in higher education institutions in this study.

#### **8.7.4 Partnerships among Adult Student Population and between Students and Institutions**

Across case sites, there was evidence of partnerships among the student population. In particular, in the Capital University, a mature student society was established in 1982 and membership is open to all adult students at the university. This includes adult access students, undergraduates, postgraduates and international students. The society is run by a group of mature students on a voluntary basis with a committee elected annually. The aim of this society is to support adult students during their time at the Capital University and to facilitate integration into the wider student body. This is achieved by hosting formal and informal events including free coffee mornings and lunches. These provide the opportunity for students to meet each other and gain further information on facilities and services the Capital University provides with the view that academic and social support are crucial to the all-round college experience. The Capital University have made a room

available for members of the society which has tea and coffee making facilities and a refrigerator where students can store lunch. These facilities are appreciated by students at the institution (Humanities Students, Capital University, 01, 02 and 03).

Since 2010, mature student societies have also been established in the Constituent College, Regional University and the IoT. The emergence of these societies may be related to the on-going reductions in state funding for adult learners and provide students with much-needed peer support as well as a potential mechanism for political lobbying. The presence of such adult student organisations was not mentioned during interviews conducted with staff, and only among students in only one institution, the Capital University. Nonetheless, one respondent, a lecturer teaching on the access course at the Constituent College, noted that peer support among the adult student demographic was one of the most significant forms of support (Lecturer, Access Course, Constituent College, 08).

Across institutions, the evidence suggests that since 2005, an intricate range of internal, formal and informal, staff and/or student partnerships have been established across all institutions. Individuals within institutions have found innovative ways of improving communication and these internal collaborations present institutions with new ways of working. This suggests that institutions are making an effort to bring more internal cohesion and strategic direction to their work. These partnerships play an important role in enhancing communication, sharing of information and providing support for those engaged at the 'coal face' of adult access in higher education institutions and provides evidence of the multifaceted environmental collaborative interactions across case sites in this study.

Analysis reveals that patterns of intra-partnership working vary in institutes of technology and universities because of different historical ways of working where one is more managerial and the other, perhaps more collegial. The collegial model emphasises the academic/administrative divide, which is reinforced in terms of access support services, but there is a blurring of roles emerging here. This is evidenced by the quasi-academic

who is cheaper to hire by management and has responsibility for working in a partnership model at grass-roots level.

## **8.8 Summary and Discussion of Findings of Thematic Area Four, Partnerships to Promote Access**

In summary, all case sites in this study clearly believe that working collaboratively is one mechanism which is helpful to promote adult access. The theme of partnership proves the ability of agents to self-organise, adapt and co-evolve. Across higher education institutions, commitment to collaboration is expressed in strategic plans and in some instances, access policies. Institutions vary in terms of how they collaborate internationally. However, all institutions are extensively networked nationally and, in particular, locally.

Each institution has developed a number of positive relationships among its student populations, intra-institutionally, with other higher education institutions, with the further education sector and with community-based groups, and the benefits of working in partnership are highlighted in this study. Further, working in partnership is seen as a way of avoiding duplication in the system and offers a way of targeting adult learners as well as a means of pooling limited financial and staff resources. A need to deepen collaboration is noted and some suggestions for further work, including the potential to develop a partnership model of adult access course delivery, may be possible in the re-structuring that is taking place in the third-level landscape more generally at present.

### ***Adaptive and Self-Organisational Capacity of Agency***

Findings reflect that structures have been developed by individual agents with the aim of both steering and supporting work and/or study for staff and students. These include new mature student societies; formal and informal networks; membership of local, national and, in two cases, international organisations, demonstrating the CAS capacity of agents

to self-organise and adapt. The creation of a critical mass, one of the characteristics of a CAS, provides opportunities for political lobbying to advance the access agenda as well as much needed support for students and staff. Like a complex adaptive system, these new ways of working, such as student partnerships and collaborations among staff, confirm how the emergence of a critical mass is facilitating micro, meso and macro adaptations to the new demographic of adult learners within HEIs in an Irish context. The evidence in this study is consistent with that across the body of literature where it is considered that partnership is an effective mechanism for promoting adult access (Gorard *et al.*, 2006).

### ***Blurring of Professional Identities***

Some interesting perspectives about the role of a lecturer in higher education compared to the role of a teacher in further education sector also emerged. Findings on the theme of partnership to promote adult access point to the emergence of new working practices and roles, consistent with international research in the area (Whitchurch, 2008 and 2012; Macfarlane, 2011 and 2013). Mcfarlane (2011) discusses the concept of change in academic work practices and presents the term ‘para-academic’. He suggests that there is an ‘unbundling’ and ‘morphing’ of academic work which is being increasingly divided into ‘specialist’ functions and that academics are being increasingly ‘displaced’ by ‘para-academics...who specialise in one element of the tripartite academic role...of teaching, research and service’ (p. 59). There is a tension though as many of these roles may involve teaching, curriculum design, research and student assessment and, thus, be academic in nature. However, in the main, staff who work in access are classified as being administrative, which may have implications for pay, promotion and access to research funding.

In her research, Whitchurch (2006: 380) describes the access area of work as being ‘quasi-academic’ and theorises that this cohort of staff need to be able to work within fuzzy boundaries and the theme of partnership in this study is a good example of this. Courtney (2013: 45) highlights that staff working in access need to ‘be conversant with different

discourses and continually adjust and define their own professional roles'. Across case sites, this emergence of the theme of partnership as a mechanism to provide for adult access highlights the blurring of professional identities. This evidence suggests that Ireland is no exception to the changing nature of work in higher education among higher education professionals. Courtney (2013: 48) argues that one model that offers potential as a 'powerful tool for dealing with a complex and constantly changing professional environment' is to work 'inter-professionally', in other words to work in partnership. In this study, the theme of partnership shows how the working practice and norms of professionals working in higher education are changing. Within an applied CAS analytical framework, the theme of partnership can be conceptualised as the blurring of system boundaries and demonstrates the adaptive and self-organisational capacity of agents to survive in new contexts.

Institutions in this study varied in their approach to the partnership model of working and findings reflect that the IoT has more in common with the Newman teaching model whereas the universities were more aligned with the Humboldtian model of teaching and research model. This was evident through the range of partnerships which had emerged, for example, in the international sphere. It was also clear that the IoT, which has only recently come under the direction of the HEA (in 2006), has less traditional collegial ways of working and in the area of access, the institution has gone for a more managerial/administrative approach. This approach was also evident in the Regional University. In the Constituent College and Capital University, both older institutions, access has been sort of 'tacked-on' to existing structures, but is not fully embedded. This has resulted in an academic/administrative divide in terms of work. However, managerialism has crept in, in terms of employment contracts and rewards structures to what is an under-funded or 'soup-kitchen' area, somewhat on the periphery of core 'traditional' work in teaching and research.

Findings highlight that access is primarily a local concern for higher education institutions, rather than a regional or national issue, a point that is also reflected to in the literature (Marks, 2000; Thomas 2001). Further, the importance of local networking as a

mechanism to promote access emerged in this study. Across all institutions, there is considerable evidence of the extensive local collaborations with a wide range of stakeholders such as the further education sector (VEC); the voluntary sector (volunteers, charities); adult education groups; community groups; Traveller organisations; women's and men's groups and local area committees.

It also seems to concern academic managers that their work in access has not been recognised in international higher education structures and rankings. This may ultimately impact on access, in what Macfarlane (2011: 60) terms a 'performative university environment'. This is not a concern for those working 'on the ground' in access. These findings signal a dissonance between the local and global environments for higher education institutions, a finding already mentioned in Chapter Four. Lynch (2006 and 2010) has written extensively on global ranking in the context of an increasingly neo-liberal marketisation of Irish higher education and its associated managerialism, and notes that increasingly, the third-level sector is being called to become more 'market-led rather than education-led' and this has 'profound implications...for the definition of what it is to be an educational leader or manager' (Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012: 22). It seems that this managerialistic approach is having an impact on the working practice and values of professionals in higher education, including academic managers. Within complexity theory, this can be conceptualised as a tension contained within the system.

### ***Feedback Loops - Partnership as a Catalyst for Change***

This study confirms that a range of new formal and informal internal, institutional partnerships have developed across case sites, including partnerships with academic departments and also among the student population in the form of mature student organisations. These partnerships suggest that adult access provision may be acting as a catalyst for internal change. Research shows that partnerships may help facilitate change in terms of the structure and content of higher education programmes as the curriculum might need to adapt to accommodate the needs of a range of stakeholders while maintaining standards (Foskett, 2002) and allow for greater mobility within the sector

(Gorard *et al.*, 2006). This study broadly supports these findings and shows how working in partnership to provide for adult access to higher education is essentially a non-linear activity.

Analysis shows that the partnership approach to access course provision has resulted in innovative models of programme delivery. In the case of the Constituent College, Regional University and IoT, a joint cross-institutional and cross-sectoral (with the VEC) model of course delivery has emerged. The development of 48 articulated progression opportunities through the Outreach Centre model also supports these findings. In this study, although relatively small numbers of adult students participate in partnership models of programme delivery, there was some evidence of progression, an opportunity clearly valued by students as expressed in focus groups. This is in contrast with Gorard *et al.*, (2006) where there was conflicting evidence regarding the effectiveness of the partnership model of adult access course delivery in terms of student progression.

Perspectives expressed by senior managers suggest that higher education institutions may commit deeply to the collaborative partnership model by contributing resources to an external access programme and may not yield returns in terms of student progression rates to undergraduate studies, hinting at an on-going resistance to change, somewhat paradoxical to statements made in strategic plans. In other words, as noted by Davies (2010), there may be lots of work for poor dividends, and in a managerialistic approach, this represents an inefficient use of limited public finance. These findings suggest that adopting a partnership approach to access with the further education sector has both merits and challenges and is not without tensions and paradoxes, particularly depending whether you are operating from the perspective of a third-level manager, academic, professional administrator or that of a student. Viewed from a CAS perspective, this can be termed as a blurring of the boundaries and findings reflect a tension around defining where access belongs, which seems to be at the interface of the further education and higher education sectors.

With the development of these new ways of working, partnership provide an example of how access is changing traditional work practices in HEIs. In this study, higher education institutions have acted on these HEA recommendations, again providing an example of how policy at the macro level is affecting practice at the meso and micro levels of the system. It illustrates one of the main elements of a CAS, that of the importance of feedback across the system. In this study, evidence reflects that the theme of partnership at institutional level has, in part, influenced national policy (HEA, 2006 and 2008). This development of partnership shows that not only do agents within the system understand the complex environment, but that agents can contextualise their approach (Plesk and Greenhalgh, 2001), causing a feedback loop, which, in turn, promotes change (Ramalingam and Jones, 2008). This concept of how social and cultural factors impinge and shape social context for agents is well-documented (Archer, 2013).

Gorard *et al.* (2006) consider that partnership works more effectively at a strategic, rather than an operational, level and is not without challenge. The findings in this study resonate with those in the literature and show that partnership is a way of bringing more cohesion to the area for all concerned and is also necessary in the context of dwindling support from exchequer funds and the need to be more cost-effective. In addition, some literature shows that partnerships present new ways of working and therefore pose a number of challenges. Gorard *et al.* (2006: 93) identify these as ‘practical, organisational and cultural...market pressure and funding methodologies create further tensions’.

McGrogan (1995) discusses how the impact of collaborative working arrangements depends on the different partnership structures. For example, if some collaborations form on a voluntary basis, this may influence levels of involvement and commitment to collaboration and trust. Further, if the structure of the collaboration is a horizontal one, where all higher education institutions are equal, this probably results in reducing competitiveness between institutions for funding and other resources. In this study, although many of the endogenous higher education institutional partnerships emerged in response to exogenous competitive funding schemes, such as Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF), essentially the structure of the partnership was vertical with one institution

assuming a lead role. Clearly individual agents were committed, as many of the consortia or alliances have continued post-funding, but they may also be seen as part of the wider clustering which is taking place in the HE landscape at present. Through a CAS lens, the emergence of these consortia and alliances illustrate the ability of individual and collective agents to adapt and self-organise in response to a constantly changing exogenous policy environment. Further, the theme of partnership offers a metaphorical example of how the process of feedback can, in this instance, promote change in working practices.

## **8.9 Chapter Conclusion**

Partnership raised a number of interesting themes in this study, namely those of programme duplication, issues of defining the boundaries between the sectors and issues around the lack of return in terms of students numbers versus the degree of financial and personnel investment, themes echoed in the literature (Gorard *et al.*, 2006). In addition, the findings in this thematic area point to the changing working practices and norms among those in higher education. However, this study did find evidence that, despite the challenges, across all institutions, both staff and students value adult access courses delivered in a partnership mode. Again, this finding is supported by the literature (Gorard *et al.*, 2006). The theme of partnerships to promote access provides an example of how the higher education system is reflective of a CAS. This theme of partnership, with its characteristics of systems nested within systems, fuzzy boundaries and critical mass, highlights how the higher education system is capable of on-going adaptation to a constantly changing exogenous environment. With regard to partnership, across all institutions there is evidence of endogenous micro- and meso-level structural, organisational and cultural change as well as tension in response to macro-level exogenous demands from stakeholders and policy recommendations. The inclusion of the theme of partnership confirms that it is one of the ways institutions provide for adult

access and also shows how the working practices and norms among higher education professionals are changing.

The following chapter, Chapter Nine, Summary, Recommendations and Conclusions, draws this study to a close.

## CHAPTER NINE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 9.0 Chapter Introduction

This chapter is divided in four sections. The first part of the chapter summarises the findings from all the chapters of the thesis, the second section returns to the research questions and problem stated in Chapter One. The third section of this chapter identifies recommendations for consideration and the final section, section four, draws the study to a close.

As part of the wider complexity framework and findings chapters in this study, a number of concepts have emerged, notably the rise of a managerialistic approach to the governance of adult access in higher education in Ireland. Lynch, Gummell and Devine (2012: 4), referencing Clarke *et al.*, (2000), explain that ‘new managerialism [is] not about management, it [is] about establishing a new set of values and practices embedded in a complex series of social, political and economic organisational changes’. From an ideological perspective, NPM has its roots in neoliberalism. Harvey (2005, p. 2) defines neoliberalism as a

theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within the institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade.

Similarly, Giroux (2004) explains that neoliberalism is more than an economic policy which aims to reduce government expenditure; it is also an ideology that affects every dimension of social life. Citizens are defined as consumers, customers and clients and there is no future outside the market. There is only market sovereignty and no political sovereignty (Fleming, 2010). Harvey (2005) expands on this to assert that neoliberalism subtly shifts the burden of responsibility onto the individual rather than the nation state, including matters relating to social welfare, health and education: ‘[neoliberalism] is not about improving the conditions for all but only for economic elites’ (Harvey, 2005: 9). Therefore, societal inequality is ‘structural to the neoliberal agenda’ (Harvey, 2005: 16).

From the 1990s, the Irish government began to move towards a managerialistic approach to governance in order to encourage neoliberal economic and social policies (Lynch *et al*, 2012). This ideological shift in Irish public policy is filtering through to higher education. As shown in Chapter Two, sub-heading 2.2.3, higher education policy discourse is placing an increasing emphasis on the link between tertiary-level education and the needs of the labour market. Similarly, at EU level, lifelong learning rhetoric has been criticised for its preoccupation with the development of human rather than social capital and with a focus on servicing the neoliberal knowledge economy which reinforces, rather than addresses, social inequality (Stauber and Walther, 1998; Blaxter and Hughes, 2000; Field, 2000 and 2006; Morgan-Klein and Osborne, 2007). As Fleming (2010) posits:

this is the core of the tension for modern society as whether it wants to allow the economy or society to dictate the education and learning agenda. The economy has the last word at present and this is hugely problematic (p.3).

A recurring theme through the findings chapters in this study reflects that there is a growing trend towards a neoliberal culture within higher education, which is permeating the adult access agenda. These neoliberal tendencies are evidenced by the growth in access-related courses offered through the *LMA/Springboard* scheme which are designed to up-skill the adult population with a view to securing employment in areas where there are skills shortages. Although this is necessary work, particularly in the context of a national unemployment rate of 14.1% (CSO, 2013), however, it is equally important to ensure that the social justice/equity model of adult access is not diluted. In addition, the burden of responsibility for fees is being increasingly passed from the state to the individual student and by adopting a managerialistic approach to access, the onus for increasing mature student access has been moved from the state to the institution. This has the net effect of ensuring that government, in the neoliberal tradition, are not addressing the structural inequalities that exist for adult learner regarding, for example, student financial support for part-time study.

The rise of a neoliberal culture is clearly influencing adult access to higher education and the threat is that such an approach to access may ultimately cause a move away from the social justice/equity dimension of access. These trends in the adult access agenda

highlight some fundamental questions about access and the role and purpose of higher education: is higher education merely an instrument of government to service the ‘smart’ economy? Or is the role and purpose of higher education about developing the whole person and as Lynch *et al*, (2012: 19) suggest nurturing graduates who can contribute in the ‘civil, political, social or cultural institutions of society, locally or globally’?

Nonetheless, as Murphy (2000) maintains, the public sector needs to be accountable and in this study, data analysis reveal that adopting a NPM approach to access has forced a degree of change at the level of the institution. This has been achieved by the adoption of a NPM approach to adult access. Institutions have engaged in strategic planning, evaluation, target setting and the various HEA calls for institutions to be accountable in this regard through a range of reporting requests. As the findings in this study reflect, this has meant that colleges have had to adapt to the new demographic of adult learners.

Trends towards a neoliberalism stance and its associated instrument of NPM provide an overview of the ideological backdrop and context for the summary of the findings in this study which follows.

### ***Summary of Chapter One: Introduction***

This study has been concerned with the theme of adult access provision across four diverse third-level providers in Ireland and has examined institutional responses to national policies which aim to promote access for adult learners to higher education. This thesis was especially focused on themes relating to access to higher education for adult learners over 23 years, especially recruitment and admission, access curricula and support/pastoral care services provided for these students. The thesis has also explored the issue of partnership formation in higher education around the theme of access. Assessing quality of access provision was not a focus of this study. The purpose of the study was to examine adult access to higher education as a development resulting from new, exogenous public policy concerns and one which may be shifting some of those working in higher education away from traditional academic norms and working practices. Therefore, the overarching research problem was, *given the nature of higher*

*education, why and in what way do Irish higher education institutions provide access for adult learners and, to what extent, if any, has such access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education professionals?*

Four interconnected secondary research questions were developed in order to guide the analysis which were:

*International/Comparative Level*

- How do Irish adult access higher education initiatives compare internationally in terms of statistics and policies?

*National Level*

- In what ways are adult access initiatives in higher education institutions congruent with existing national policy concerns?

*Institutional Level*

- How do institutional managers and academics perceive adult access initiatives in their institutions and to what extent, if any, has this caused a shift in working practices?

*Individual Student Level*

- How do adult students experience institutional access initiatives and to what extent, do they perceive, if any, changes in curriculum content, curriculum delivery modes and provision of support services for them?

The access dimension to higher education has emerged as a salient policy concern but it is viewed differently from many perspectives in higher education, including those of managers, academic staff, professional staff and students. This study has provided an opportunity to contribute to the debate and the existing access to higher education literature, with regard to policy and practice and especially the usefulness of working collaboratively, particularly in an access context.

## *Summary of Chapter Two: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework*

The literature drawn on in this research primarily focussed on four areas:

- the macro-level global trends in adult access to higher education. This section investigates supra-national policy developments and examines comparative literature on adult participation in higher education;
- the evolution of macro-level national Irish policy;
- institutional meso-level studies of adult access programme provision;
- micro studies of adult access programme provision.

Access policy in Ireland has been seen to develop in quite a piecemeal manner in the 1990s, with small amounts of initiative funding being provided by the Higher Education Authority. However, a more pro-active and strategic approach emerged when the government became focused on preparing citizens to work in the ‘knowledge economy’ which required additional up-skilling and higher levels of education. A new office for access was created in the 2000s and policy, as a result, has developed in this area, but it is felt that more work needs to be done in developing: more flexible access provision; greater recognition of prior learning; more policy coherence across the higher education system and increased sustainability in the area of human and financial resources, especially in these current times of recession.

The review of literature further revealed that while useful research has been completed at the national policy level in this area, much less has been completed at the institutional level. These gaps include limited literature on mature student access to higher education in an Irish context, a tendency for research to focus on the barriers model to the broadening of access and a lack of evidence on the challenges and merits of working in partnership.

One overarching theoretical and analytical framework which provides a way of conceptualising adult access initiatives within the complex endogenous and exogenous higher education landscape is Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) or complexity theory.

This study draws on CAS or complexity theory as a useful analytical framework. The models of higher education organisation, which consider institutions essentially as social organisations, especially the collegial (horizontal) versus a more managerial (hierarchical) one, were considered as part of the wider complexity framework.

### ***Summary of Chapter Three: Methodology***

This study adopted a mainly qualitative approach in the constructivist and interpretivist epistemological tradition using the case study method (Stake, 2011). Fieldwork which involved a total of 77 participants across staff, institutional managers and students in four diverse higher education institutions in Ireland was undertaken. In addition, this fieldwork was complemented by a review of institutional documentation. The following data collection methods were used: focus groups, interviews and institutional documentation review including mission statements, strategic plans, access plans, access policies, equity policies, student records and access programme evaluations, where available.

### ***Summary of Chapter Four: Impact of International, Supra-national and National Government Policies on Adult Access***

Chapter Four presented the first thematic area that emerged from the data in this study: impact of international, supra-national and national government policies on adult access. Four main sub-themes emerged from the analysis of findings. These included the impact of transnational and supra-national policy on adult access; the impact of national policies on adult access; impact of financial policies of government departments on adult access and a tension between quality and equality. Evidence showed that there was only a slight awareness of transnational and supra-national adult access policy but a desire to engage more and it was felt that access work at a local level should be more recognised at global level and that social justice elements be acknowledged in university global ranking systems. From a neoliberal perspective, this signifies the commodification of higher education (Lynch *et al*, 2012). Irish national higher education, on the other hand, and in particular, access policy, were considered to have a significant impact. From an

ideological stance, this vertical shift in the implementation of higher education policy from the collegial model with its characteristics of academic autonomy to more intrusion by central government represents a move towards a NPM approach to the implementation of policy (Harvey, 2005). However, institutions differed in how they viewed higher education policy and this was linked to the different types and structures of higher education institutions. Finance remains a central concern, both from the perspective of institutions and students where the onus of responsibility is moving from the state to the individual (Harvey, 2005).

### ***Summary of Chapter Five: Adult Access and Wider Organisational Environment***

Chapter Five explored the findings from the second thematic area in this study, adult access and wider organisational environment. Higher education institutions in this study are, in principle, committed to broadening access for adult students. Extensive planning has taken place across institutions and access is, in the main, included. This is expressed through the findings on the inclusion of adult access into all institutional strategic plans and in some mission statements. All institutions except one have identified recruitment targets and institutions are pro-active in trying to attract more adult access students, as dictated by HEA policy in the NPM tradition. Again, this is congruent with neoliberal ideology where the role of policymakers is to create ideal conditions for the market to thrive (Harvey, 2005). Student support facilities are available and greatly appreciated by adult students. Academic and professional staff at each institution appeared to be deeply committed with most of the work emerging through a grass roots approach. Further, there appears to be strong support for adult access course provision from senior managers across each case site. Students rated their experiences on adult access initiatives as being positive and helpful in preparing them for the rigours of full-time study. Operational issues concerning the difficulty of managing out-of-hours provision emerged as a challenge in only two institutions. However, there was also evidence that access is still a relatively new area of development within higher education and that more coherent planning is required.

### ***Summary of Chapter Six: Adult Access and Specific Organisational Policies, Processes and Structures***

The evidence in Chapter Six, the third thematic area, demonstrated that institutions have developed a wide range of organisational policies, processes and structures specifically for enhanced adult access provision and that these are considered mostly effective by both staff and students. All institutions had dedicated access policies, support structures and roles in place. Support structures included the formation of access and equality committees within the traditional collegial model. Typical new roles created included Access Officers, Mature Student Officers and Learner Development staff who reported to a senior manager such as a Vice-President who had responsibility for the area of access, indicating increasing managerialism in this area with a shift of power to the centre away from academics. Governance of access differed across case sites but was mainly hierarchical and vertical. It reflected the different models and structures of higher education and in three institutions, a review of access was being undertaken which was concerning for some staff in terms of employment security and professional identity. Vertical hierarchical governance structures are a manifestation of NPM and concerns about the neoliberal trend to devalue labour is reflected in the literature (Harvey, 2005; Lynch *et al*, 2012). In addition, the need to develop more flexible models of programme delivery emerged as a challenge. The evidence in this chapter reveals that both structure and agency play integral roles in providing access for adult learners at the level of the institution, but that this provision was heavily reliant on ring-fenced dedicated funding.

### ***Chapter Seven: Adult Access Course Provision***

Chapter Seven deals with the fourth thematic area, adult access course provision, and confirms that, since 1997, one of the ways higher education institutions has provided for access for adult learners is to offer access courses specifically targeting this cohort. These courses have emerged across three of the institutions in this study because of the availability of seed-funding, and in the IoT, a wide range of pre-entry initiatives have been developed since the 2000s. There were many similarities across case sites in terms of various admissions procedures; programme demand; student demographics and

programme structure. There were also some differences around contact hours and accreditation procedures. On-campus delivery was reportedly seen as helpful for both students and institutions and student progression rates to undergraduate study remain consistently high. In one institution, a need to develop more flexible options for progression was noted. Adult access courses are reported as highly valued, as evidenced by data from student evaluations and focus groups and staff interviews across sites. This study did not attempt to evaluate the quality of access programme provision.

In summary, although there was not much evidence of a transformative approach to curricula design, and in general courses were an adaptation of existing disciplinary provision, evidence suggests that the access curricula across institutions in this study are considered suitable by the institutions and the individual student. At micro level, students, professional and academic staff report finding programmes to be of relevance. At meso level, these courses do much to augment student numbers and therefore feed into macro-level public policy concerns. The emergence of this theme illustrates that, one of the many ways institutions provide for adult access is to adapt, rather than change, existing disciplinary provision and deliver access courses targeted at adult learners. Academic integrity and quality of the courses are upheld as they are subject to professional peer review when students have their work examined. However, reproducing neoliberal characteristics, the inclusion of generic skills and work experience modules, with the purpose of preparing graduates for the world of work, reflects a neoliberal approach to higher education which defines the purpose of tertiary education as servicing the needs of the knowledge economy (DES, 2011).

### ***Chapter Eight: Partnerships to Promote Adult Access***

Chapter Eight examined the final thematic area, partnerships to promote adult access. This chapter raised a number of interesting issues that emerged from this study, namely programme duplication, definition of boundaries between the sectors, as well as concerns around the lack of return in terms of student numbers versus the degree of financial and personnel investment. Institutions were all broadly committed to the principle of

partnership and access staff were deeply involved intra-institutionally, local, regionally and nationally. There were also some instances of international collaboration and of students being involved in a partnership model of working. The inclusion of the theme of partnership can be seen to demonstrate a change in the traditional teaching, research and service work associated with higher education professionals. A sub-text within these findings suggests that the drive for greater financial efficiencies is one of the main motivators for partnership working from the perspective of managers within higher education institutions (Harvey, 2005).

These findings suggest that adult access initiatives have resulted in a degree of change at the level of the institution, although there was also some evidence of continuity of existing practices. This can be conceptualised under the broad headings of change and continuity, as summarised in Table 9.1: Summary of Findings.

**Table 9.1 Summary of Findings**

| <b>Change</b>  | <b>Continuity</b>   |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supra-national policy is evolving and will filter down to institutions over time</li> <li>• National access policy is very influential</li> <li>• Changing relationship between HEIs and government regarding effectiveness and accountability</li> <li>• Access is contributing to rise of managerialism (strategic planning, recruitment targets and monitoring of access performance)</li> <li>• Access is constructed in 'deficit' neo-liberal model</li> <li>• There is a growing relationship between the market and access</li> <li>• Institutions have adapted to accommodate adult access and new roles, structures, policies and procedures have been developed</li> <li>• Agents play a key role and new work practices in the form of partnership and in the area of governance have emerged.</li> <li>• There is a blurring of professional identities and a rise of the 'quasi-academic' in an Irish context</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The wider socio-cultural political context impacts on adult access</li> <li>• Finance remains an issue for students and institutions</li> <li>• Institutional culture contributes to the mediation of access</li> <li>• Access, in some ways, is moving from the periphery to the centre of institutions</li> <li>• There is on-going debate about location of access courses</li> <li>• Part-time/flexible provision continues to be under-developed</li> <li>• Curricula of access courses adapted and re-structured rather than re-imagined, while maintaining quality</li> <li>• Admissions policies and procedures remain largely under-developed and are not always flexible or coherence across the higher education system, thus reducing transferability</li> </ul> |

## 9.1 Secondary Research Questions

This section addresses the secondary research questions raised in this study and is divided into four levels of analysis.

**International/Comparative Level** - *How do Irish adult access higher education initiatives compare internationally in terms of statistics and policies?*

Compared with other western European countries, Ireland has been a latecomer to the field of adult access to third-level education. The literature shows that earlier higher education policy was more concerned with massification rather than diversification of the student population in third-level education. However, since the mid-1990s, there have been significant developments in higher education policy with legislation and a range of special initiatives being put in place. These include provision of a dedicated ‘access’ unit located within the HEA, competitive funding schemes for institutions and targeted institutional initiatives. Findings show that this commitment at macro level appears to have advanced adult access to third-level education and increases in adult student participation have been steadily recorded. This progress at national level reflects positively internationally within the EHEA where Ireland performs strongly in the Social Dimension of Bologna. Nonetheless, there was also evidence that more work is needed in a number of key areas, such as finance, development of part-time flexible options for programme delivery and in the recognition of RPL as a mechanism to facilitate greater adult access. In addition, some managers also felt work on access needed to be recognised in rankings internationally.

**National Level** - *In what ways are adult access initiatives in higher education institutions congruent with existing national policy concerns?*

According to the current study, access initiatives appear to be congruent with national access policy. All institutions have engaged in organisational planning with the result

being access policies and plans are in place; resources are committed and a range of student support infrastructures such as Learning Development Centres, counselling units and dedicated spaces are available. Institutions have also identified their target groups and have set ambitious quantitative targets, again adhering to policy recommendations. Across all sites, there was evidence of dedicated resources in the form of staffing, physical facilities and structures in the form of governance at committee level and reporting lines to vice-presidents. All four elements of good practice, which are policy, practice, partnership and targeting, identified in the review of access initiatives have been adopted by institutions (HEA, 2006 and 2008). Across case sites there was evidence of targeting, policies and procedures in place and all institutions have adopted a partnership model to further their access work.

**Institutional Level** - *How do institutional managers and academics perceive adult access initiatives in their institutions and to what extent, if any, has this caused a shift in working practices?*

Institutional managers and academics appear to perceive their adult access initiatives positively. From the perspective of academic staff, there seems to be a return on their investment of time in adult access initiatives as many students progress both to undergraduate and postgraduate studies in their various disciplines. In all institutions, there was evidence of on-going commitment to the area with either access reviews taking place and/or drafting of access policies and support from senior managers was seen as essential. Such initiatives are congruent with institutional missions and strategic approaches where across case sites, commitment to broadening access for adult learners is espoused in a wide range of institutional documentation such as mission statements, access plans and policies. Institutional managerial discourse focuses more on the wider social dimensions of broadening access. Evidence reveals an apparent shift in working practices. Where there was a traditional divide between academic and professional services staff in third-level work practices, access (among other areas such as quality and internationalisation) has led to a new category of ‘quasi-academic’ staff (Whitchurch,

2008; 2012a and 2012b). These quasi-academics are involved in both administrative and traditional academic work.

**Individual Student Level** - *How do adult students' experience institutional access initiatives and to what extent, do they perceive, if any, changes in curriculum content, curriculum delivery modes and provision of support services for them?*

At institutional level, adult students' experience of access initiatives and courses across the four case sites in this study was reported as overwhelming positive. The fieldwork in this study appears to confirm that access courses and initiatives fulfil a number of important functions. First, such courses and initiatives introduce adults to third-level education and provide a 'taster' of what is involved. Second, these initiatives also prepare adult learners for the rigours of third-level study. Many of the assessments completed during preparatory programmes of study mirror the assessment procedures in undergraduate programmes and this model of assessment is considered challenging, but helpful, for those transitioning to undergraduate study. Further, as guardians of standards and quality, academics did not appear to 'dumb down' academic programmes to enhance access numbers. Third, these courses provide adults with an opportunity to sample subjects and decide if progression to undergraduate study is what they want at a particular point in time. Findings in this study suggest that adults develop personally by participating in access courses and initiatives. Fourth, such courses and initiatives would seem to facilitate acculturation into third-level institutions. By participating in access courses and initiatives, adult learners can become familiar with the teaching and learning environment, modes of assessment, academic and professional staff, and the physical surroundings. In addition, students reported that they greatly appreciated the range of support services available. From the perspective of adult students, the issue of financial support remains unresolved and although some progress has been made, the evidence suggests that some students were struggling to make ends meet and that this was causing considerable stress.

## 9.2 Addressing the Research Problem

Having outlined the main findings of the study, it is time to return to the overarching research problem with which this study is concerned, *given the nature of higher education, why and in what way do third-level institutions in Ireland provide for access for adult learners, and, to what extent, if any, has such access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education professionals?*

The first part of the research problem addresses *why Irish higher education institutions provide for adult access* and the evidence in this study has revealed that although individual institutional culture plays a mediating role, overall higher education institutions in this study provide for adult access mainly in response to expectations from the complex exogenous environment. It would appear to be economically and socio-politically expedient to do so. Although, the evidence reveals only slight awareness of adult access transnational or supra-national policy, findings reflect high engagement, from the perspective of institutional staff, with Irish adult access higher education policy.

Results in this study reflect that access is being increasingly constructed in a neo-liberal fashion at all levels of this CAS system with its associated managerial approach. Across case sites, access tended to be associated more with a deficit or utilitarian approach (Jones and Thomas, 2005). Despite this, academics appear to remain involved with admissions, teaching and assessment of access students and therefore, are part of the day-to-day processes of student life. Morgan and Slowey (2009) theorise that access is constructed in a neo-liberal disparate manner, rather than in a 'holistic' system-wide approach (p.216).

At the macro level, data revealed that there has been a shift in HEA policy discourse which constructs the purpose of higher education in economic terms, again consistent with observations from the Irish literature on the subject (Thompson, 2007; Burke, 2009; Lynch, Baker and Lyons, 2009; Lolich, 2011; Lynch, Gummell and Devine, 2012; Fleming, 2012). This theme of the relationship between neo-liberalism and access is reinforced in the literature (Burke, 2002; Darmody and Fleming; 2009; Morgan and Slowey, 2009; Lynch, 2010; Fleming, 2012; Lynch, Gummell and Devine, 2012; Rizvi, 2013). Apple (2004) contends that neo-liberalism highlights the importance of the market

and promotes an individual rather than collective ideology. Writing in an Irish context, Lynch (2006) argues that education discourse increasingly interprets education as a market commodity and this is perhaps the most significant influential force at present. In Australia, Rizvi (2013) argues that there has been a ‘distinctive ideological shift from a social democratic to a market conception of equity in education...this shift has been accompanied by changes in governance...to new managerialism focussed on efficiency and accountability’ (p. 274). This study would seem to support these findings, (as noted throughout Chapters Four, Five and Six).

Some evidence of a neo-liberal managerial approach to adult access within higher education emerged in this study and it seems that Ireland is also engaging in a re-articulation of access, constructed in neo-liberal terms. This is represented by the sub-theme of positioning of access within the market in the Capital University, IoT and Regional University, although each institution approached this differently: in the IoT, it was driven by the need to maintain enrolments; in the Capital University and Regional University, it was to balance the promotion of student diversity in the context of international rankings. Similarly, the availability of government Springboard funding appears to be influencing this alignment of higher education access and the market. This trend of the influence of the market on higher education has been well-documented in the literature (Clark, 1983; Whelan, 2012; Rizvi, 2013) where it is argued that there is an increasing link between marketisation and access in higher education institutions. The findings in this study suggest that the market and in particular, the access policies of government are strong forces of influence on the area of access to higher education in Ireland (Clark, 1983).

Although there were on-going challenges for the financing of access from the perspective of the institution and students, the range of exogenous policy instruments aimed at promoting greater adult access would seem to have contributed to driving this agenda, again characteristic of an NPM or managerialist approach. This suggests a change in the relationship between third-level institutions and government (Hanney and Kogan, 2000).

The second part of this overarching research questions aimed to examine *in what way higher education institutions provide for access for adult learners*. Findings in this study

suggest that higher education institutions draw on their distinct structures and unique processes as outlined in Becher and Kogan's (1992) meta-theory of higher education in Chapter Two. Therefore, HEIs in this study provide for adult access by developing distinct policies, and unique structures, processes and practices. In Chapter One, it was proposed that access is one of the many forces that compel a whole institutional approach and therefore, contributes to advancing managerialism, and the findings of the study reflect this. Institutions in this study responded to the adult access agenda largely in an externalist manner, more aligned with the NPM model of higher education. Although there were cultural differences at the level of the institution in response to this type of approach, there was also considerable evidence that HEIs are adhering to policy recommendations and are conceptualising access in the NPM model by engaging with strategic planning, evaluation and review, access policies and access target setting. One of the ways they provide for adult access is by adapting and augmenting existing disciplinary provision to provide curricula designed to suit the needs of the adult learner cohort with the only new addition being skills components, thus academics can be seen to be maintaining control over their work. There was little evidence of a transformative approach, rather access was constructed mainly in a 'deficit' and 'utilitarian' paradigm (Thomas and Jones, 2005). Despite this, opinions expressed by both staff and students confirm that this model appears to work well.

The adult access agenda can be seen as a work in progress and although not fully mainstreamed and incorporated into institutional norms, there was some evidence that it was moving inwards from the periphery. Questions over the status of access and where it should be located within the internal structures of the institution emerged as a strong thread. The theme of adult access being on the periphery was also evident in institutional documentation and, in the main, while there were dedicated access plans and policies in place and, apart from the Capital University, these were not on the whole fully integrated into core institutional strategic planning work. This finding echoes Whitchurch's (2008 and 2012) concept of access being located in a different symbolic space which she terms the 'third space' (2012b: i). This study shows that, although considerable progress has been made in the adult access agenda, it has been because dedicated ring-fenced finance has been and still continues to be available, albeit in smaller amounts.

The third section of the research question explores *to what extent if any, has such access made an impact on the working practices and values of staff working in higher education?*

Access appears to be making an impact on the working practices, and professional norms, rather than values, of professionals working in higher education. Evidence reveals that individual agents play a significant role in providing adult access to higher education and results point to the existence of a complex web of social relationships across agents (Mason, 2008). The current study further suggests that interaction across a wide range of collaborative partnerships is pivotal to providing adult access to higher education. Findings reflect that partnership is a new way of working for the sector and both structure and agency combine to provide for adult access.

The current findings resonate with Whitchurch's research (2012) and shows that through these new ways of working 'environments and identities reflect expanding agendas in higher education, and institutions that have become more permeable, for instance as a result of diversifying student and staff profiles, expanding models of learning, a broadening range of external partners...' (Whitchurch, 2012: 144). This theme of partnership with its characteristics of systems nested within systems, blurring of boundaries and critical mass highlights how staff, working within the higher education system, are capable of on-going adaptation to a constantly changing exogenous environment. With regard to partnership, across all institutions, there is evidence of endogenous micro and meso-level structural, organisational and cultural change as well as tension in response to macro-level exogenous demands from stakeholders and policy recommendations. This appears to represent a change in traditional working practices, rather than the values, of higher education staff.

Changing work practices also emerged in the sub-theme of governance and access course co-ordination. In two institutions, the Regional University and IoT, governance of access was administratively dominated and academic staff were not represented on the various access governance structures, with this work overseen by a senior administrator. This represents a move from traditional disciplinary structures to a more centralised approach at the level of the institution. In contrast, at the Constituent College and Capital University, both collegially oriented, there was representation on access committees from

across the community, academic staff, professional staff, senior managers and students. Across case sites, access, rather than academic, staff had responsibility for the coordination of preparatory/access courses. These were the only third-level courses coordinated by non-designated academic staff at all case sites, although these staff often had a high level of academic qualifications and were very capable.

In addition, evidence gathered shows that the presence of dedicated staff, ‘para-academics’ as termed by Macfarlane (2011) or ‘quasi-academics’ (Whitchurch, 2008 and 2012b) and institutional champions at each institution do much to support students from a ‘bottom-up’ perspective. Again, this finding highlights the key role such agents can play in effecting institutional change from an adult access perspective. This concept of the importance of institutional champions has also emerged in the literature and appears to be central to providing adult access at the level of the institution (Lomas, 2006; Thompson, 2007). The theme of the casualisation of labour also emerged with some staff reporting that they worried about their future prospects, again, echoing findings in the literature (Macfarlane, 2011; Lynch, Gummell and Devine, 2012; Clarke, 2013; Courtney, 2013). It is clear that access is one of many agendas which is contributing to change in higher education.

### **9.3 Recommendations**

As pointed out above in section 9.0, the study is a timely one given the current context and the under-researching of this area from an Irish perspective. In addition, as outlined in Chapter One, the aim of the study was to examine adult access provision in four higher education institutions and to provide recommendations for the future development of national policy in the area of adult access. Therefore, this section proposes recommendations emerging from the thematic analysis of data in this study. These recommendations are clustered into three headings which are 1) resource-related; 2) behavioural/operational-related and 3) value/norm-related.

### *1) Resource-related recommendations*

- Findings reflect (Chapter Four, sub-heading 4.3) that many students were struggling to make ends meet, particularly in rural Ireland where there are few public transport options and transport costs were proving prohibitive. Crucially, it is recommended that the issue of student finance to be properly addressed as it remains an on-going central tension in the debate surrounding adult access. In addition, students need to communicate their concerns, particularly concerning finance, through the existing structures of mature student societies and/or student unions. Data suggest that unless the issue of finance is resolved and improvements are made, it is likely that lack of finance will negatively affect access, progression and retention among adult learners. Hence, this is the most fundamental recommendation in this study.
- This research shows that part-time/flexible learning provision has featured across many policy pieces since 1995 (for example, DES, 1995; 1998; 1999; 2000 and 2011; HEA, 2012). However, as suggested in Chapter Two, sub-heading 2.1.2 and in Chapter Four, sub-heading, 4.2.5, progress in this regard has been slow. It is recommended that financial relief mechanisms for students be developed to encourage more part-time and/or flexible/distance learning students. Government need to consider incentivising the area financially from the perspective of institutions. One way of achieving this is to provide seed-funding to develop resource infrastructure in the area of part-time and flexible/distance learning options. In addition, as noted in Chapter Four, sub-heading, 4.3, the findings in this study advocate for increased investment in adult education guidance.
- From the perspective of institutions, there needs to be an awareness that access staff are finding it difficult to work in the context of reduced resources (Chapter Four, sub-heading 4.3) and that at a minimum, access funding needs to be maintained and ideally, increased.

- Adult access funding initiatives, such as *Springboard* and SIF, are welcome policy measures but in order to improve impact, it is recommended that there needs to be greater consultation and collaboration between HEIs and HEA and such initiatives should be amended based on feedback and evaluation data (Chapter Four, sub-heading 4.2.6 and 4.2.7).

### ***Behavioural/operational-related recommendations***

- Based on findings in Chapter Four (sub-heading 4.2, 4.2.1, 4.2.2, 4.2.3., 4.2.4 and 4.3) more strategic access policy cohesion is required at government level. In particular, data reflect that there were administrative issues and there needs to more improved cohesion around the various government departments who deal with student finance.
- As evidenced in Chapter Four, sub-heading 4.2.7 and in Chapter Eight, sub-heading 8.4, government funding schemes, such as SIF, which promote greater institutional interaction were seen as beneficial in terms of promoting co-operation and collaboration among colleges. It is recommended that such activity continues.
- Data analysis (Chapter Five, sub-heading 5.8 and Chapter Six, sub-heading 6.1 and 6.3) shows that there needs to be further flexibility for adult learners in admission policies. In particular, although RPL policies were in place across case sites, it was perceived that there were difficulties in operationalising such policies. It is recommended that RPL policies be operationalized and concerted efforts at individual institutional level are necessary in this regard.
- Evidence reflects that participation in adult access courses is beneficial for all stakeholders and progression rates are high in comparison with other countries (Chapter Seven, sub-heading 7.6 and 7.9). However, despite the success of such courses, only about 1-2% of the undergraduate student population enter third level

via this route. It is recommended that delivery of adult access programmes be increased.

- The presence of dedicated personnel and institutional structures in the form of learning development centre, counselling facilities, orientation programmes and subject-specific support emerged as significant supports particularly from the perspectives of adult learners (Chapter Six, sub-heading 6.6.1 and 6.6.2). It is recommended that institutional infrastructure for these essential activities is continued.
- It is imperative that further research on the impact of access courses delivered in partnership, or delivered externally by the further education sector, is undertaken. Findings reveal that progression rates to undergraduate courses vary and more research is needed to explore this further (Chapter Eight, sub-heading 8.6.1), in particular, there is a need to gather cross-sectoral data in both the further and higher education sectors, with reference to adult access including entry route, subsequent academic performance and post-graduation destinations;

#### ***Value/norm-related recommendations***

- Evidence in this study (Chapter Four, sub-heading 4.1.5) reflects that unless access is included as an indicator in the global rankings mechanisms, such work will remain lower in status than core work of research and teaching. Therefore, the recommendation is that access is incorporated into the KPIs among global and EU university ranking agencies.
- Although labour market initiatives such as *Springboard* are important, particularly in the context of high national unemployment, nonetheless it is important that the social justice/equity model of access continues to be supported by both the HEA and institutions (Chapter Four, sub-heading 4.1.6). Access provision to higher education can be of service to both the economy and to society in general and the

recommendation is that the social justice/equity dimension of access must remain a salient public policy objective.

- Findings in Chapter Four, (sub-heading 4.4), reveal that there are on-going elitist tensions regarding the issues of increasing access and maintaining high academic standards. It is recommended that more research is conducted in this area. In addition, it is recommended that national debate about this issue takes place. This would show, as Skilbeck (2001) asserts, that equity and quality can co-exist. It is further recommended that data gathering and subsequent dissemination of findings at the level of the institution on mature student participation including entry route; subsequent academic performance; retention rates; mode of study (full-time/part-time/distance) and post-graduation destinations is undertaken. This type of research would help address the tensions around issues of equity and academic quality.
- Individual higher education institutional culture influences how adult access is constructed endogenously (Chapter Five, sub-heading 5.3). Findings reveal that there is a need for more dialogue and an articulation of how and why access is important at the level of each institution among all categories of staff. Therefore, it is recommended that greater investment is needed in the area of staff development and training through Centres for Teaching and Learning and Human Resource offices. Such initiatives have potential to feed into revisions and development of institutional mission statements and strategic planning activities (Chapter Five, sub-heading 5.1 and 5.2). Institution-wide dialogue would facilitate a greater awareness of access activities and contribute to the mainstreaming of access which, as the evidence shows, is work in progress (Chapter Six, sub-heading 6.8). Further, it is recommended that the governance of access at institutional level is re-visited. In two institutions, the governance of access was administratively dominated. In terms of improving the status of access work and ensuring that mainstreaming is taking place, it is important that access is seen as core work and therefore, it is recommended that there is cross-institutional democratic representation on the various access committees. This should include

members of the student body as well as a representatives from senior administration and academic management.

- In Chapter Six, (sub-heading 6.1), findings show that each institutional had an access policy in place and clearly such policies have played a key role in advancing the access agenda at each institution. However, evidence also reflects that access is work in progress, moving from the periphery into core institutional business (Chapter Six, sub-heading 6.7). It is recommended that in order to achieve greater institutional ‘buy-in’, access needs to be incorporated into core strategic planning, rather than remaining as a stand-alone/separate policy. Following this recommendation would foster and encourage greater awareness of access work across the institution.
- The changing work practices among higher education professionals emerged as a strong thread. It is clear that there are status issues (one respondent mentioned that access is essentially ‘an academic soup kitchen’). Themes which surfaced included the casualisation of labour (Chapter Six, sub-heading 6.7); job security (Chapter Six, sub-heading 6.4.1); lack of access to promotional opportunities (Chapter Six, sub-heading 6.6.1); opportunities to access research funding (Chapter Six, sub-heading 6.6.1) and participation in international or supra-national networks (Chapter Four, sub-heading 4.1.4 and Chapter Eight, sub-headings 8.2, 8.2.1 and 8.2.2). Evidence shows that the work of the ‘quasi academic’ who can traverse blurred boundaries needs to be acknowledged (Chapter Eight, sub-heading 8.8). It is recommended, therefore, that the work of access staff should be valued, appreciated and encouraged by institutions. This study advocates for a need to support access staff development and the establishment of mechanisms to encourage interested access personnel to up-skill and become research active and disseminate their findings via local, national or international fora.

- It is important that higher education institutions are involved locally and working partnership is a useful approach to fostering relationships and bringing the institution out into the community, thereby reducing perceptions of elitism (Chapter Six, sub-heading 6.7). Working in partnership acknowledges that access work is more than just about attracting greater numbers of access students. This aspect of work recognises that educational disadvantage is multi-faceted and complex and some of the work undertaken by access staff, particularly in local communities, functions more in a longitudinal inter-generational way, rather than yield immediate dividends (Chapter Eight, sub-heading 8.5). It is recommended that working in partnership continues to be valued as a mechanism to support access and that further research is needed in this area.

#### **9.4 Conclusion**

It was hypothesised that access in higher education, is largely a response to wider public policy concerns and funding, and is one of the many agendas that compel a whole institutional approach and therefore, makes a contribution to advancing managerialism and results in a shift in work practices and professional norms in higher education. It is not access, in and of itself, that has caused these shifts. Government has been concerned to produce more citizens who can work effectively in the ‘knowledge economy’ and has encouraged higher education institutions to take more access students and meet government-set targets. What has resulted then is a change in the relationship between the state and institutions as institutions have had to become more accountable, which has led to more dependent institutions and the promotion of effective management of this area.

Academics have yielded some power to management within institutions. This has meant academic practices becoming more corporate-like and even a change in academic identity with new categories of staff emerging. Other areas where a shift of power to the centre occurs are in the creation of mission statements and strategies, some of which refer to access and new ways of working in partnership with other agencies and institutions. However, some managers have an academic background and can be still described as

academic managers in the area of access and are responsible for the development and implementation of policy institution-wide.

While academics remain involved in recruitment and admission of all students, new offices at the centre of the university, new managers for responsibility for access and new roles have emerged. This has given more power to the centre in the area of access and yet it is 'soft' power as there has to be co-operation and co-ordination across the whole institution. Therefore, there have also been some horizontal power shifts with managers linking with deans and departmental heads on access committees. Where academics still maintain their values, and are the primary agents, is in the area of teaching, design and revision of the curriculum and an altruistic regard for all students. This has resulted only in the adaptation of curriculum delivery styles, to accommodate adult learners, but has not caused a fundamental change of disciplinary curriculum content. Thus, it can be seen that standards and quality have been maintained by academics and their values upheld. There has also been a tendency towards professionalisation of those concerned with access and this can be seen with national bodies of access and mature student officers emerging as well as similar European bodies.

As noted in Chapter Two, Analytical Framework, De Zilma (2010: 3) describes the 'complex, turbulent exogenous environments' as having a profound impact on the Australian higher education system. The same statement could be made in relation to environments in which Irish higher education institutions are currently situated. The field work in this study was conducted against a background of an enormous fiscal crisis with an IMF bailout and parallel review of the higher education system.

Across the five thematic areas in this study, a number of common threads surfaced that of change and continuity, of tension and paradox, and of an interplay between agency and structure. Although providing adult access is a discrete sector within the complex higher education landscape, access affords a snapshot of the wider reform and modernisation of the higher education system within an Irish context. The themes of tension and paradox in relation to access have been highlighted in a number of international studies (for example, Jary and Parker, 1998; Bowl, 2003; Thompson, 2007). However, not a great

deal of research has considered access within the paradoxical parameters of change and continuity within the area of higher education.

The findings in this study reflect that access is, largely, a development which is the result of new exogenous public policy concerns and one which, in many ways, is shifting those working in higher education away from traditional academic norms and working practices. Changing work practices are blurring professional identities in access, and in some ways weakening it, leading to less secure employment terms and conditions. Answering the overarching research problem provides a portrait of some of the on-going change in, and debate about, the role and purpose of higher education in Ireland and can also be seen as part of wider public policy concerns.

The evidence in this study suggests that complex forces of influence combine to provide for adult access to higher education. At a macro level, institutions in this study provide for access mainly in response to the multifaceted demands from the exogenous environment. At the level of the institution, it is the interplay between structure and agency that contributes to the provision of adult access and there has been some change in working practices among higher education professionals. This dynamic ‘isomorphism’ (Clancy, 2011) shows how the paradigm of complexity is a useful framework for conceptualising the vibrant exogenous and endogenous nature of higher education adult access. Analysis reflects that there is no one rationale with access; it varies enormously depending on the perspective. Managers respond to finance/external policy/accountability; academic staff are prepared to take all students to win resources and increase numbers for their departments, while maintaining quality provision of teaching and from the perspective of students, they are trying to get an education and/or up-skill to compete in the employment market.

Interpretations of access also vary depending on the level of analysis in the higher education discourse, but nonetheless national systems and institutional culture influence how adult access is mediated. However, despite the tensions and paradoxes raised in this study, findings reveal that adult students, who progress to undergraduate study from such initiatives, appear to be appreciative of the opportunity to access higher education. This complex area of work within higher education may, as Whitchurch (2012) argues: ‘go

some way, at a local level, towards delivering on expectations of contemporary higher education institutions' (p. 145).

Finally, it was suggested at the outset, that access is in an early paradigmatic phase and, is perhaps, not yet fully integrated into wider higher education policy conceptualisations. This may change with the influence of Europe as the Bologna dimensions permeate down, especially the social dimension and this may even overshadow local, institutional and national systems conceptualisations in this area, especially in terms of transferability and matters of recognition.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: OVERVIEW OF ACCESS COURSES DELIVERED BY THIRD-LEVEL SECTOR IN IRELAND

| Institution and Title of<br>Course and Entry Criteria<br>P/T or F/T & Cost  | Subjects available  | Direct Entry to<br>Undergraduate<br>courses/ Number of<br>Students Enrolled /<br>Rate of progression   |
|---|---|--|
| <i>University of Limerick</i>   |   |  |
| <b>Certificate in General Studies</b><br><b>Downtown Centre</b><br>In collaboration with Shannon Consortium Partners (MIC, LIT, IT Tralee)<br>18+ - F/T 1 yr - €100 | Core modules:<br>Communications and Personal Effectiveness<br>Business Information Technology<br>Work Placement<br>Specialist electives (one chosen by each student):<br>Humanities<br>English Language and Literature<br>Local History and Theology<br>Community & Enterprise Studies<br>Science<br>Foundation Biology<br>Foundation Chemistry<br>Foundation Mathematics 1 & 2<br>Business<br>Office Administration<br>Business Management<br>Community & Enterprise Studies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes (based on results)</li> <li>• Started in 2007.</li> <li>• 24 students enrolled.</li> <li>• 16 completed successfully. 15 took up full-time undergraduate courses. Drop-out rate 33.30%</li> </ul> |
| <b>Access Programme for mature students</b><br>Socio-Economic Disadvantaged (SED)<br>Mature/Disability<br>Ethnic minority<br>F/T 1yr                                | Study skills/Maths/Computing skills/Explore career options/<br>Study foundation-level subjects in one of the following areas:<br>Humanities, Science, Electronic & Computer Technology, Business and Engineering  | Yes  |
| <i>University College Cork</i>  |   |  |

|   |  |     |
|---|--|-----|
| No Access Programme for mature students.  | Only for school leavers from designated second level schools, in the form of UCC Plus+.  | n/a |
| <i>National University of Ireland, Galway.</i>  |  |     |
| <b>Access course for Mature Students</b> - also delivered in outreach centres (in partnership with other colleges) in Ennis, Border region, Midlands and Western Region. Format the same throughout. Have Access co-ordinator in each region. In collaboration with 6 other institutions.<br>SED / disability/ traveller/ ethnic minority<br>P/T evening & some Saturday<br>- No Fees | Core subjects:<br>Study Skills<br>Applied Writing<br>Information Technology<br>Educational Guidance<br>Academic subjects: (4 of these)<br>Arts: Philosophy, Sociology, History, Irish, English, Mathematics, Legal Science, Spanish, Economics, Classical Civilisation<br>Science/Engineering/IT:<br>Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology<br>Commerce: Economics, Mathematics<br>Celtic Studies: Irish | Yes |
| <b>Foundation Course in Science, Technology and Engineering and Foundation Course in Business/Commerce</b><br>P/T evening 1yr - €300 - concessions for social welfare recipients  | The Foundation Course in Science, Engineering and Technology focuses on four specific subject areas:<br>Physics<br>Chemistry<br>Biology<br>Mathematics<br>The Foundation Course in Commerce focuses on three specific subject areas:<br>Mathematics<br>Economics<br>Accountancy  | Yes |
| <b>Mature Access, Carraroe</b><br>SED / disability/ traveller/ ethnic minority<br>P/T   | Core subjects:<br>Study Skills<br>Applied Writing<br>Information Technology<br>Educational Guidance<br>Academic subjects: (4 of these)<br>Arts: Philosophy, Sociology, History, Irish, English, Mathematics, Legal Science, Spanish, Economics, Classical Civilisation<br>Science/Engineering/IT:<br>Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology<br>Commerce: Economics, Mathematics<br>Celtic Studies: Irish | Yes |

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| <p><b>Mature Access, St Angela's, Sligo</b><br/>Mature students &amp; school leavers - P/T</p>   | <p>Study skills<br/>Applied writing<br/>Information Technology<br/>Educational Guidance<br/>Arts: Sociology, Politics, Economics, Psychology, Philosophy, Home Economics, Religious Studies.<br/>Science: Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Nursing (depending on demand)</p> | <p>Yes</p>  |
| <p><b>National University of Ireland Maynooth</b></p>  |  |   |
| <p><b>Maynooth Access Programme (MAP)</b></p>  |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10 in the first three years, 30 in the next three years, 78 in 06.</li> <li>• 200+ undergraduates at present from access programmes</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Certificate in Return to Learning</b><br/>Mature students - P/T with day or evening option available. 100 hour programme<br/>€1000 (exemption for those who qualify for Back to Education Allowance)</p>   | <p>Module 1: Motivation and Goals<br/>Module 2: Taking Notes<br/>Module 3: Writing Skills<br/>Module 4: Reading Skills<br/>Module 5: Library Skills<br/>Module 6: Coping with Examinations<br/>Module 7: Introduction to Degree Subjects</p>                             | <p>Yes (based on results)</p>   |
| <p><b>NUI Certificate in Finance, Economics and Business:</b><br/>Foundation Year Programme<br/>Mature, SED mature, Disability, ethnic minority<br/>F/T 1 yr - €900.00. Students eligible for the Back to Education Allowance do not have to pay fees (contact Local Social Welfare Office).</p>                       | <p>(a) Study Skills,<br/>(b) Basic Computer Skills,<br/>(c) Mathematics (basic or advanced),<br/>(d) Microeconomics,<br/>(e) Foundation in Economics (Macroeconomics)<br/>(f) Introduction to Accounting<br/>(g) Management.</p>   | <p>Yes (based on results)</p>   |
| <p><b>NUI Certificate in Science or Engineering:</b> Foundation Year Programme<br/>Mature, SED mature, Disability, ethnic minority<br/>F/T 1 yr - Fees for this Foundation Course are €900.00. Students eligible for the Back to Education Allowance do not have to pay fees (contact Local Social Welfare Office)</p> | <p>(a) Study Skills,<br/>(b) Basic Computer Skills,<br/>(c) Mathematics (basic or advanced),<br/>(d) Chemistry,<br/>(e) Experimental Physics,<br/>(f) Mathematical Physics,<br/>(g) Biology or Electronic Engineering.</p>   | <p>Yes (based on results)</p>   |

|   |  |                               |
|---|--|-------------------------------|
| <p><b>Midlands Project - Access21</b><br/>         SED / disability/ traveller/<br/>         ethnic minority<br/>         P/T over 1 academic year -<br/>         No Fees</p>   | <p>The Core Modules:<br/>         Study Skills Course<br/>         Applied Writing Course<br/>         Information Technology<br/>         Educational Guidance<br/>         Academic subjects:<br/>         Sociology, History, Mathematics,<br/>         Legal Studies and a modern language<br/>         (French or German).<br/>         Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry,<br/>         Biology<br/>         Economics, Mathematics, Business<br/>         Studies.<br/>         Sports and Health Science.<br/>         Web Technology.<br/>         3 of the above academic modules are<br/>         selected by each student</p> | <p>n/a</p>                    |
| <p><b>University College Dublin</b></p>   |  |                               |
| <p><b>Access to Arts and Human Sciences</b><br/>         Course Locations 08-09<br/>         EX401 UCD Belfield<br/>         (Tue/Thu evenings) EX402<br/>         Mount Merrion (Wed/Thu<br/>         mornings*) EX403 IFSC<br/>         North Wall Quay (Mon/Fri<br/>         mornings*) EX407 Wicklow<br/>         Town (Tue <i>morning/Thu<br/>         afternoon</i>)<br/>         * <i>All I.T. classes will offered<br/>         on the Belfield campus on 4<br/>         consecutive Saturday<br/>         mornings in the first semester.</i><br/>         Mature, SED mature,<br/>         Disability, ethnic minority<br/>         P/T day and evening options<br/>         €800 with reduced fee for low<br/>         income students</p> | <p>Academic subjects: Students will<br/>         take two subjects, one in each term.<br/>         English Literature, History,<br/>         Sociology and Politics are available,<br/>         depending on venue.<br/>         Core Subjects: Information<br/>         Technology, Tutorials and Study<br/>         Skills/Writing Skills and Educational<br/>         Guidance.</p>   | <p>Yes (based on results)</p> |
| <p><b>Access to Commerce</b><br/>         Mature, SED mature,<br/>         Disability, ethnic minority<br/>         P/T evenings €990 with<br/>         reduced fee for low income<br/>         students</p>  | <p>Marketing;<br/>         Mathematics;<br/>         Accounting;<br/>         Organisational Behaviour;<br/>         Finance;<br/>         Economics<br/>         Study Skills<br/>         Computing</p>  | <p>Yes (based on results)</p> |

|   |  |                                       |
|---|--|---------------------------------------|
| <b>Access to Science and Engineering</b><br>Mature, SED mature, Disability, ethnic minority<br>P/T evenings & Sat.<br>Mornings €1590 with reduced fee for low income students   | Chemistry<br>IT<br>Mathematics<br>Physics<br>Biology or Mathematics for Engineering<br>Study Skills  | Yes (Case-by-case)                    |
| <b><i>Trinity College Dublin</i></b>  |  |                                       |
| <b>Foundation Course for Higher Education Mature Students</b><br>SED mature students<br>F/T 1 yr<br>No Fees   | Students can choose from two broad subject areas: Arts and Social Science, or Science<br>Study Skills<br>Mathematics (introductory, intermediate, or advanced level)<br>Information Technology (beginner or intermediate)<br>Educational and Personal Guidance | 25 per year<br>Yes (based on results) |
| <b>TAP /CDVEC Partnership Access courses. Delivered in 3 further education colleges:</b><br>(i) Pearse College, Crumlin - 25 mature students per year<br>(ii) Plunket College, Whitehall - 25 mature students per year<br>(iii) Liberties College, Dublin 8 - 25 young adults per year<br>SED mature students - F/T 1yr - No Fees | Students can choose from two broad subject areas: Arts and Social Science, or Science<br>Study Skills<br>Mathematics (introductory, intermediate, or advanced level)<br>Information Technology (beginner or intermediate) Educational and Personal Guidance    | 25 per year<br>Yes (based on results) |
| <b><i>Mary Immaculate College, Limerick</i></b>   |  |                                       |
| <b>Pre-University Programme</b><br>Mature students<br>P/T for one semester<br>100   | Psychology, Philosophy, Local History, Sociology, or Early Childhood Education. (Some of these)<br>Academic Writing<br>Study Skills<br>Library Skills<br>Information Technology  | n/a                                   |
| <b>Return to Learning-Foundation Certificate</b><br>Mature/ traveller/ ethnic minority<br>P/T evenings & Saturdays  | Liberal Arts subjects: History, English, Language and Linguistics, Geography, Media and Communication Studies, Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies; Study and Writing Skills and Information Technology   | Yes (based on results)                |

***St. Patrick's College, Dublin***

No Access program for adults.  
Some places allocated on courses to disadvantaged students.  
They were unable to get any funding from HEA for access type programmes.

n/a

n/a

## APPENDIX B: DETAILS OF SAMPLE POPULATION

### Staff Interview Sample

| <b>Institution</b>  | <b>Interview Number</b> | <b>Broad Position in Institution</b> |
|---------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Constituent College | Respondent 1            | Access Project Worker                |
|                     | Respondent 2            | Senior Manager                       |
|                     | Respondent 3            | Head of Academic Department          |
|                     | Respondent 4            | Senior Academic                      |
|                     | Respondent 5            | Access Course Co-ordinator           |
|                     | Respondent 6            | Access Officer                       |
|                     | Respondent 7            | Access Project Worker                |
|                     | Respondent 8            | Lecturer, teaching on access course  |
|                     | Respondent 9            | Senior Manager                       |
|                     | Respondent 10           | Senior Manager                       |
| Capital University  | Respondent 1            | Senior Administrator                 |
|                     | Respondent 2            | Access Project Worker                |
|                     | Respondent 3            | Access Project Worker                |
|                     | Respondent 4            | Access Course Co-ordinator           |
|                     | Respondent 5            | Lecturer, access course              |
|                     | Respondent 6            | Lecturer, access course              |
|                     | Respondent 7            | Lecturer                             |
|                     | Respondent 8            | Access Project Worker/Researcher     |
|                     | Respondent 9            | Senior Manager                       |
| Regional University | Respondent 1            | Senior Administrator                 |
|                     | Respondent 2            | Senior Manager                       |
|                     | Respondent 3            | Access Manager                       |
|                     | Respondent 4            | Access Project Worker                |
|                     | Respondent 5            | Access Project Worker                |
|                     | Respondent 6            | Lecturer, access course              |
|                     | Respondent 7            | Access Course Co-ordinator           |
|                     | Respondent 8            | Lecturer, access course              |
|                     | Respondent 9            | Lecturer, access course              |
|                     | Respondent 10           | Access Project Worker                |
| IoT                 | Respondent 1            | Access Officer                       |
|                     | Respondent 2            | Access Project Worker                |
|                     | Respondent 3            | Access Project Worker                |
|                     | Respondent 4            | Access Project Worker                |
|                     | Respondent 5            | Head of Academic Department          |
|                     | Respondent 6            | Head of Academic Department          |
|                     | Respondent 7            | Lecturer                             |
|                     | Respondent 8            | Senior Manager                       |

### Student Focus Group Sample

| Institution         | Detail/Gender  | Discipline     | Gender |
|---------------------|----------------|----------------|--------|
| Constituent College | Participant 1  | Humanities     | Male   |
|                     | Participant 2  | Humanities     | Female |
|                     | Participant 3  | Humanities     | Female |
|                     | Participant 4  | Humanities     | Male   |
|                     | Participant 5  | Humanities     | Male   |
|                     | Participant 6  | Humanities     | Male   |
|                     | Participant 7  | Humanities     | Female |
|                     | Participant 8  | Humanities     | Female |
|                     | Participant 9  | Humanities     | Male   |
|                     | Participant 10 | Humanities     | Female |
| Capital University  | Participant 1  | Humanities     | Male   |
|                     | Participant 2  | Humanities     | Female |
|                     | Participant 3  | Humanities     | Male   |
|                     | Participant 4  | Social Science | Female |
|                     | Participant 5  | Law            | Male   |
|                     | Participant 6  | Social Science | Female |
|                     | Participant 7  | Humanities     | Female |
|                     | Participant 8  | Humanities     | Female |
|                     | Participant 9  | Humanities     | Female |
|                     | Participant 10 | Humanities     | Female |
| Regional University | Participant 1  | Humanities     | Female |
|                     | Participant 2  | Humanities     | Male   |
|                     | Participant 3  | Humanities     | Female |
|                     | Participant 4  | Humanities     | Female |
|                     | Participant 5  | Humanities     | Male   |
|                     | Participant 6  | Humanities     | Male   |
|                     | Participant 7  | Science        | Female |
|                     | Participant 8  | Science        | Male   |
|                     | Participant 9  | Science        | Male   |
|                     | Participant 10 | Science        | Female |
| IoT                 | Participant 1  | Engineering    | Male   |
|                     | Participant 2  | Business       | Female |
|                     | Participant 3  | Business       | Female |
|                     | Participant 4  | Business       | Female |
|                     | Participant 5  | Business       | Female |
|                     | Participant 6  | Engineering    | Male   |
|                     | Participant 7  | Engineering    | Male   |
|                     | Participant 8  | Engineering    | Male   |
|                     | Participant 9  | Business       | Female |
|                     | Participant 10 | Business       | Female |

## APPENDIX C: STAFF/STUDENT INFORMATION SHEET



### **An Examination of Adult Access Provision in Higher Education in Ireland: Policy and Practice**

#### **Participant Information Sheet**

##### **What is the project about?**

This study involves researching on the theme of adult access provision in four diverse third level providers in Ireland. It is particularly interested in examining institutional responses to national policies promoting access by adult learners in Ireland. The overarching research question is why and in what way do third level institutions in Ireland provide for access for adult learners? In terms of methodology, I am adopting a mainly qualitative approach using focus groups and semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The purpose of this is to gain multi-perspectives from higher education institutional managers, academic staff and adult students.

##### **Who is undertaking it?**

My name is Geraldine Brosnan and I am presently completing a PhD by research in the area of higher education policy in the Faculty of Arts at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick under the supervision of Drs. Caroline Healy and Anne O’Keeffe. This current study will form part of my thesis. I am also a staff member of the Learner Support Unit in Mary Immaculate College.

##### **Why is it being undertaken?**

The objective of the study is to examine adult access provision in higher education institutions in Ireland, especially current policies on adult student access and course provision.

##### **What are the benefits of this research?**

It is hoped that the data gathered from participants will (a) make a contribution to the knowledge base on adult learning in higher education within an access context, (b) benefit other institutions who may be interested in exploring their adult access provision and (c) have implications for the development of national policy in the area of adult access.

##### **Exactly what is involved for the participant (time, location, etc.)**

One-to-one interviews will be required for higher education staff at four institutions to 1) critically examine how institutional managers and academics perceive the course across the case sites, and 2) observe how this particular programme of study fits in to existing missions and strategic approaches. Therefore, each participant will be asked four questions about international, national, regional and institutional adult access policies and about the merits and

challenges of institutional adult access programmes. It is envisaged that each interview will take no longer than forty-five minutes and will take place in your office at your institution.

Focus groups will be required for adult students (consisting of at least 5-6 students) to ask them questions related to how government policies impact on them and their experiences of returning to learning as an adult. The time commitment will be approximately no more than one hour. The focus group location will take place in your institution to make it as convenient for you as possible and will most likely be in a classroom or meeting room, so you will not have to travel or incur any personal costs.

**Right to withdraw**

Your anonymity is assured and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.

**How will the information be used / disseminated?**

The data from your interview or focus group will be combined with that of the other participants in this study and used to form the findings section of my thesis. Summary data only will appear in the thesis; individual participant data will not be shown.

**How will confidentiality be kept?**

All information gathered will remain confidential and will not be released to any third party. A code will be generated for each participant and it is this code rather than the participant's name which will be held with their data to maintain their anonymity. Higher education Institutions will also be assigned a code name.

**What will happen to the data after research has been completed?**

All participant data will be stored in a secured location.

**Contact details:**

If at any time you have any queries/issues with regard to this study my contact details are as follows:

**Principal Investigators Name:** Geraldine Brosnan

**Principal Investigators E-mail Address:** [Geraldine.Brosnan@mic.ul.ie](mailto:Geraldine.Brosnan@mic.ul.ie)

**Principal Investigators Contact Number:** 061-204917

Alternatively you may wish to contact my supervisors, Drs. Caroline Healy and Anne O'Keeffe, at [Caroline.Healy@mic.ul.ie](mailto:Caroline.Healy@mic.ul.ie) or [Anne.OKeeffe@mic.ul.ie](mailto:Anne.OKeeffe@mic.ul.ie)

## APPENDIX D: STAFF CONSENT FORM

### Staff informed Consent Form

#### I. Research Study Title

An Examination of Adult Access Provision in Higher Education in Ireland: Policy and Practice

#### II. Clarification of the purpose of the research

The objective of the study is to examine adult access provision in higher education institutions in Ireland, especially current policies on adult student access and course provision. I am presently completing a PhD by research in the area of higher education policy in the Faculty of Arts at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick under the supervision of Drs. Caroline Healy ([Caroline.Healy@mic.ul.ie](mailto:Caroline.Healy@mic.ul.ie)) and Anne O’Keeffe ([Anne.Okeeffe@mic.ul.ie](mailto:Anne.Okeeffe@mic.ul.ie)). This current study will form part of my thesis.

#### III. Confirmation of particular requirements

*Requirements include involvement in interviews and audio-taping of same (if agreed).*

*Participant – please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question or delete as appropriate if you are returning electronically)*

*Do you understand the information provided? Yes/No*

*Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? Yes/No*

*Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? Yes/No*

#### IV. Confirmation that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary

Participants may withdraw from the Research Study at any point. There will be no penalty for withdrawing before all stages of the Research Study have been completed.

#### V. Advice as to arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations

Information will not be presented in its original, raw form. All original data will be summarized, synthesized and presented as general findings.

#### V. Any other relevant information

In the context of a small system it can be difficult to protect identity, however no findings will be attributed to individuals and interviews will be conducted on a one-to-one basis. Interviewees will be assigned a number and the association of number to identity will be kept in a separate, secure file. Any quotations or other references to individual participants will only be made using

a broad identifier (for example ‘An Access Project Worker noted.....’). Higher Education Institutions will also be assigned a code name.

**VI. Signature:**

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project:

**Participant’s Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name in Block Capitals:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUPS CONSENT FORM

I am a faculty member in the Learner Support Unit (LSU) at MIC Limerick. As part of my doctoral studies, I am conducting research under the supervision of Drs. Caroline Healy and Anne O’Keeffe, and I am inviting you to participate in my study. The purpose of the study is to examine why and in what way higher education institutions in Ireland provide for access for adult learners and to what extent, if any, has such access made an impact on the working practices and values of higher education professionals?

This study involves conducting field work in four Irish higher education institutions and adopts a qualitative approach in the case study tradition. **Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

All information obtained in this study will be kept strictly **confidential**. All participants will be asked not to disclose anything said within the context of the discussion. All identifying information will be removed from the collected materials, and all materials will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet in my office.

I also understand that my words may be quoted directly. With regard to being quoted, please initial next to any of the statements that you agree with:

|  |  |
|--|--|
|  | I wish to review the notes, transcripts, or other data collected during the research pertaining to my participation. |
|  | I agree to be quoted directly.   |
|  | I agree to be quoted directly if a made-up name (pseudonym) is used.   |
|  | I agree that the researcher may publish documents that contain quotations by me.                                     |

**By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study.**

**Participant's signature** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Geraldine Brosnan by telephone at 061-204917 or by email at [geraldine.brosnan@mic.ul.ie](mailto:geraldine.brosnan@mic.ul.ie) and Drs. Caroline Healy and Anne O’Keeffe, at [Caroline.Healy@mic.ul.ie](mailto:Caroline.Healy@mic.ul.ie) or [Anne.OKeeffe@mic.ul.ie](mailto:Anne.OKeeffe@mic.ul.ie).

## APPENDIX F: SAMPLE CODING INDEX AND INTERVIEW

### Example One

#### 2.1 National Policies/NQAI

‘Nationally then, because of working with the Foundation Cert. and the Pre-University Programme what I found very useful in terms of national was the NQAI’ (Access Project Worker, Constituent College, 01)

‘the NQAI framework is really helpful’ (Access Officer, Constituent College, 06)

‘I think the NQAI has created awareness around access’ (Lecturer on Access Course, Constituent College, 08)

‘The establishment of the NQAI has been good for access’ (Lecturer on Access Course, Regional University, 09)

‘development of the NQAI which meshes in with other developments across Europe’ (Access Project Worker, Regional University, 04)

‘NQAI is a good development’ (Senior Administrator, Regional University, 01)

‘The NQAI has been helpful to the whole area of access, particularly for mature students’ (Access Project Worker, IoT, 02)

‘The NQAI has provided a good framework for the area of mature students’ (Access Project Worker, IoT, 04)

‘The NQAI is brilliant, makes it all easily understood’ (Head of Academic Department, IoT, 05)

At national level, the NQAI has made courses more accessible, students get a sense of what it is they are doing’ (Head of Academic Department, IoT, 06)

‘I think the NQAI has been one of the better national developments’ (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 02)

[the NQAI] is really user-friendly’ (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03)

‘the NQAI is a good policy development, especially for students’ (Lecturer, Access Course, Capital University, 05)

‘ nationally, apart from the HEA, I reckon the NQAI is one of the more useful initiatives’ (Lecturer, Access Course, Capital University, 06)

## Example Two

### 4.1.1 Institutional Policy/Access Policy

‘Can I say locally as well [Constituent College] Access Policy I think is brilliant’ (Access Project Worker, Constituent College, 01)

‘Well I think our own one [Constituent College]. Our access policy I think is very good’ (Senior Academic, Constituent College, 04)

‘the policy negotiated access to a certain extent’ (Senior Academic, Constituent College, 04)

‘The access and disability policy document that was put to *Academic Council* by the Access committee’ (Academic, Constituent College, 08)

‘all this commitment was made to access in the institution...having a policy makes a huge difference to any innovation you want to begin’ (Senior Manager, Constituent College, 10)

‘Institutional access policy, yes it is good, it gives a really good backdrop’ (Access Project Worker, Capital University, 03)

‘The access office feeds into the institutional access plan’ (Lecturer, Access Course, Capital University, 05)

‘Like, I suppose you know it builds on top of all the previous policies, you know our access policy, and you know it’s very much embedded’ (Senior Manager, Capital University, 09)

‘Institutional structures now in place because of our access policy’ (Access Project Worker, Regional University, 05)

‘I know that institutions now have to develop access institutional access plans and we have’ (Access Project Worker, Regional University, 04)

‘We’ve a new access plan in draft. That is an extremely important piece of work’. (Access Officer, IoT, 01)

## Sample Coded Interview

**Interview Number: 01**

**Role: Access Project Worker**

**Institution/Organisation: Constituent College**

**Q.1: Interviewer: What international, national or regional policies are you aware of that in your view have promoted access, progression and course completion?**

**Codes**

**1. International Policy**

**1.1 International Policy/OECD**

**1.1.1 International Policy/OECD/Mature Student Access Targets**

‘My understanding of the ones I am aware of I suppose would be (I don’t know the exact names of the reports)’

‘the OECD report that is the one that recommends the figures that everyone seems to be going by the 20% of matures and third level and all those figures. I guess that is the international one I am most aware of in terms of promoting access. I don’t know does the OECD really talk about progression and completion but access diffidently?’ **(1.1.1)**

**Codes**

**2. National Policies**

**2.1 National Policies/NQAI**

**2.1.1 National Policies/NQAI/lifelong Learning**

**2.1.1.1 National Policies/NQAI/lifelong Learning/credit building**

**2.1.1.1.1 National Policies/NQAI/lifelong Learning/qualification levels**

**2.1.1.1.1.1 National Policies/NQAI/lifelong Learning/APEL**

**2.1.1.1.1.1.1 National Policies/NQAI/lifelong Learning/access & progression**

‘Nationally then, because of working with the Foundation Cert. and the Pre-University Programme what I found very useful in terms of national was the NQAI’. **(2.1)**

‘...and its [NQAI] policies towards say lifelong learning and credit building’. **(2.1.1.; 2.1.1.1)**

‘...and getting credits for what you have done before and being able to enter on certain levels’. **(2.1.1.1.; 2.1.1.1.1.)**

‘...and I think that is very, very useful in promoting access and progression because you don’t always have to start at step one and you get credit for what’s happening before’. (2.1.1.1)

‘...and I think for adult learners it is great because you can go in at Step Five or Step Six and it gives them a boost already’ (2.1.1.1.1).

‘They do see progression and they do see that what they have done previously happens. I like that the NQAI nationally is very good maybe it appeals to me because it has got steps’ (2.1.1.1.1.1)

## **Codes**

### **2 National Policies**

#### **2.2 National Policies/HEA**

##### **2.2.1 National Policies/HEA/Funding**

###### **2.2.1.1. National Policies/HEA/Funding/ Access-Progression Initiatives**

###### **2.2.1.1.2 National Policies/HEA/Funding/ Access-Progression Initiatives/LSU**

###### **2.2.1.2 National Policies/HEA/Funding/SIF**

‘Nationally, the HEA have loads of access initiatives and have funded different initiatives through the years in the area of access, progression and completion and I guess we are one of them in the Learning Support Unit’ (2.2.1.1; 2.2.1.1.2)

‘...and SIF as well now I suppose its all the whole strand of access and progression and all that kind of stuff as well ah I think that’s the national ones I am aware of anyway’ (2.2.1.2)

‘I’m sorry I don’t have any concrete’.

## **Codes**

### **3 Regional Policies**

#### **3.1 Regional Policies/Shannon Consortium**

##### **3.1.1 Regional Policies/Shannon Consortium/Downtown Centre-Limerick**

###### **3.1.1.1 Regional Policies/Shannon Consortium/Regional Learning Centres-Ennis**

‘Regionally, in third level terms I suppose the Shannon Consortium I suppose have come together now and organised the Downtown Centre’ (3.1; 3.1.1)

‘...and now the Regional Learning Centres and they are all designed towards access and bringing the students through’ (3.1; 3.1.1.1)

## **Codes**

### **4. Institutional Policy**

#### **4.1. Institutional Policy/Mary Immaculate College**

##### **4.1.1 Institutional Policy/Mary Immaculate College/Access Policy**

**4.1.1.2 Institutional Policy/Mary Immaculate College /Access Policy/ Documented**

**4.1.1.3 Institutional Policy/Mary Immaculate College/Access Policy/Commitment**

**4.1.1.4 Institutional Policy/Mary Immaculate College/Access Policy/Access Routes**

**4.1.1.4.1 Institutional Policy/Mary Immaculate College/Access Policy/Access Routes/PUP for Mature Students**

**4.1.1.4.2 Institutional Policy/Mary Immaculate College/Access Policy/Access Routes/Foundation Certificate for Mature Students**

**4.1.1.4.2.1 Institutional Policy/Mary Immaculate College/Access Policy/Access Routes/Foundation Certificate for Mature Students/Direct Entry to BA**

**4.1.1.4.3 Institutional Policy/Mary Immaculate College/Access Policy/Access Routes/Foundation Certificate for Mature Students/Negotiated Access to the B.Ed.**

**4.1.1.5 Institutional Policy/Mary Immaculate College/Access Policy/Academic Depts.**

‘Can I say locally as well: Mary I. Access Policy I think is brilliant’ (4.1.1)

**Q2. What institutional policies are you aware of, that have in your view, promoted access, progression and course completion at institutional level?**

‘Well I think our own one [i.e. MIC]. Our access policy I think is very good’ (4.1.1)

**Interviewer: What do you think is so significant about it?**

‘Well, I think it is just that the institution actually came out and said that we have a policy on access, which I think we have found out that UL don’t have, as far as I know anyway. As far as I know, UL don’t have one’. (4.1.1.2)

‘At some stage sitting on the Academic Advisory Board Committee, it did come up that we did have an Access Policy and that we could say that these courses fit in under our Access Policy’ (4.1.1.4)

‘and we could say our institution made a commitment to Access, and if we back this, it backs your commitment to Access and we have a very concrete footing you know’ (4.1.1.3)

‘We could actually go and say, ‘sorry you have made the commitment and we are going to move it forward now, so either you are committed to this or your not, and you made the Access Statement so we are committed to it’ (4.1.1.5; 4.1.1.4; 4.1.1.2)

‘and it seems to logically follow on that you know, the Pre-University Programme’ (4.1.1.4.1)

‘the Foundation Certificate Direct Access on to the B.A’ (4.1.1.4.2.1)

‘negotiated access to a certain extent on the B.Ed. in terms of being a mature student, and still having to have your honour in honours Irish, but you could sit your oral you might not necessarily have the points or anything, but still...’ (4.1.1.4.3)

‘all this commitment was made to access in the institution and I have seen from working in other institutions that the commitment is not there, and it makes a huge difference to any innovation you want to begin it makes a big difference’. (4.1.1.3)

## **Codes**

### **5 Foundation Certificate**

#### **5.1. Foundation Certificate/Merits**

##### **5.1.1 Foundation Certificate/Merits/Teaching Quality**

###### **5.1.1.2 Foundation Certificate/Merits/Teaching Quality/Use of lecturers**

**5.1.1.2.1 Foundation Certificate/Merits/Teaching Quality/Use of lecturers/No monitoring or overseeing required**

**5.1.1.2.2 Foundation Certificate/Merits/Teaching Quality/Use of lecturers/Internal assignment grading**

**5.1.1.2.3 Foundation Certificate/Merits/Teaching Quality/Use of lecturers/Sense of institutional belonging**

###### **5.1.2. Foundation Certificate/Merits/Preparation for 3<sup>rd</sup> Level Standard**

**5.1.2.1 Foundation Certificate/Merits/Preparation for 3<sup>rd</sup> Level Standard/First Year Equivalency**

##### **5.1.3 Foundation Certificate/Merits/Built-in Learner Support**

##### **5.1.4 Foundation Certificate/Merits/Allows for continuation of employment**

##### **5.1.5 Foundation Certificate/Merits/Provides a taster of 3<sup>rd</sup> level demands**

##### **5.1.6 Foundation Certificate/Merits/Development of time management skills**

##### **5.1.7 Foundation Certificate/Merits/Opportunities for Second Chance Mature Learners**

##### **5.1.6 Foundation Certificate/Merits/Community Outreach Models Developed**

**Interviewer: In your opinion, and from your perspective, what are the merits of the Foundation Cert. for Adult Learners and weaknesses, if any?**

‘Ok from the point of view from merits, I suppose there are loads’ (5.1)

‘I suppose I don’t know will I cover them all, but for me, the main ones are that from a teaching point of view. The quality is very high for me, that is very important on an access course because the students need to get an impression about what university is all about’ (5.1.1; 5.1.2)

‘I don’t think access should be as simple as just get the students into college. It has to have some kind of quality, like quality control, you know. So that the fact that lecturers from Mary I.

make the time to teach on the Foundation Cert. is very important because as well as giving the course *gravitas* you know, it also gives it a certain level' (5.1.1.2; 5.1.2)

'... that level I suppose, when students make the step from the foundation level to the university level on the Foundation Certificate, we don't have to worry about that because we know the standard of teaching is very close or same as where the first year is at'. (5.1.2; 5.1.2.1)

'...and because we know who are lecturing on the courses, as apposed to sending students on the type of Foundation Cert. course where you don't know the people who are lecturing, and you don't know what standard there are lecturing at, but you can keep an eye on them you can look at their presentations or whatever, but the bottom line is you don't know who they are (5.1.2.1; 5.1.1.2 ; 5.1.2)

'.....whereas on the Foundation Cert. you know the quality of teaching is high' (5.1.1.)

'...and also the assignments they are given, are internally corrected by the people who are doing [i.e. delivering] the course, so we say take for example someone like [LI]. He takes the assessment in history every year and corrects it and gives some feedback like you would with any university student and its important' (5.1.2.2)

'.....and its important.... and it really gives them [participant students] a sense of being part of the institution as well then, so I think that's very important' (5.1.2.3)

'and I think as well then because the students are mature, and access students, they need a higher degree of support, or they look for a higher degree of support, then a traditional undergraduate coming straight from Leaving Cert. So I think that the fact the Learner Support Unit have built-in support into the course is very good' (5.1.3)

## **Codes**

### **7 Mature Students**

#### **7.1 Mature Students/Problems**

##### **7.1.1. Mature Students/Problems/Financial**

##### **7.1.2 Mature Students/Problems/Lack of confidence**

##### **7.1.3 Mature Students/Problems/Childcare**

##### **7.1.4 Mature Students/Problems/Sense of isolation**

##### **7.1.5 Mature Students/Problems/Lack of awareness**

##### **7.1.5.1 Mature Students/Problems/Lack of awareness/LSU awareness-raising**

##### **7.1.5.2 Mature Students/Problems/Lack of awareness/LSU problem-solving**

'.....because I think a lot of when you read about mature students you always read about problems like financial problems' (7.1.1)

'.....and you read about confidence problems' (7.1.2)

‘.....and you read about child care problems and you read about all of these but I seriously think that a lot of those problems can be solved’ (7.1.3)

‘.....but an overriding problem over and above all of them [financial, confidence and childcare problems] is the sense of isolation of a mature student can feel due to the fact that they are just not aware of what’s out there for them, that’s something that came very strongly out of the Pre-University Programme, they didn’t know what was out there for them. When they found out they were very surprised and I think that overrides. Then you know, if they are looking for financial support, you know it isn’t there automatically,’

‘first thought isn’t, I can’t handle it because of the financial side. At least their first thought is well maybe I’ll run this by someone and we will see is there is another solution. and the LSU provides that sort of support you know and I think it is very useful’ (7.1.4; 7.1.5)

‘and the LSU provides that sort of support [awareness-raising and problem-solving] you know and I think it is very useful’ (7.1.5.1; 7.1.5.2)

‘That’s two things and the third thing is that right, that’s good for people. Bottom line is you have to work. A lot of people have to work. At least they get a chance to work and study and see what their time management is like’ (5.4.1)

‘I suppose a lot of people want to work part-time when they go to university, so at least they get an opportunity to experience what work and study is like, and see if is for them or maybe not for them. At least they get a chance to see that anyway. So they get both sides. They get to study and to get to work and then you can start to make your decisions about whether you are serious about it or not’ (5.5.1)

‘You know, the Foundation Cert., it gives you that real good impression of you really having to manage your time because you’re working and studying. You have to manage your time and again, then, time management is another difficult task that lots of students will encounter when they come to university, so then its almost, I think the Foundation Cert almost anticipates all the problems they have and goes towards’ (5.1.6).

## **Codes**

### **6 Foundation Certificate**

#### **6.1 Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses**

##### **6.1.1 Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students**

###### **6.1.1.1 Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Not targeting socio-economic and educationally disadvantaged enough**

###### **6.1.1.1.2 Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Not breaking the cycle??**

###### **6.1.1.1.3 Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Not targeting socio-economic and educationally disadvantaged enough/travellers**

###### **6.1.1.1.4 Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Not targeting socio-economic and educationally disadvantaged enough/refugees**

**6.1.1.1.5 Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Not targeting socio-economic and educationally disadvantaged enough/single mothers**

**6.1.1.1.6 Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Not targeting socio-economic and educationally disadvantaged enough/long-term unemployed**

**6.1.1.7.1 Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Not targeting socio-economic and educationally disadvantaged enough/no community outreach models**

**6.1.1.7.2 Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Not targeting socio-economic and educationally disadvantaged enough/no follow-on courses in the community**

**6.1.1.2 Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Younger Matures**

**6.1.1.2.1 Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Younger Matures/Poor Leaving Cert**

**6.1.1.2.2 Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Younger Matures/Dropped out of initial college course**

**6.1.1.2.3 Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Younger Matures/Went into employment after leaving school**

‘Weaknesses. Sometimes I think that it doesn’t target disadvantaged groups in the way that we would like to target them’ (6.1.1.1)

‘Ok, if you look at the profile of the students which we will be looking at and you would have a much better idea than me, but even the ones that come through I think we are getting a lot of students now who are in the younger age bracket we say for matures’ (6.1.1.2)

‘.....so maybe they [younger matures] haven’t done so well in their Leaving Cert.’ (6.1.1.2.1)

‘..... or they [younger matures] have done and tried one college course and they have dropped out’ (6.1.1.2.2)

‘and they [younger matures] have worked for a while and then they are coming back so your getting them’ (6.1.1.2.3)

‘and kind of another broad band you get are say from both men and women who have kind of put their own children through the education system, so that the tradition of education is well established in their families. So it isn’t a question of them not breaking any cycle. The tradition is already established and it’s just that they haven’t had maybe the opportunity but they always,

even they themselves, didn't go to third level they always intended to send their kids to third level, so you have these demographics' (6.1.1.2 ??; 5.1.7)

'....but you don't have the ones then... ok you do.... but its very low numbers so you know you have people like [JF, an ex-offender] and then they're the exceptions, their the ones that have no tradition of education in their family, they're the ones where their initial education experience would have being very negative and their education level would have been lower than a lot of what we are getting' (6.1.1.1; 6.1.1.1.2)

'and also we have a few refugees through, but again they are low numbers', (6.1.1.4)

'and we have no travellers. We have one sort of traveller but he does not identify himself as well'. So I think that is the weakness of the Foundation Cert'. (6.1.1.3)

'Now I don't know how we eliminate that weakness, you know, I think maybe the new model of the regional learning centres and getting out into the community with a Foundation Certificate'. (5.1.6)

'I think in the past we noticed that a weakness of the Foundation Certificate when delivered in the community was that we couldn't follow it up with anything in the community' (6.1.1.1.8)

'So I think maybe now if you can deliver a Foundation Cert. in the community like for example Ennis, and you have a third level course ready for the Foundation Cert. afterwards, then I think maybe that we suddenly overcome that' (6.1.1.1.7; 6.1.1.1.8)

'The demographic might change a little bit. You get the single mothers and the long-time unemployed' (6.1.1.1.5; 6.1.1.1.6)

## **Codes**

### **3.2 Regional Policies/VEC**

#### **3.2.1 Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively**

##### **3.2.1.1 Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Support**

##### **3.2.1.2 Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Trust**

##### **3.2.1.3 Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Sharing information**

##### **3.2.1.4 Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Overlap of levels**

###### **3.2.1.4.1 Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Overlap of levels/Competition**

##### **3.2.1.5 Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Blurring boundaries**

###### **3.2.1.5.1 Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Blurring boundaries/Standards**

##### **3.2.1.6 Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Identifying rural disadvantage**

### **3.3 Regional Policies/NQAI**

#### **3.3.1 Regional Policies/NQAI/HE-FE Sectors**

**Is there anything else that we haven't covered that you think is important to mention?**

'I'd like to see a little more support from now on.... I think when it comes to education initiatives and when it comes to third level working, for example, with VECs or second level, you would even see it in the Shannon Consortium, I think that all these things start with an element of defensiveness you know if the third level go the VEC it's not a lot of the time, is not what we can do together, its are you stepping on my feet you know, and I think that in terms of access and progression you have to' (3.2.1; 3.2.1.1; 3.2.1.2)

'There are levels for the VECs for example, and the third level institutions work together, so the Adult Guidance Support Services there in the Limerick VEC would be very good' (3.2.1)

'...But I think a lot of the initiatives are overlapping too much and I think there needs to become kind of delegation between a level between the VECs and the third level institution where we can work together, rather than there being too much overlap' (3.2.1.4).

'I think the Downtown Centre overlaps too much with the VEC, that would be my own opinion' (3.2.1.4)

'I don't think... and even the NQAI will say it, and FETAC will say it, no third level... it's a terrible thing to say because its almost like saying no third level institution should be involved with primary schools or secondary schools' (3.3.1)

'but I don't think third levels institutions should be delivering Level 5 FETAC its too low' (3.2.1.5; 3.2.1.5.1)

'...and there is too big a jump if your serious about access, your serious about direct access, its too big a jump for them to come in from a FETAC Level 5 into first year. Its too high. There is too much of a gap; there is a Level 6 gap there. I think Mary I. Foundation Cert. is probably Level 6; it might not be a full Level 6 or anything like that, but I think it is level 6. I haven't got the empirical data or I'm only going by my own observation of the students so far, you know, even though I don't want to be focusing too much on the Downtown Centre, I am kind of gone off in tangents' (3.2.1.5.1)

'I think that you need to establish a level and I think that the Foundation Cert has established a level very well but I think that level needs to be consistent across organisations, like the Downtown Centre and the Regional Learning Centres and the VECs will see then that we are not working against them, or anything like. That we are working with them, and they will come on board' (3.2.1.5.1)

'...and I think that the third level institutions will be a lot more responsive to that level as well as to apposed to a lower level and I think I like to see a little bit tighter working together' (3.2.1; 3.2.1.1;)

'I mean that the VEC have I don't know how many adult education courses at different levels they must have thousands of students. Why can they not be identifying the students for us, rather than us having to go out and find the students even if they could identify 10% of them.

How many students then would forward onto third level and they have all the contacts' (3.2.1.2; 3.2.1.3; 3.2.1.4.1)

'Clare that we are going to start working with, they have Scariff a good centre there, and in Kilrush, a good centre in Milltown Malbay and these will identify rural communities and rural disadvantage, for example single mothers there, you could have rural working class, you could have farming communities, for example you know and I think that if we could all work together that would be good'. (3.2.1.6; 3.2; 3.1.1.1)

## APPENDIX G: CODING INDEX

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73. (2.3.4)/National Policies/HEA/History
74. (2.3.4.1)/ National Policies/HEA/History/Investment in education in 1960s
75. (2.3.4.1.1)/ National Policies/HEA/History/Investment in education in 1960s/ Shift in role of education
76. (2.3.4.2)/ National Policies/HEA/History/Overall educational inequality
77. (2.3.5)/National Policies/HEA/Lifelong Learning
78. (2.3.6)/National Policies/HEA/SIF
79. (2.3.6.1)/National Policies/HEA/SIF/Widening participation and Lifelong Learning strand
80. (2.3.6.1.1)/National Policies/HEA/SIF/Widening participation and Lifelong Learning strand/Benefits
81. (2.3.6.1.1.1)/National Policies/HEA/SIF/Widening participation and Lifelong Learning strand/Benefits/Positive outcome overall
82. (2.3.6.1.1.2)/National Policies/HEA/SIF/Widening participation and Lifelong Learning strand/Benefits/Highly political environment
83. (2.3.6.1.1.2.1)/National Policies/HEA/SIF/Widening participation and Lifelong Learning strand/Benefits/Highly political environment/Positive relationships built across institutions
84. (2.3.7)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)
85. (2.3.7.1)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)/Students can only progress up the NQAI

86. (2.3.7.2)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)/Institutional involvement
87. (2.3.7.3)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)/Targeting unemployed adults
88. (2.3.7.3.1)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)/Targeting unemployed adults/Part-time provision
89. (2.3.7.3.1.1)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)/Targeting unemployed adults/Part-time provision/Short programmes
90. (2.3.7.3.1.1.1)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)/Targeting unemployed adults/Part-time provision/Short programmes/Attractive to adults
91. (2.3.7.3.1.1.1.1)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)/Targeting unemployed adults/Part-time provision/Short programmes/Attractive to adults/Retain social welfare payments
92. (2.3.7.1.1.1.2)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)/Targeting unemployed adults/Part-time provision/Short programmes/Attractive to adults /Tailored to labour market needs
93. (2.3.7.1.1.1.3)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)/Targeting unemployed adults/Part-time provision/Short programmes/Attractive to adults /Tailored to labour market needs/Bespoke programmes
94. (2.3.7.1.1.1.4)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)/Targeting unemployed adults/Part-time provision/Short programmes/Attractive to adults /Tailored to labour market needs/Large numbers
95. (2.3.7.1.2)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)/Targeting unemployed adults/Unemployed graduates
96. (2.3.7.1.2.1)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)/Targeting adults/Unemployed graduates/New growth area
97. (2.3.7.2)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)/Lots of institutional resources used
98. (2.3.7.3)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)/Not measured as access students
99. (2.3.7.3.1)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)/ Not measured as access students/but are access students
100. (2.3.7.3.1.1)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)/ Not measured as access students/But are access students/Need additional resources
101. (2.3.7.3.1.1.1)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)/ Not measured as access students/But are access students/Need additional resources/Subject specific support
102. (2.3.7.1.1.1.1)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)/ Not measured as access students/But are access students/Need additional resources/Second chance learners
103. (2.3.7.1.1.1.2)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA)/ Not measured as access students/But are access students/Need additional resources/Not confident
104. (2.3.7.1.1.1.3)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA) ) Not measured as access students/But are access students/Need additional resources/Academic support
105. (2.3.7.1.1.1.4)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA) ) Not measured as access students/But are access students/Need additional resources/Counselling services
106. (2.3.7.1.1.1.5)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA) ) Not measured as access students/But are access students/Need additional resources/Mature student office
107. (2.3.7.1.1.1.6)/National Policies/HEA/Springboard (LMA) ) Not measured as access students/But are access students/Need additional resources/Disability support
108. (2.4.8)/National Policies/HEA/Hunt

109. (2.4.8.1)/National Policies/HEA/Hunt/Move towards equal recognition of full-time and part-time provision
110. (2.4.8.2)/National Policies/HEA/Hunt/Flexible learning
111. (2.4.8.3)/National Policies/HEA/Hunt/CPD
112. (2.4.8.4)/National Policies/HEA/Hunt/Distance learning
113. (2.4.8.5)/National Policies/HEA/Hunt/Lifelong Learning
114. (2.4.8.6)/National Policies/HEA/Hunt/Accessibility of learning
115. (2.4.9)/National Policies/HEA/Promotion of second-chance learning
116. (2.4.10)/National Policies/HEA/White Paper on Adult Education
117. (2.4.11)/National Policies/HEA/Emphasis on Collaboration
118. (2.5)/National Policies/Legislative context
119. (2.6)/National Policies/Economic climate
120. (2.6.1)/National Policies/Economic climate/Austerity
121. (2.6.1.1)/National Policies/Economic climate/Austerity/Negative impact on students
122. (2.6.1.1.1)/National Policies/Economic climate/Austerity/Negative impact on students/More competition for places
123. (2.6.1.1.2)/National Policies/Economic climate/Austerity/Negative impact on students/Part-time work commitments
124. (2.6.1.1.2.1)/National Policies/Economic climate/Austerity/Negative impact on students/Part-time work commitments/Importance of part-time work
125. (2.6.1.1.3)/National Policies/Economic climate/Austerity/Negative impact on students/Student leaving exams early to go to work
126. (2.6.1.2)/National Policies/Economic climate/Austerity/Positive impact on students learning /No part-time work commitments
127. (2.6.1.2.1)/National Policies/Economic climate/Austerity/Positive impact on students learning/Less money to spend on partying
128. (2.6.1.2.1.1)/National Policies/Economic climate/Austerity/Positive impact on students learning/Less money to spend on partying/More time to spend studying
129. (2.6.1.2.1.1.1)/National Policies/Economic climate/Austerity/Positive impact on students learning/Less money to spend on partying/More time to spend studying/Higher attainment levels
130. (2.6.1.2.1.1.2)/National Policies/Economic climate/Austerity/Positive impact on students learning/Less money to spend on partying/More time to spend studying/Concerned about future
131. (2.6.1.3)/National Policies/Economic climate/Austerity/Access resourcing issues
132. (2.6.1.3.1)/National Policies/Economic climate/Austerity/Access resourcing issues/Impact of Employment Control Framework (ECF)
133. (2.6.1.3.1.1)/National Policies/Economic climate/Austerity/Access resourcing issues/Impact of ECF/No replacement of staff
134. (2.6.2)/National Policies/Economic climate/Policy environment/ Encouraging versus discouraging participation
135. (2.6.3)/National Policies/Economic climate/Increase in male participation
136. (2.6.3.1)/National Policies/Economic climate/Increase in male participation/up skilling required in IT
137. (2.6.4)/National Policies/Economic climate/Student finance
138. (2.6.5)/National Policies/ Economic climate/ Institutional financial constraints
139. (2.6.5.1)/National Policies/ Economic climate/ Institutional financial constraints/Access funding
140. (2.6.5.1.1)/National Policies/ Economic climate/ Institutional financial constraints/Access funding/Education resources

141. (2.6.5.1.2)/National Policies/ Economic climate/ Institutional financial constraints/Access funding/Impact of the ECF
142. (2.7)/National Policies/Change in higher education participation
143. (2.7.1)/National Policies/Change in higher education participation/Increase in participation
144. (2.7.1.1)/National Policies/Change in higher education participation/Increase in participation/Widen participation
145. (2.8)/National Policies/Accreditation
146. (2.9)/National Policy/Quality in higher education
147. (2.9.1)/National Policy/Quality in higher education/Maintenance of academic standards
148. (2.10)/National Policy/Lateness of intervention
149. (2.11)/National Policy/Need for system-wide reform
150. (2.12)/National Policy/Link between policy and practice
151. (2.13)/National Policies/Information re: access opportunities
152. (2.13.1)/National Policies/Information/Educational guidance
153. (2.14)/National Policies/National Office for Equity of Access
154. (2.14.1)/National Policies/National Office for Equity of Access/Impact of the office
155. (2.14.1.1)/National Policies/National Office for Equity of Access/Impact of the office/National Access Plan
156. (2.14.1.1.1)/ National Policies/National Office for Equity of Access/Impact of the office/National Access Plan/Equal access data collection
157. (2.15)/National Policies/Need for new access programme policy
158. (2.15.1)/National Policies/Need for new access programme policy/Organic development
159. (2.15.1.1)/National Policies/Need for new access programme policy/Organic development/Well-intentioned
160. (2.15.2)/National Policies/Need for new access programme policy/Need for several access providers across the education sector
161. (2.15.2.1)/National Policies/Need for new access programme policy/Need for several access providers across the education sector/Greater student choice
162. (2.15.3)/National Policies/Need for new access programme policy/Prescriptive policy
163. (2.15.3.1)/National Policies/Need for new access programme policy/Prescriptive policy/Need for standard framework of country
164. (2.15.3.1.1)/National Policies/Need for new access programme policy/Prescriptive policy/Need for standard framework of country/Avoid a range of models
165. (2.15.4)/National Policies/Need for new access programme policy/Positioning of access (level 5 or 6)
166. (2.15.4.1)/National Policies/Need for new access programme policy/ Positioning of access (level 5 or 6)/Avoid duplication
167. (2.15.4.1.1)/National Policies/Need for new access programme policy/ Positioning of access (level 5 or 6)/avoid duplication/partnership model delivery of access programmes
168. (2.15.4.1.1.1)/National Policies/need for new access programme policy/ positioning of access (level 5 or 6)/Avoid duplication/Partnership model delivery of access programmes/Challenging
169. (2.15.4.1.1.1.1)/National Policies/Need for new access programme policy/ Positioning of access (level 5 or 6)/Avoid duplication/Partnership model delivery of access programmes/Challenging/Quality

170. (2.15.4.1.1.2)/National Policies/Need for new access programme policy/  
Positioning of access (level 5 or 6)/Avoid duplication/Partnership model delivery of  
access programmes/Challenging/Academic standards
171. (2.15.4.1.1.3)/National Policies/Need for new access programme policy/  
Positioning of access (level 5 or 6)/Avoid duplication/Partnership model delivery of  
access programmes/Challenging/Investment risk
172. (2.15.5)/National Policies/Need for new access programme policy/Nuanced area
173. (2.15.5.1)/National Policies/Need for new access programme policy/Nuanced  
area/Fragmented area
174. (2.15.6)/National Policies/Need for new access programme policy/Local dimension
175. (2.15)/National Policies/Poverty industry
176. (2.15.1)/National Policies/Poverty industry/Competing industry with HSE schools
177. (2.15.2)/National Policies/Poverty industry/Need for strategic thinking
178. (2.15.2.1)/National Policies/Poverty industry/Need for strategic thinking/Transition  
points
179. (2.16)/National Bodies/
180. (2.16.1)/National Bodies/AMA
181. (2.16.2)/National Bodies/MSI
182. (2.16.3)/National Bodies/Retention Network
183. (3)/Regional Policies
184. (3.1)/Regional Policies/ Higher Education Collaboration/
185. (3.1.1)/ Regional Policies/ Higher Education Collaboration/Shannon Consortium
186. (3.1.1.1)/Regional Policies/Higher Education Collaboration/Shannon  
Consortium/Downtown Centre-Limerick
187. (3.1.1.1.1)/ Regional Policies/ Higher Education Collaboration/Shannon  
Consortium/Regional Learning Centres-Ennis/Regional Policies/VEC
188. (3.1.2)/Regional Policies/ Higher Education Collaboration/DRHEA
189. (3.1.2.1)/Regional Policies/ Higher Education Collaboration/DRHEA/Access
190. (3.1.2.1.1)/Regional Policies/ Higher Education  
Collaboration/DRHEA/Access/Retention
191. (3.1.2.2)/Regional Policies/ Higher Education Collaboration/DRHEA/Teaching and  
Learning
192. (3.2.1)/ Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively
193. (3.2.1.1)/Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Support
194. (3.2.1.2)/Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Trust
195. (3.2.1.3)/Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Sharing information
196. (3.2.1.4)/Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Overlap of levels
197. (3.2.1.4.1)/Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Overlap of  
levels/Competition
198. (3.2.1.5)/Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Blurring boundaries
199. (3.2.1.5.1) /Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Blurring  
boundaries/Standards
200. (3.2.1.6)/Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Identifying rural  
disadvantage
201. (3.2) /Regional Policies/VEC
202. (3.2.1)/Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively
203. (3.2.1.1)/Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Support
204. (3.2.1.2)/Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Trust
205. (3.2.1.3)/Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Sharing information
206. (3.2.1.4)/Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Overlap of levels

207. (3.2.1.4.1)/Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Overlap of levels/Competition
208. (3.2.1.5)/Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Blurring boundaries
209. (3.2.1.5.1) /Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Blurring boundaries/Standards
210. (3.2.1.6)/Regional Policies/VEC/Working Collaboratively/Identifying rural disadvantage
211. (3.2.1.7) /Regional Policies/ /VEC / Working Collaboratively/Pre-entry access work/
212. (3.2.1.7.1) /Regional Policies/ /VEC / Working Collaboratively/Pre-entry access work/Networks
213. 3.2.1.7.2)/Regional Policies/VEC / Working Collaboratively /Pre-entry access work/Campus visits
214. 3.2.1.7.2.1)/Regional Policies/ VEC / Working Collaboratively/ Pre-entry access work/Campus visits/Mentoring
215. 3.2.1.7.2.2)/Regional Policies/ /VEC / Working Collaboratively/ Pre-entry access work/Campus visits/Shadowing another student for a day
216. (3.2.1.7.2.3)/Regional Policies/VEC / Working Collaboratively/ Pre-entry access work/Campus visits/Lecture attendance
217. (3.2.1.7.2.4)/Regional Policies/ /VEC / Working Collaboratively/ Pre-entry access work/Campus visits/Small group visits
218. (3.2.1.8)/Regional Policies/ VEC / Working Collaboratively/ Benefits
219. (3.2.1.8.1)/Regional Policies/ VEC / Working Collaboratively/ Benefits/Recruitment
220. (3.2.1.8.2)/Regional Policies/VEC / Working Collaboratively/ Benefits/Joint programme delivery
221. (3.2.1.8.2.1)Regional Policies/VEC / Working Collaboratively/ Benefits/Joint programme delivery/Challenges
222. (3.2.1.8.2.1.1)/Regional Policies/VEC / Working Collaboratively/ Benefits/Joint programme delivery/Challenges/Standards
223. (3.2.1.8.2)/Regional Policies/VEC / Working Collaboratively/ Benefits/Programme duplication
224. (3.2.1.8.3)/Regional Policies/VEC / Working Collaboratively/ Benefits/Possibility of franchising model of access programme delivery
225. (3.3)/ Regional Policies/NQAI/
226. (3.3.1)/Regional Policies/NQAI/HE-FE Sectors
227. (3.4)/Regional Policies/Partnerships
228. (3.4.1)/Regional Policies/Partnerships/Community partnerships
229. (3.4.1.1)Regional Policies/Partnerships/Community partnerships/ With male or female groups
230. (3.4.1.2)/Regional Policies/Partnerships/Community partnerships/Outreach visits
231. (3.4.1.3)/Regional Policies/Partnerships/Community partnerships/Campus visits
232. (3.4.1.4)/Regional Policies/Partnerships/Community partnerships/Networking
233. (3.4.2)/Regional Policies/Partnerships/Outreach work
234. (3.4.2.1)/Regional Policies/Partnerships/Outreach work/Expense
235. (3.4.2.2)/Regional Policies/Partnerships/Outreach work/Resourcing
236. (3.4.3)/Regional Policies/Partnerships/Sustainability of outreach work
237. (3.4.3.1)/Regional Policies/Partnerships/Sustainability of outreach work/Lack of dedicated funding stream
238. (3.4.3.2)/Regional Policies/Partnerships/Community partnerships/More outreach provision

239. (3.4.4)/Regional Policies/Partnerships/Corporate sponsors for access
240. (4.)/ Institutional Policy
241. (4.1.)/ Institutional Policy/ Access Policy
242. (4.1.2)/ Institutional Policy/ Access Policy/ Documented
243. (4.1.3)/ Institutional Policy/ Access Policy/Commitment
244. (4.1.4)/Institutional Policy/ Access Policy/Access Routes
245. (4.1.4.1) /Institutional Policy/ Access Policy/Access Routes/PUP for Mature Students
246. (4.1.4.2)/Institutional Policy/ Access Policy/Access Routes/Foundation Certificate for Mature Students
247. (4.1.4.2.1)/Institutional Policy/ Access Policy/Access Routes/Foundation Certificate for Mature Students/Direct Entry to BA
248. (4.1.4.3)/Institutional Policy/ Access Policy/Access Routes/Foundation Certificate for Mature Students/Negotiated Access to the B.Ed.
249. (4.1.5)/ Institutional Policy/ Access Policy/Academic
250. (4.1.6)/Institutional Policy/Access policy/Embedded in Institution
251. (4.1.7)/Institutional Policy/Access policy/New policy in draft
252. (4.2)/Institutional Policies /Rigidity of system
253. (4.3)/Institutional Policies/Mission statement
254. (4.4)/Institutional Policies/Strategic plan
255. (4.5)/Institutional Policies/Access plan
256. (4.5.1)/Institutional Policies/Access plan/Contribution towards national policy
257. (4.5.2)/ Institutional Policies/Access plan /High institutional profile
258. (4.5.2.1)/ Institutional Policies/Access plan /High institutional profile/Support from senior management
259. (4.5.2.2)/ Institutional Policies/Access plan /High institutional profile/Support from faculty
260. (4.5.2.3)/ Institutional Policies/Access plan /High institutional profile/Support from professional staff
261. (4.5.2)/ Institutional Policies/Access plan /Sense of responsibility to local communities
262. (4.5.3)/Institutional Policies/Access plan/Access routes
263. (4.5.3.1)/Institutional Policies/Access plan/Access routes/Admissions procedures
264. (4.5.3.2)/Institutional Policies/Access plan/Access routes/Admissions procedures/Target setting
265. (4.5.3.2.1)/Institutional Policies/Access plan/Access routes/Admissions procedures/CAO
266. (4.5.3.2.2)/Institutional Policies/Access plan/Access routes/Admissions procedures/Direct entry schemes
267. (4.5.2.2.3)/Institutional Policies/Access plan/Access routes/Admissions procedures/Access programmes
268. (4.5.2.2.4)/Institutional Policies/Access plan/Access routes/Admissions procedures/Selection mechanisms
269. (4.5.2.2.4.1)/Institutional Policies/Access plan/Access routes/Admissions procedures/Selection mechanisms/Supplementary application form
270. (4.5.2.2.4.2)/Institutional Policies/Access plan/Access routes/Admissions procedures/Selection mechanisms/Written assignment
271. (4.5.2.2.4.3)/Institutional Policies/Access plan/Access routes/Admissions procedures/Selection mechanisms/Interview
272. (4.5.2.2.4.4)/Institutional Policies/Access plan/Access routes/Admissions procedures/Selection mechanisms/Aptitude tests in other institutions

273. (4.5.2.2.5)/Institutional Policies/Access plan/Access routes/Admissions procedures/Growing demand for access places
274. (4.5.2.2.6)/Institutional Policies/Access plan/Access routes/Admissions procedures/Restricted access to some undergraduate programmes
275. (4.6)/Institutional Policies/Civic engagement policy
276. (4.7)/Institutional Policies/Equality or diversity policy
277. (4.7.1)/ Institutional Policies/Equality or diversity policy/Very positive
278. (4.7.1.1)/ Institutional Policies/Equality or diversity policy/Very positive/impact on classroom
279. (4.7.1.1)/ Institutional Policies/Equality or diversity policy/Very positive/Impact on classroom/Positive teaching and learning experience
280. (4.8)/Institutional policies/ Adaptation of national policy
281. (4.8)/Institutional Policies/Mainstream student supports
282. (4.8.1)/Institutional Policies/Mainstream student supports/Adult students
283. (4.8.1.1)/Institutional Policies/Mainstream student supports/Adult students/ Good to seek support
284. (4.8.1.2)/Institutional Policies/Mainstream student supports/Adult students /High service users
285. (4.8.1.3)/Institutional Policies/Mainstream student supports/Adult students /High retention of mature students
286. (4.8.1.4)/Institutional Policies/Mainstream student supports/Adult students /Disability support service
287. (4.8.1.5)/Institutional Policies/Mainstream student supports/Adult students /Role of Mature Student Office
288. (4.8.1.6)/Institutional Policies/Mainstream student supports/Adult students/Academic support
289. (4.8.1.6.1)/Institutional Policies/Mainstream student supports/Adult students /Academic support/Writing support
290. (4.8.1.6.2)/Institutional Policies/Mainstream student supports/Adult students /Academic support/Pastoral support
291. (4.8.1.6.3)/Institutional Policies/Mainstream student supports/Adult students /Academic support/Subject-specific
292. (4.8.1.6.3.1)/Institutional Policies/Mainstream student supports/Adult students /Academic support/Subject-specific/ICT
293. (4.8.1.6.3.2)/Institutional Policies/Mainstream student supports/Adult students /Academic support/Subject-specific/Maths
294. (4.8.1.6.3.3)/Institutional Policies/Mainstream student supports/Adult students /Academic support/Subject-specific/Science
295. (4.8.1.6.4)/Institutional Policies/Mainstream student supports/Adult students /Academic support/Educational guidance
296. (4.8.1.6.5)/Institutional Policies/Mainstream student supports/Adult students /Academic support/Positive relationships with students
297. (4.8.1.6.6)/Institutional Policies/Mainstream student supports/Adult students /Academic support/High quality
298. (4.9)/Institutional Policies/Staff/
299. (4.9.1)/Institutional Policies/Staff/Multiplicity of roles
300. (4.9.2)/Institutional Policies/Staff/Access staffing
301. (4.9.2.1)/Institutional Policies/Staff/Access staffing/Overstaffed
302. (4.9.2.2)/Institutional Policies/Staff/ Access staffing/Reporting structures
303. (4.9.2.3)/Institutional Policies/staff/Access staffing/Defining parameters of work
304. (4.9.2.4)/Institutional Policies/staff/Access staffing/Duplication of work

305. (4.9.2.5)/Institutional Policies/staff/Access staffing/Responding to local issues
306. (4.10)/Institutional Policies/Internal committees
307. (4.10.1)/Institutional Policies/Internal committees/Institutional access committee
308. (4.10.2)/Institutional Policies/Internal committees/Access steering committee
309. (4.10.3)/Institutional Policies/Internal committees/Student affairs committee
310. (4.10.4)/Institutional Policies/Internal committees/Restructuring of existing governance of access
311. (4.10.5)/Institutional Policies/Internal committees/Consultative
312. (4.10.5.1)/Institutional Policies/Internal committees/Consultative/Democratic
313. (4.10.5.1.1)/Institutional Policies/Internal committees/Consultative /Democratic/All categories of staff represented
314. (4.10.5.1.1.)/Institutional Policies/ Internal committees/ Consultative /Democratic/All categories of staff represented/Student representation
315. (4.11)/Institutional Policies/Course assessment
316. (4.11.1)/Institutional Policies/Course assessment/Continuous
317. (4.11.2)/Institutional Policies/Course assessment/Variety
318. (4.11.2.1)/Institutional Policies/Course assessment/Variety/Presentations
319. (4.11.2.2)/Institutional Policies/Course assessment/Variety/Essays
320. (4.11.2.3)/Institutional Policies/Course assessment/Variety/Learning diary
321. (4.11.3)/Institutional Policies/Course assessment/Continuous plus end-of-semester examinations
322. (4.12)/Institutional Policies/Challenges
323. (4.12.1)/Institutional Policies/Challenges/Resourcing
324. (4.12.1.1)/Institutional Policies/Challenges/Resourcing/Staff
325. (4.12.1.2)/Institutional Policies/Challenges/Resourcing/Course finance
326. (4.12.1.3)/Institutional Policies/Challenges/Resourcing/Student finance
327. (4.13)/Institutional Policies/Community engagement
328. (4.14)/Institutional Policies/Civil engagement
329. (4.15)/Institutional Policies/Need for flexible learning policy
330. (4.16)/Institutional Policies/Need for part-time learning policy
331. (4.17)/Institutional Policies/ RPL policy
332. (4.17.1)/Institutional Policies/ RPL policy/ Need for implementation of RPL policy
333. (4.17.2)/Institutional Policies/ RPL policy/ Need for development of RPL policy
334. (4.18)/Institutional Policies/Expansion of student population
335. (4.19)/Institutional Policies/Diversification of student population
336. (4.19.1)/Institutional Policies/Diversification of student population/Value
337. (4.19.2)/Institutional Policies/Diversification of student population/Tension
338. (4.19.2.1)/Institutional Policies/Diversification of student population/Tension/Concerns about academic standards
339. (4.19.2.2)/Institutional Policies/Diversification of student population/Tension/Demands of students
340. (4.20)/ Institutional Policies/ Institutional culture
341. (4.20.1)/ Institutional Policies/ Institutional culture/ Commitment of senior staff
342. (4.20.2)/ Institutional Policies/ Institutional culture/ Commitment of staff ‘on the ground’
343. (4.20.3) Institutional Policies/ / Institutional culture/Positivity of staff
344. (4.20.3.1) Institutional Policies/ Institutional culture/Positivity of staff/Link between staff investment and outcome for students
345. (4.20.4)/ Institutional Policies/ Institutional culture/Importance of providing access programmes of study
346. (4.20.5)/ Institutional Policies/ Institutional culture/Access curriculum

347. (4.20.5.1)/ Institutional Policies/ Institutional culture/Access curriculum/Discipline-specific
348. (4.20.5.2)/ Institutional Policies/ Institutional culture/Access curriculum/Popularity of some areas within curriculum
349. (4.20.5.2.1)/ Institutional Policies/ Institutional culture/Access curriculum/Popularity of some areas within curriculum/Gender differences
350. (4.20.5.3)/ Institutional Policies/ Institutional culture/Access curriculum/Adapted Teaching and Learning environment/
351. (4.20.5.3.1)/ Institutional Policies/ Institutional culture/Access curriculum/Adapted Teaching and Learning environment/Learning styles
352. (4.20.6)/ Institutional Policies/ Institutional culture/Need for greater internal collaboration
353. (4.20.7)/Institutional Policies/ Institutional culture/Access risk of being on fringes
354. (4.20.8)/Institutional Policies/ Institutional culture/Need for tracking
355. (4.20.9)/ Institutional Policies/ Institutional culture/Need for staff development
356. (4.20.10)/ Institutional Policies/ Institutional culture/Need for access research
357. (4.20.9)/Institutional Policies/ Institutional culture /Institutional tensions
358. (4.21)/Institutional Policies /Lifelong Learning
359. (4.21.1)/Institutional Policies /Lifelong Learning/Extra-mural provision
360. (4.21.1.1)/Institutional Policies /Lifelong Learning/Extra-mural provision/Enjoyment of learning
361. (4.21.2)/Institutional Policies /Lifelong Learning/Programme accreditation
362. (4.21.3)/Institutional Policies /Lifelong Learning/Challenges
363. (4.21.3.1)/Institutional Policies /Lifelong Learning/Challenges/ Challenge to the system
364. (4.21.3.1.1)/Institutional Policies /Lifelong Learning/Challenges/ Challenge to the system/Institutional change needed
365. (4.21.3.2)/Institutional Policies /Lifelong Learning/Challenges/Superficial
366. (4.21.3.2.1)/Institutional Policies /Lifelong Learning/Challenges/Superficial/No assessment
367. (4.22)/Institutional Policies/Speed of change
368. (4.22.1)/Institutional Policies/Speed of change/On-going planning and review
369. (4.22.2)/Institutional Policies/Speed of change/New governance structures
370. (4.22.2)/International Policies/Speed of change/Evolving new governance structures
371. (4.23)/Institutional Policies/Need for more strategic work in access
372. (4.24)/Institutional Policies/Need for greater institutional collaboration
373. (4.24.1)/Institutional Policies/Need for greater institutional collaboration/Pockets of people working in isolation
374. (4.25)/Institutional Policies/Facilities
375. (4.25.1)/Institutional Policies/Facilities/IT room
376. (4.25.2)/Institutional Policies/Facilities/Study room
377. (4.25.3)/Institutional Policies/Facilities/Mature student common room
378. (4.25.4)/Institutional Policies/Facilities/Laptop support
379. (4.25.5)/Institutional Policies/Facilities/Maths helpdesk
380. (4.26)/Institutional Policies/Educational guidance
381. (4.26.1)/Institutional Policies/Educational guidance/Strong demand
382. (4.27)/Institutional Policies/Careers service
383. (5)/ Foundation Certificate
384. (5.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits
385. (5.1.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/Teaching Quality
386. (5.1.1.2)/Foundation Certificate/Merits/Teaching Quality/Use of lecturers

387. (5.1.1.2.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/Teaching Quality/Use of lecturers/No monitoring or overseeing required
388. (5.1.1.2.2)/Foundation Certificate/Merits/Teaching Quality/Use of lecturers/Internal assignment grading
389. (5.1.1.2.3)/Foundation Certificate/Merits/Teaching Quality/Use of lecturers/Sense of institutional belonging
390. (5.1.2)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/Preparation for 3<sup>rd</sup> Level Standard
391. (5.1.2.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/Preparation for 3<sup>rd</sup> Level Standard/First Year Equivalency
392. (5.1.3)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/Built-in Learner Support
393. (5.1.4)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/Allows for continuation of employment
394. (5.1.5)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/Provides a taster of 3<sup>rd</sup> level demands
395. (5.1.6)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/Development of time management skills
396. (5.1.7)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/Opportunities for Second Chance Mature Learners
397. (5.1.8)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/Community Outreach Models Developed
398. (5.1.9)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/Well-run programme
399. (5.1.10)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/On-campus delivery
400. (5.1.10.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/On-campus delivery/Acculturation
401. (5.1.10.1.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/On-campus delivery/Acculturation/ Familiarity with campus
402. (5.1.10.1.2)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/On-campus delivery/Acculturation/ Break down barriers
403. (5.1.11)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Skill development
404. (5.1.12)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Personal development
405. (5.1.13)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ /High student motivation
406. (5.1.14)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Peer support for students
407. (5.1.15)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Diversification of student population
408. (5.1.16)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ First steps to accessing higher education
409. (5.1.17)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ /Societal integration
410. (5.1.18)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Enjoyable teaching and learning environment
411. (5.1.19)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Course content
412. (5.1.20)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Open access
413. (5.1.21)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Part-time mode of delivery
414. (5.1.21)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Progression opportunity
415. (5.1.21.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Progression opportunity/New entry routes created
416. (5.1.22)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Cooling-out function
417. (5.1.23)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Change in participants
418. (5.1.23.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Change in participants/Positive effect on family life
419. (5.1.23.1.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Change in participants/Positive effect on family life/Increase in likelihood of others in family progressing to third level
420. (5.1.23.1.1.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Change in participants/ Positive effect on family life/Increase in likelihood of others in family progressing to third level/Intergenerational effect
421. (5.1.23.1.1.2)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Change in participants/ Positive effect on family life/Increase in likelihood of others in family progressing to third level/Multiplier effect

422. (5.1.23.1.1.3)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Change in participants/ Positive effect on family life/Increase in likelihood of others in family progressing to third level/Multiplier effect/Bring about change
423. (5.1.23.2)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Change in participants/ Positive effect on community
424. (5.1.23.3)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Change in participants/Development of confidence
425. (5.1.24)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Change in staff involved
426. (5.1.24.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Change in staff involved/Worthwhile work
427. (5.1.24.2)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Change in staff involved/Privilege to do this
428. (5.1.25)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Contribution of students to college
429. (5.1.25.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Contribution of students to college/Change in student population
430. (5.1.25.1.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/Contribution of students to college/Change in student population/Different perspective
431. (5.1.26)/Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Staff enjoy teaching on programme
432. (5.1.27)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Staff enjoy teaching adult learners
433. (5.1.28)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Very supportive environment
434. (5.1.28.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ /Very supportive environment/Informal relationships with key staff
435. (5.1.28.2)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/ Very supportive environment/Peer support
436. (5.1.29)/ Foundation Certificate/Merits/Softer skills
437. (6 )/Foundation Certificate
438. (6.1) /Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses
439. (6.1.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students
440. (6.1.1.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Not targeting socio-economic and educationally disadvantaged enough
441. (6.1.1.1.2)/Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Not breaking the cycle??
442. (6.1.1.1.3)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Not targeting socio-economic and educationally disadvantaged enough/travellers
443. (6.1.1.1.4)/Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Not targeting socio-economic and educationally disadvantaged enough/refugees
444. (6.1.1.1.5)/Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Not targeting socio-economic and educationally disadvantaged enough/single mothers
445. (6.1.1.1.6)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Not targeting socio-economic and educationally disadvantaged enough/long-term unemployed
446. (6.1.1.1.7)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Not targeting socio-economic and educationally disadvantaged enough/no community outreach model
447. (6.1.1.1.8)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Not targeting socio-economic and educationally disadvantaged enough/no follow-on courses in the community
448. (6.1.1.2)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Younger Matures
449. (6.1.1.2.1)/Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Younger Matures/Poor Leaving Cert
450. (6.1.1.2.2)/Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Younger Matures/Dropped out of initial college course

- 451. (6.1.1.2.3)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Profile of Students/Younger Matures/Went into employment after leaving school
- 452. (6.2)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/ Difficult to design assessment
- 453. (6.2.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Difficult to design assessment/Challenging
- 454. (6.3)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Change in type of learning
- 455. (6.3.1) Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Change in type of learning/Move from rote-learning
- 456. (6.3.1.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Change in type of learning/Move from rote-learning/Critical thought and reflection
- 457. (6.4)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Students initial negative experience of education system
- 458. (6.4.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Students initial negative experience of education system/Classroom confrontational
- 459. (6.5)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Students not suited
- 460. (6.5.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Students not suited/Need for educational guidance
- 461. (6.6)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Limited progression opportunities
- 462. (6.6.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/ Limited progression opportunities/Lack of part-time follow-on
- 463. (6.7)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Curriculum
- 464. (6.7.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Curriculum/Difficulty with some subjects e.g. maths
- 465. (6.7.2) Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Curriculum/Difficulty with some subjects e.g. IT
- 466. (6.7.3)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Curriculum/Difficult to develop skills
- 467. (6.7.3.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Curriculum/Difficult to develop skills/Need opportunity to practice
- 468. (6.7.3.2)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Curriculum/Limited subjects
- 469. (6.8)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Community-based learning
- 470. (6.9)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Resources
- 471. (6.9.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Resources/Financial resources
- 472. (6.9.1.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Resources/Financial resources resourcing for out-of hours provision
- 473. (6.10)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/ Lack of systematic monitoring
- 474. (6.11)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/ Whose business? Further education or Higher education
- 475. (6.12)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/ Transition to degree programmes
- 476. (6.13)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/ Importance of evaluation
- 477. (6.13.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Importance of evaluation/Importance of reflection
- 478. (6.14)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Students
- 479. (6.14.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Students/ major decision
  
- 480. (6.14.2)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Students/ Balancing home and study
- 481. (6.14.3)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Students/ Transition issues for FT study
- 482. (6.14.3.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Students/ Transition issues for FT study/Large classes
- 483. (6.14.3.2)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/Students/ Transition issues for FT study/Difficult to understand standard required

- 484. (6.14.3.3)/ Foundation Certificate/Weaknesses/ students/ Transition issues for FT study/High expectations of mature students
- 485. (7) / Mature Students
- 486. (7.1)/ Mature Students/Problems
- 487. (7.1.1)/ Mature Students/Problems/Financial
- 488. (7.1.2)/ Mature Students/Problems/Lack of confidence
- 489. (7.1.3)/ Mature Students/Problems/Childcare
- 490. (7.1.4)/ Mature Students/Problems/Sense of isolation
- 491. (7.1.5)/ Mature Students/Problems/Lack of awareness
- 492. (7.1.5.1)/ Mature Students/Problems/Lack of awareness/LDC awareness-raising
- 493. (7.1.5.2)/ Mature Students/Problems/Lack of awareness/LDC problem-solving

### **Student Focus Groups**

- 494. 1. (1)/ Finance
- 495. 2. (1.1)/ Finance/Impact of recession
- 496. 3. (1.2)/ Finance/ Low cost of access course
- 497. 4. (1.2.1)/ Finance/ Low cost of access course/financially viable
- 498. 5. (1.3)/ Finance/Social Welfare
- 499. 6. (1.3.1)/ Finance/Social Welfare/Poverty trap
- 500. 7. (1.3.2)/ Finance/Social Welfare/One-parent family allowance
- 501. 8. (1.3.3)/ Finance/ Social Welfare/ BTEA
- 502. 9. (1.3.3.1)/ Finance/ Social Welfare/ BTEA/Payment delay
- 503. 10. (1.3.3.2)/ Finance/ Social Welfare/ BTEA/Payment delay/Change of address
- 504. 11. (1.3.3.3)/ Finance/ Social Welfare/ BTEA/Payment delay/Administrative delays with payments
- 505. 12. (1.3.3.4)/ Finance/ Social Welfare/ BTEA/Fearful of cuts
- 506. 13. (1.3.3.5)/ Finance/ Social Welfare/ BTEA/Book allowance
- 507. 14. (1.3.3.6)/ Finance/ Social Welfare/ BTEA/Book allowance/Should be individualised
- 508. 15. (1.3.3.7)/ Finance/ Social Welfare/ BTEA/Book allowance/Should be individualised/Not take parental income into account for adults
- 509. 14. (1.4)/Finance/Lone Parent Allowance
- 510. 15. (1.5)/Finance/Reliant on financial support from parents
- 511. 16. (1.5.1)/ Finance/Reliant on financial support from parents/Reliant on financial support from wider family
- 512. 17. (1.5.1.1)/ Finance/Reliant on financial support from parents/Reliant on financial support from wider family/Caught between government schemes
- 513. 17. (1.6)/Finance/Abuse of system by some students
- 514. 18. (1.7)/Finance/Hardship
- 515. 19. (1.7.1)/ Finance/Hardship/Cost of food
- 516. 20. (1.7.1.1)/ Finance/Hardship/Cost of food/Cost of petrol
- 517. 21. (1.8)/Finance/Maintenance grant/
- 518. 22. (1.8.1)/ Finance/Maintenance grant/Reductions
- 519. 23. (1.8.1.1)/ Finance/Maintenance grant/Reductions/Negative impact

520. 24. (1.8.1.1.1)/ Finance/Maintenance grant/Reductions/Negative impact/Not affordable without state support
521. 25. (1.8.1.1.1.1)/ Finance/Maintenance grant/Reductions/Negative impact/Not affordable without state support/Insecurity
522. 14. (2)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course
523. 15. (2.1)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/well organised
524. 16. (2.2)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/preparatory function
525. 17. (2.3)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/positive experience
526. 18. (2.4)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/open access
527. 19. (2.5)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/offers a direct entry route
528. 20. (2.6)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/provides a taster of third level
529. 21. (2.7)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/helps decide on an area of study
530. 22. (2.8)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/Stepping stone
531. 23. (2.9)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate/Value of on-campus delivery
532. 24. (2.10)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/Positive experience
533. 25. (2.10.1)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/Positive experience/ Relationships with staff
534. 26. (2.10.2)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/Positive experience/Relationship with course co-ordinator
535. 27. (2.10.3)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/Positive experience/Pleasant teaching and learning environment
536. 28. (2.10.4)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/Positive experience/Reduced risk of attrition
537. 29. (2.11)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/Challenging learning environment
538. 30. (2.12)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/ Positive teaching and learning environment/
539. 31. (2.12.1)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/ Positive teaching and learning environment/Different to school
540. 32. (2.12.1.1)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/ Positive teaching and learning environment/Different to school/adapted to adults
541. 33. (2.12.1.1)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/ Positive teaching and learning environment/Different to school/Adapted to adults/Treated as adult learners
542. 34. (2.12.1.1.1)/ Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/ Positive teaching and learning environment/Different to school/Adapted to adults/Treated as adult learners/Engaged with lecturers
543. 35. (2.13)/Merits of Foundation Certificate Course/ Good preparation for undergraduate studies
544. 29. (3)/ Curriculum of Foundation Certificate Course
545. 30. (3.1)/ Curriculum of Foundation Certificate Course/Good range of subjects available
546. 31. (3.1.1)/ Curriculum of Foundation Certificate Course/Good range of subjects available/Taster of third level
547. 32. (3.1.2)/ Curriculum of Foundation Certificate Course/Good range of subjects available/Varied types of assignments
548. 33. (3.2)/ Curriculum of Foundation Certificate Course/ More academic subjects
549. 34. (3.3)/Curriculum of Foundation Certificate Course/ Less emphasis on skills
550. 35. (3.4)/ Curriculum of Foundation Certificate Course/No need for work experience for adults
551. 36. (3.5)/ Curriculum of Foundation Certificate Course/Allows for deep learning

552. 37. (3.5.1)/ Curriculum of Foundation Certificate Course/Allows for deep learning/contradictory with pressure of continuous assessment and examination
553. 38. (3.6)/ Curriculum of Foundation Certificate Course/Should be mandatory
554. 35. (4)/ Student supports in Foundation Certificate Course
555. 36. (4.1)/ Student supports in Foundation Certificate Course/Built-in academic support
556. 37. (4.2)/ Student supports in Foundation Certificate Course/More support for students with a disability
557. 38. (4.2.1)/ Student supports in Foundation Certificate Course/More support for students with a disability/one to one academic support
558. 39. (4.3)/ Student supports in Foundation Certificate Course/Availability of subject specific support
559. 39. (4.4)/ Student supports in Foundation Certificate Course/Dedication of staff
560. 40. (4.4.1)/ Student supports in Foundation Certificate Course/Dedication of staff/availability of staff
561. 41. (4.5)/ Student supports in Foundation Certificate Course/Every form of help available
562. 39. (5)/ Foundation Certificate/Need for more part-time progression opportunities
563. 40. (5.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Alternative routes of entry
564. 41. (5.1.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Alternative routes of entry/FETAC
565. 42. (5.1.1.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Alternative routes of entry/FETAC/Minor award
566. 43. (5.1.1.2)/ Foundation Certificate/Alternative routes of entry/FETAC/Special purposes award
567. 44. (5.1.1.3)/ Foundation Certificate/Alternative routes of entry/FETAC/Night classes
568. 45. (5.1.1.4)/ Foundation Certificate/Alternative routes of entry/FETAC/Ladder route (cert/dip/deg)
569. 46. (5.1.1.4.1)/ Foundation Certificate/Alternative routes of entry/FETAC/ Ladder route (cert/dip/deg)/Exit options
570. 40. (6)/ Personal Development
571. 41. (6.1)/Personal Development/Very positive personal experience
572. 42. (6.2)/Personal Development/Development of skills
573. 43. (6.2.1)/ Personal Development/Development of skills/Development of writing skills
574. 44. (6.2.2)/Personal Development/Development of skills/Development of IT skills
575. 46. (6.3)/Personal Development/Second-chance learning
576. 47. (6.3.1)/Personal Development/Second-chance learning/Early school leavers
577. 48. (6.4)/Personal Development/Self-knowledge
578. 49. (6.5)/Personal Development/Confidence building
579. 50. (6.5.1)/Personal development/Confidence building/Academic confidence
580. 51. (6.5.1.1)/Personal development/Confidence building/Academic confidence/Sense of pride
581. 52. (6.5.1.2)/Personal development/Confidence building/Academic confidence/Sense of pride/Self-esteem
582. 53. (6.6)/Personal Development/Challenge
583. 54. (6.7)/Personal Development/Interesting
584. 55. (6.8)/Personal Development/Potential for career change
585. 56. (6.9)/ Personal Development/On-going learning process
586. 57. (6.10)/ Personal Development/Personal growth
587. 58. (6.11)/Personal development/ Pressure

588. 59. (6.11.1)/ Personal development/Pressure/Continuous assessment  
589. 60. (6.11.1.1)/ Personal development/Pressure/Continuous assessment/Examinations  
590. 61. (6.11.1.1.1)/ Personal development/Pressure/Continuous assessment/Examinations/Promotes surface learning  
591. 56. (7)/Institution  
592. 57. (7.1)/Institution/Very welcoming  
593. 58. (7.1.1)/Institution/Very welcoming/Pleasant ethos  
594. 59. (7.1.2)/Institution/Very welcoming/Good communication between College Offices  
595. 60. (7.2)/Institution/Supports  
596. 61. (7.2.1)/Institution/Supports/Positive experience of counselling service  
597. 62. (7.2.2)/Institution/Supports/Positive experience of academic support  
598. 63. (7.2.2.1)/Institution/Supports/Positive experience of academic support/ pastoral support  
599. 64. (7.2.2.1.1)/ Institution/Supports/Positive experience of academic support/Provides pastoral support/Peer mentoring  
600. 65. (7.2.2.1.1.)/ Institution/Supports/Positive experience of academic support/Provides pastoral support/Peer mentoring/Grinds  
601. 64. (7.2.3) Institution/Supports /Positive experience of students union  
602. 64. (7.3)/Institution/Geographical proximity  
603. 65. (7.4)/Institution/Student-centred  
604. 66. (7.4.1)/ Institution/Student-centred/Sense of community  
605. 67. (7.4.1.1)/ Institution/Student-centred/Sense of community/Inclusivity  
606. 68. (7.5)/ Institution/Range of admissions routes  
607. 69. (7.5.1)/ Institution/Range of admissions routes/FAS  
608. 70. (7.5.2)/ Institution/Range of admissions routes/FETAC  
609. 71. (7.5.3)/ Institution/Range of admissions routes/evening classes  
610. 72. (7.6)/Institution/Lack of communication between staff and students  
611. 73. (7.6.1)/ Institution/Lack of communication between staff and students/affects mature students, not school leavers  
612. 74. (7.6.1.1)/ Institution/Lack of communication between staff and students/Affects mature students, not school leavers/Complications of life  
613. 75. (7.7)/Institution/Attitudes of some staff  
614. 68. (8)/Function of higher education  
615. 69. (8.1)/ Function of higher education/Social justice  
616. 70. (8.2)/ Function of higher education/Government policy  
617. 71. (8.2.1)/ Function of higher education/Government policy/Job creation  
618. 72. (8.2.2)/ Function of higher education/Government policy/Internship scheme  
619. 73. (8.2.3)/ Function of higher education/Government policy/Internship scheme/Value  
620. 74. (8.2.4)/ Function of higher education/Government policy/Up-skill  
621. 75. (8.2.5)/ Function of higher education/Government policy/Contradictory  
622. 76. (8.2.5.1)/ Function of higher education/Government policy/Contradictory/Financial obstacles  
623. 77. (8.2.6)/ Function of higher education/Government policy/Social welfare not income  
624. 78. (9)/ Information about third level access  
625. 79. (9.1)/ Information about third level access/Found out by chance  
626. 80. (9.2)/ Information about third level access/Found out on employment website  
627. 81. (9.3)/ Information about third level access/Not easily available

## **APPENDIX H: ACCESS-RELATED THEMES IN MISSION STATEMENTS IN CASE SITES**

This appendix outlines institutional mission statements across case sites and details the relevant sections relating to access in Strategic Plans in the four institutions.

### **Constituent College: Mission Statement**

‘respects cultural diversity...it strives to promote equity in society’.

### **Capital University: Mission Statement:**

‘is committed...to an inclusive College community with equality of access for all. The College will continue to disseminate tis knowledge and expertise to the benefit of the City, the Country and the international community’.

### **Regional University: Mission Statement:**

‘to be a distinctive, pioneering and connected university that shapes the future through educating and empowering people to meet the real challenges of tomorrow and is globally

### **IoT: Mission Statement:**

‘to excel in teaching, research and development work, for the benefit of students, industry and the wider community...and within a framework of equality of opportunity with easily accessible, multilevel programmes’.

## **APPENDIX I: REFERENCES TO ACCESS IN STRATEGIC PLANS ACROSS CASE SITES**

**Constituent College:** The Constituent College's Strategic Plan, 2012-2016, was approved by its Governing Body on December 16th, 2011. There are two pillars which articulate a commitment to access and lifelong learning. Each of these pillars is accompanied by a number of targets and reference is made to the economic climate within which the plan will be implemented.

Historical tradition at the College and its associated vision are referred to in the Plan as follows:

‘Our founding vision will continue to inform our deep commitment to widening educational participation at third level by enhancing our own access, retention and progression strategies... to strive for equity in society...’ (Strategic Plan 2012-2016: 13-14).

12 goals, which are listed below, have been identified so as to increase representation of all categories of access students over the time frame of Plan. The overarching principle is to improve participation rates in line with national targets. The Strategic Plan aims to do this by engaging in a partnership approach, by developing improved communication and information dissemination structures, by ensuring that this work is both informed by research and research led, and finally, by improving co-ordination and leadership in the area of access.

### **Access goals identified in Strategic Plan at the Constituent College**

- To significantly increase the breadth and diversity of our student community in alignment with national targets for inclusive participation and lifelong learning targets
- Effective targeting and outreach strategies developed and implemented with critical emphasis on partnership with key stakeholders in the community, public and statutory sectors
- Effective communication strategies in place for (a) internal information and guidance in relation to strategies for diversity of participation and inclusion (b) for prospective learners along the life-cycle, beginning with early years through to pre-entry
- Coordination with research staff and external partners focusing on barriers to educational participation to identify and respond appropriately to barriers to inclusion along the life-cycle
- Targets achieved across all demographic and socio-economic learners
- Significant enhancement of coordination of leadership, infrastructure and resourcing towards diversity of participation and lifelong learning

- Co- sponsored task force review by Academic Council and the College Management Committee
- To develop enhanced outreach strategies for life-long learning, with emphasis on partnership with education, community, public and statutory sectors
- Community- based learning initiatives designed to widen diversity of participation in mainstream provision
- Number of innovative and open campus-based learning initiatives specifically designed to introduce all sections of our community to university- level learning experiences, to promote life-long learning and to attract prospective students to access mainstream provision at [the Institution] /partner institutions
- Evidence of coordination and complementarity between campus life-long learning initiatives and partner initiatives
- Evidence of effective information dissemination in concert with external partners aimed at awareness-raising around learning along the life-cycle and access points available (Strategic Plan 2012-2016: 13-14).

**Capital University: References to Access in Strategic Plan (2009-2014, p.9)**

At the Capital University, Section 2.7 of the institutional Strategic Plan lists specific aims relevant to increasing access provision at the institution.

Access Aims identified in Strategic Plan: Capital University

To continue to work with appropriate government agencies and other third-level institutions to understand and define the underrepresentation of certain social groups in higher education more accurately

Implement College’s Access Plan, 2009–13: To further develop existing pre-entry activities and alternative entry routes for students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, as well as for mature students and students with a disability

Increase the participation of the aforementioned groups in the student body: By incorporating access issues into staff development and training, and by including access as an area of responsibility at School administration level, we will ensure a heightened awareness of diversity as a dimension of College life

### **Regional University: References to Access in Strategic Plan (2011-2015, pp.29-30)**

Increase the diversity of the undergraduate population [and] provide a specific and coordinated series of supports and experiences for first-year students during their transition to third-level education. Broadening access to and offering greater flexibility in the delivery of programmes of study that are relevant to the needs of students and society

Actions:

2. Increase the numbers of mature students, students with a disability and students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
3. Develop a tailored programme to facilitate the transition to third-level study of an increasingly diverse student body.
4. Promote the Link-to-Learn initiative with NUI Galway by developing joint programmes, sharing modules and facilitating student exchange at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
5. Formalise flexible entry and exit routes in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.
6. Build on Strategic Innovation Fund investments to sustain vital learning resources, learner support services, and access and lifelong learning programmes.

### **IoT: References to Access in Strategic Plan (2008-2013, p.33)**

Learner Diversity

While overall learner numbers have remained relatively stable in recent years, there has been significant variation in numbers between different disciplines and various categories of student. The Institute plans to continue expanding this diversity in terms of enhancing international activity, providing increased opportunities for lifelong learning through initiatives such as Minor, Supplemental or Special Purpose awards, and enhancing access opportunities for under-represented groups through collaborative arrangements with partner bodies (p.20).

### ***PRIORITY AREA Access and Lifelong Learning***

EU and National education policy requires the higher education sector to make significant progress in Access and Lifelong Learning. A key focus will be on enhancing pathways to full-time education for life-long learners and accommodation of part-time learners within full-time programmes. The Institute recognises the constraints in delivering full-time programmes on a part-time basis and will focus on delivering more focussed shorter duration programmes (Minor, Special Purpose or Supplemental Awards) in traditional or blended learning formats. In

addition, opportunities will be explored for delivering executive education and workforce upskilling programmes to targeted cohorts.

By giving Access and Lifelong Learning the status of a Priority Area it ensures that the disparate efforts of many that have been working on Access and Lifelong Learning activities will be combined and we will be in a position to bring this experience to bear across the Institute. The focus will be on the following guiding principles listed below:

*Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)*

RPL will be developed as a priority to facilitate Access and Lifelong Learning. Programme design and development will give particular attention to the inclusion of lifelong learners and on identifying elements of relevance to those in the workforce.

*Flexible Delivery of Lifelong Learning Programmes*

The importance of flexible delivery of programmes to support Lifelong Learning is fundamental and will be considered in programme development, design, delivery and timetabling.

*ITT as First Point of Contact for Lifelong Learning*

The Institute of Technology, will encourage learners in the region to look to ITT first for higher education provision and the Institute will expand the breadth and depth of its portfolio of higher education provision by appropriate facilitation of other providers.

*ITT as Collaborator in Lifelong Learning*

The Institute will use its links with other agencies to provide pathways to higher education for the broadest possible range of learners.